



## St. Petersburg Conference

– Ina Topper, *Broward Excom Chair*



So many Sierra Club members, be it at the National, State or local Broward group level, probably never think of how much goes into keeping our environmental organization functioning at its best.

Well, behind the scenes are many *very* dedicated people making sure this worldwide-known environmental venture is run at its best - administrative, financial, all purposefully dedicated. In brief, a LOT goes into the management of the National Sierra Club.

On a National level there are those conferences during the year where, understandably, one has to take time off for several days to fly to some far outlying places. A bit closer to home, on the State level, the St. Petersburg, Florida office makes sure to schedule quarterly conferences at their Gulf coast location, requesting representatives from all Florida County groups to attend. The reason is multi-purpose: it's not only for making sure we're all on the same page (adhering to our National mandates, following all Sierra rules and regulations in our pursuit of preserving nature), but, of course, also creating some very important brainstorming and feedback opportunities for us all. Let me hasten to point out (which many Sierra members or non-members aren't even aware of) ALL the time and energy spent on many meetings, conferences, training sessions, and seminars are strictly on our own time, on a purely volunteer level of spending a couple of days to go to these needed sessions on a national, state or county level. We do get thanks, yes, when we meet face-to-face with the general public at our many local events like Water Matters, Earth Day, plant give-aways, etc. Yet, it may be OK to point out how much time and energy is expended for the greater benefit.

This is where we think it's a good idea to mention the many issues discussed in main conference settings, smaller workshops, issue-related team sequestering, etc.

For example, at our June weekend conference in St. Pete we discovered that there are many identical issues every Florida county chapter has been dealing with in recent times. On the one hand, we took comfort in that "we're not alone" with battling some time-worn local problems. Yet, it also profoundly made us confront the reality of present day Florida, in terms of mutual stumbling blocks.

A major point of discussion was our now statewide concerns regarding red tide and green algae in Florida rivers. Perhaps some solace is to be taken from the fact that even the most conservative Tallahassee legislators have come to acknowledge this fast growing threat. It may not hurt, of course, that many of aforementioned legislators now find this scourge in their own backyards.

A very recent issue discussed is the fact that, finally, we now recognize that many sunscreen products, while good to prevent skin cancer, can at the same time be very harmful to our already endangered coral reefs. The two most common culprits are sunscreen products containing oxybenzone and octinoxate - both of which speed up the bleaching of our coral reefs. Just think about it, the little bit that you're rubbing on your skin may not seem like a big deal, but with thousands of ocean swimmers doing the SAME thing day after day, one can only imagine the quantity that goes directly in our ocean waters. Perhaps, and this is just a personal opinion, we might be better off wearing those newly-produced long sleeved very thin material T-shirts instead of using ANY emulsion on our bodies. In the news, printed media as well as on national TV it was pointed out just a couple of months ago that ANY sunscreen product seeps through the skin and stays in the body for a while, at least some hours. This was mentioned as a particular harmful issue for very young children.

Thankfully, all of the Keys are now only selling products without the aforementioned ingredients.

Once again, at the conference, a lively lengthy discussion ensued pertaining to the burn off of sugar cane harvest debris. Will it ever end? What is it that makes the Florida residents NOT stand up in united protest to stop this totally unnecessary practice? You all may remember a detailed newsletter article following the big sugar conference in West Palm Beach a few years ago, where we were told in detail about WHAT goes on in the communities directly adjoining the sugar fields all over Florida. Youngsters are developing asthma, the elderly are getting COPD symptoms even if they never smoked. Laundry hanging out to dry is brought inside with a fine soot covering every garment. And then the sugar companies insist "there's no issue"...We already know that for years in Australia they've handled sugar cane refuse differently - no burning, in fact even some recycling from the cane remnants. Closer to