

Community Report Card

Examining the quality of life in Sarasota County through data and indicators



The above illustration represents the Natural, Built, Economic, and Social environments. They are represented as a streetscape to highlight that despite being identified as separate environments, they interact to make up the whole of Sarasota County.

the natural environment

Everything that was a part of Sarasota County before humans came along

2007-2008 Community Report Card: Examining the quality of life in Sarasota County

Throughout the next year SCOPE's *Community Report Card* will use data about our community to share information about our quality of life. The *Community Report Card* hopes to ask and answer questions about our community, and encourages you to do the same.

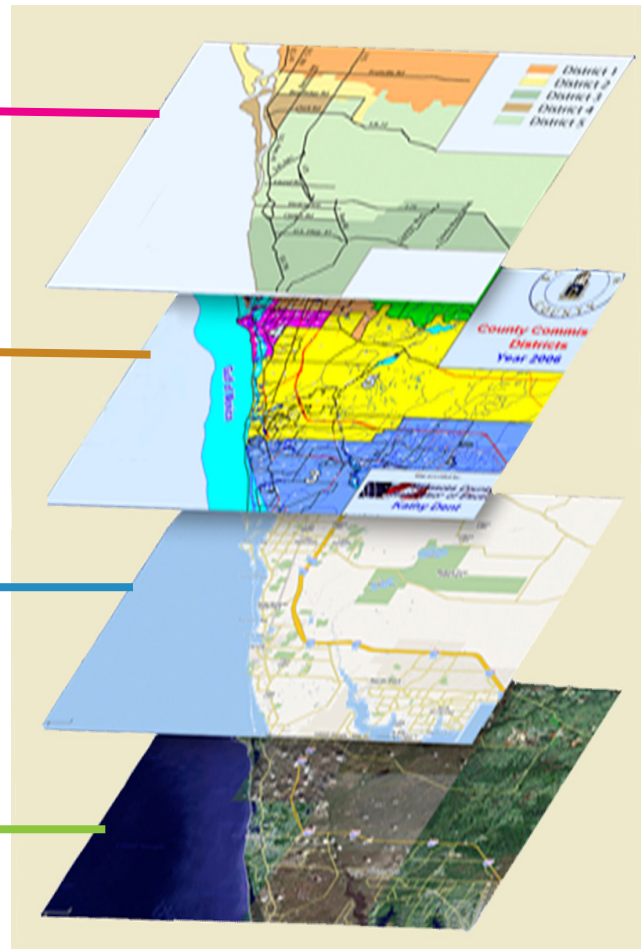
The next year is split into four sections, or environments: the natural, built, economic, and social. Each environment is highlighted for three months will encompass three indicators (data sets that reveal information about our community) each month. Each indicator will use data to tell a story about a different aspect of life in Sarasota County.

social How we support human growth. Our community, families, systems of governance and decision-making.

economic Exchange, money, and the ways we create wealth or add value to our world.

built The buildings and infrastructure humans construct on the natural environment.

natural Everything that was part of Sarasota County before humans came along.



Graphic from the Florida House Institute for Sustainable Development

Through learning about these data and what they tell us we can put together a picture of the quality of life in our community. Throughout the coming year SCOPE will highlight community gatherings and sources of more information to talk and learn about these subjects and what they mean for Sarasota County. If you enjoy reading the *Community Report Card* and know someone else who you think would as well, please forward this to them! If you would like to get involved, SCOPE encourages you to download these supplements. You can find more information on our website (www.scopexcel.org) as these events get closer. If you have immediate questions, comments or reactions to what you have just read, please visit our blog at www.scope-crc.blogspot.com.

Question:

“How much of our lands are protected - and where are they?”

Sarasota County is amazingly diverse. In one county we have the beautiful white beaches of Siesta and Lido and the picturesque forest of Myakka River State Park. We have palm trees and oak trees, bald eagles and scrub jays, Florida panthers and house cats - all in an area of only 620 square miles.

The qualities that produce this amazing diversity are the same ones that draw humans to the area – in large numbers! Florida’s ever-increasing population and the houses, roads, and schools that come with population increases have changed land preservation in the state. Protected lands used to be something that “just happened” because of the availability of undeveloped land. Now, protecting our land is a choice that Sarasota residents can make. In the indicator that follows, we try to answer the question: How are we doing at protecting our land?

Indicator:

Connectivity ***of local protected lands***

This indicator measures the amount of land that is protected and where that land is located – are our protected lands connected or far away from each other? The indicator looks at preserved and conserved lands larger than 50 acres. It takes connectivity into account to reveal whether land in Sarasota County is protected in ways that allow wildlife (and sometimes humans) to move easily from one protected area to the next.

The numbers tell us that the number and total acreage of protected connected lands has been steadily increasing, from 1 site in 1950 to 43 sites in 2007. A site is defined as an area of at least 50 contiguous acres, and may make up more than one named park or parcel. Since many sites are larger than 50 acres, we also measured total acreage of protected lands. As of August 2007, Sarasota County had 101,200 acres of protected land, with an average site size of 2,400 acres. This means that 26% of the land in Sarasota County is protected.

Since Sarasota County voters approved the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP) in 1999, the number of protected acres has increased by close to 23%, or almost 23,000 acres. In the last 57 years, we have added over 82,000 acres of land to the protected list. ESLPP values connectivity and tries to acquire land that is adjacent to areas that are already protected. The long-term goal for Sarasota County is to have a north-south and east-west corridor of protected lands. Right now, most of our protected land is in the eastern part of the county, with a limited amount of land along the coast.

How is this measured?

All of the protected parcels of land larger than 50 acres were reviewed, including land designated for conservation or preservation. (For more information about the difference between preserved and conserved land, please see the “Terms to Know” box at the bottom of page 6)

Parcels that exhibited connectivity were consolidated into a single site. Adjacent lands were designated as connected if they are less than 110 feet apart (which is the width of I-75). Sites were then plotted on the map on the following page.

Statistics of Protected Lands Connectivity in Sarasota County, 1950 - 2007

As Of	Number of Sites	Approximate Total Acreage	Approximate Mean Acreage
January 1, 1950	1	18,800	18,800
January 1, 1975	15	22,100	1,500
January 1, 1990	18	54,100	3,000
January 1, 2000	33	78,300	2,400
August 1, 2007	43	101,200	2,400

The above chart defines a site as a continuous parcel of protected land, regardless of legal parcel boundaries.

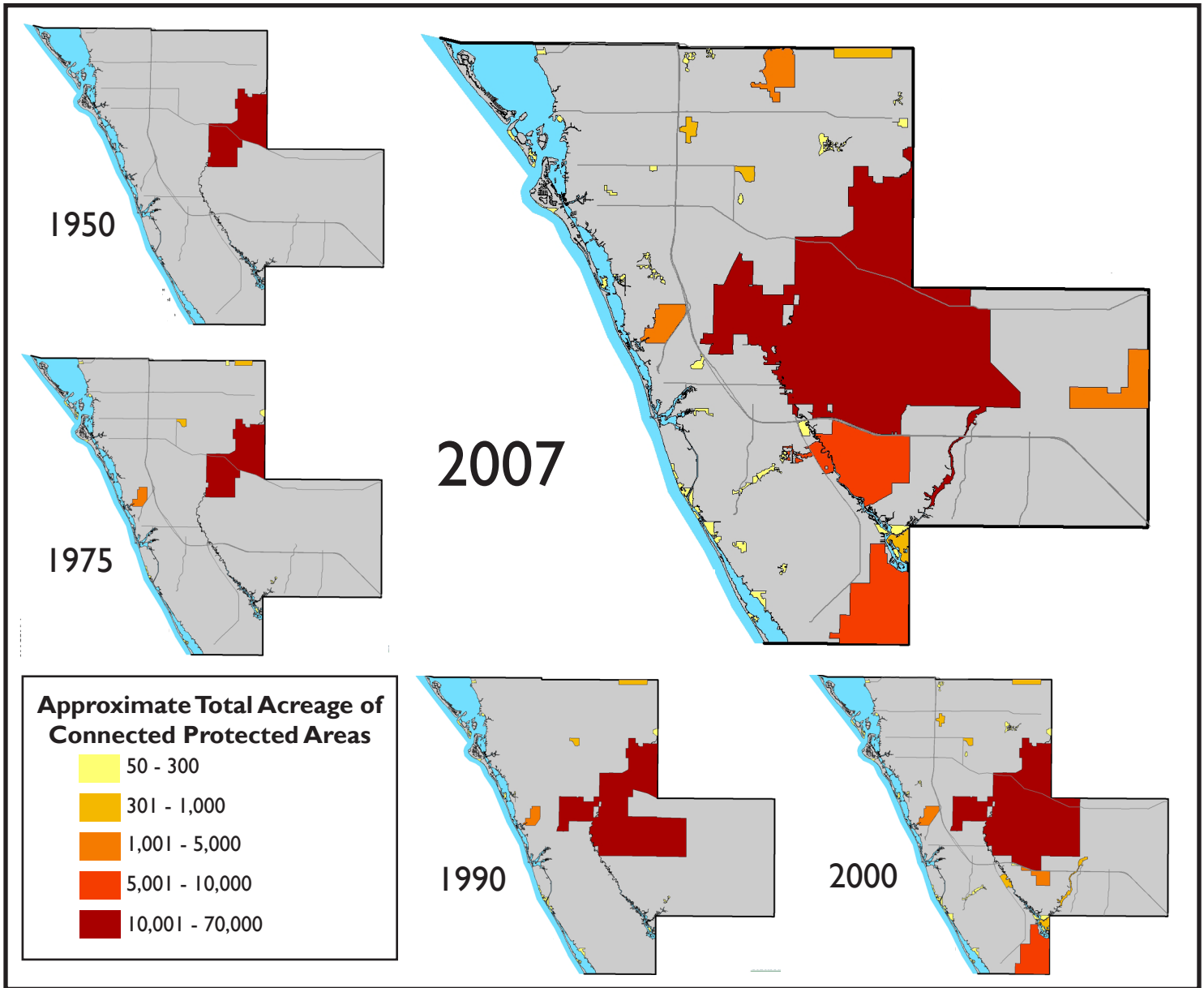
How do we compare?

Sarasota County has preserved 26% of our land, which, as of May 2007, is about average for the state of Florida. The counties preserving the highest percentage of land are in the Everglades (Collier, Miami-Dade) or on the waterfront (Monroe, Franklin). Monroe County preserves 94% of it’s land - the most in the state. However, most of Monroe County is federally protected Everglades and coastal key area. The two counties with the lowest percentage of preservation are Calhoun (1%), and Hardee (0%) Counties, both interior counties.

Looking at the counties closest to us, Charlotte County preserves 38% of their area, mostly at the state level. Manatee County has protected 11% of their land, split almost evenly between local and state protection. DeSoto County has protected 10% of their lands, all by the state.

It is noteworthy that none of Sarasota County’s land is protected at the federal level. Our county has the third highest number of locally protected lands in the state – 41% of our total. Much of that protection comes from the ESLPP program, which means the citizens of Sarasota County have a very real stake in protecting lands in our county.

Sarasota County Protected Lands Connectivity 1950 - 2007



This series of maps shows the location of Sarasota County's protected lands at specific points in the last 57 years. This information is represented in the table on page 3.

TERM TO KNOW:

Parcel: This refers to the legal definition of a unit of land. Protected lands are bought in parcels, which makes them legally distinct from the land next to them. One parcels can exhibit connectivity to another, if it is located adjacently.

Linkages

Natural Environment:

Protection of natural lands helps non-endangered species as well. By protecting traditional wildlife corridors we let animals move freely, which allows them to avoid human infrastructure. This in turn reduces the amount of deaths and preserves the species.

Built Environment:

The built environment impedes any move toward connectivity. If there are too many built environment structures in a protected area (i.e. roads, buildings, sewer lines) it interrupts the flow of wildlife and disturbs the area. However, there is a way to build to preserve connectivity, such as building wildlife underpasses or overpasses.

Economic Environment:

In Sarasota County, land is at a premium, and real estate costs are a real concern in protecting lands. The ESLPP program has been given a fixed amount of money to purchase new lands, and how much that money buys depends on the real estate market at the time of purchase.

Social Environment:

Protected lands provide many social benefits for people too! Lands designated for conservation are open to the public for hiking and picnicking. Protected lands allow people the ability to learn about natural Florida habitat and ecology, connect to others, and relax outdoors.

Why is this important?

The maps show a significant increase in protected land as a result of the 1999 vote to keep and expand the Environmentally Sensitive Lands Protection Program (ESLPP). This means that with the help of taxpayer dollars, open space requirements for developers and land gifts from citizens, Sarasota County has been able to promote habitat protection. Because a connected string of lands are protected animals can freely move within the protected area, especially in the more protected eastern portion of the county.

Sarasota County is home to many different habitats and each habitat performs a function that keeps our ecosystem running healthily. Many plants in the coastal habitats (such as mangrove swamps and tidal marshes) filter water to make it cleaner. The beaches and dunes dissipate wave energy and act as a buffer against flooding during storms. Our county's upland habitats, such as hammocks, pine flatwoods, and dry praries, provide critical areas for a number of endangered species.

Most of the endangered species in Florida and Sarasota County are endangered because of human encroachment on their habitat. Florida is home to a wide variety of endangered species. Those that make their home in Sarasota County include the Florida scrub jay, bald eagle, bobcat, and Florida panther. Florida is the primary location for bald eagle nesting in the United States. As development encroaches on their habitat, these species turn to protected land to make their home. The more continuously protected our land is, the easier it is for animals to move freely. By protecting wildlife corridors we ensure that the animals that have lived in Sarasota County for centuries can continue to do so.

TERM TO KNOW:

Protected Lands: A term that covers lands designated for both Preservation and Conservation. We use this term throughout the report because it encompasses both types of land.

What else would we like to know?

How much land is protected in smaller, private developments? These lands don't connect with others, but they do provide 'pockets' of natural habitat.

Also, if non-protected but 'natural' lands connect to the protected lands shown on the map, wildlife corridors would still be present. How much non-protected but 'natural' land is there in the county, and does it connect to protected lands?

Finally, it would be beneficial to know how the protected lands match up with needed habitat. For example, the Florida scrub jay is an endangered species that only thrives in specific habitats. If the preserved lands map was overlaid on the vital habitat area for endangered species, we would know if we were protecting the most needed habitat. While this is beyond the scope of the indicator, it is information that the ESLPP program takes into account when planning to acquire new land.

What can I do?

- Preserve the lands we have and support the ESLPP program to create more protected lands.
- Visit the lands that are preserved – go to Myakka River State Park, Oscar Scherer State Park, or any one of the protected lands, and celebrate the areas that our county and cities have put aside for protection.
- If you own rural property, consider donating it to become protected land.
- Be mindful of the pesticides and fertilizer that you use in your lawn, especially if you live near a protected land. The fertilizer runs off into the water and can poison wildlife.
- Volunteer at the Sarasota Conservation Foundation. You can help promote conservation of our delicate lands by volunteering at a variety of different positions. Call 941-918-2100 for more information.

Reservations and Caveats

There are actually more protected lands than shown on the map, and most of these are protected privately. Developers are required to leave open space when they build new developments, but if this land is less than 50 acres, it will not show up on the map. However, these lands are so isolated that they do little to promote wildlife movement and to maintain and protect complete habitats.

Also, there is very little land protected on the west coast of the county. This is important because our coastal lands are among the most fragile areas of the county, and they are also the location of the most human development.

TERMS TO KNOW:

Preservation: The perpetual maintenance of habitats in their pristine or restored condition. This is the highest degree of protection in our county. These lands remain unchanged in perpetuity.

Conservation: The wise use of native habitats that are not required to be protected. These habitats are usually land put aside to meet open space requirements. Passive recreational activities such as nature trails and picnic areas are allowed.

Data Sources: Environmentally Sensitive Lands Acquisition Program, Sarasota County Government, Sarasota County Resource Management GIS **References:** Florida State University "Acres of Conservation Lands by County" Report **Illustrations** by Mark Villarreal

What else would we like to measure?

We could only choose one indicator for the month that spotlighted “Connectivity of Protected Lands” as part of the natural environment quarter. Choosing an indicator became easier when looking at the data that were available, since many of the things that could have been included were not being measured. These other things are important enough to share with you, and they are highlighted in brief below:

Money Spent on Acres Protected: This indicator would tell about the financial information for the protected acres in Sarasota County. However, a visual representation made a more compelling indicator. If you are interested in the money spent to provide this level of protection, you can find information about this from the ESLPP program.

Invasive Species and Restored Land: This indicator would tell about the invasive species in Sarasota County and about how much of our land they populate. This is difficult data to uncover, since invasive species are located on public, private, and protected lands.

What is SCOPE ?

“To engage our community in planning for excellence through a process of open dialogue and impartial research, to establish priorities, propose solutions, and monitor change to enhance the quality of life in Sarasota County.”

SCOPE is a nonprofit organization that focuses on building community connections. Our goal is to engage a diverse group of people in conversations to look at what we want our future to be instead of problemsolving

the past. In addition to publishing a community indicators report (the *Community Report Card* you are reading), SCOPE conducts studies on topics such as Affordable Housing (2002), Mental Health (2003), and Family Violence (2004). Our two current studies are *Aging: The Possibilities* and *Race and Cultural Relations*.

If you were forwarded this message & would like to receive the Community Report Card in your inbox, please email kirwin@scopexcel.org. If you want to get connected with SCOPE and our community, please visit www.scopexcel.org or call (941) 365-8751

Indicator Releases

Introduction
August

Accessibility
September

Water Quality
October

Connectivity
November

Disaster Preparation
December

Transportation
January

Land Use
February

Jobs & Industry
March

Workforce Housing
April

Wealth & Income
May

Health
June

Education
July

Civic Engagement
August

Why connect with your community?

Connected communities have:

- Lower rates of school dropout
- An increased ownership of the decision-making process
- Lower crime rates
- Fewer colds and heart attacks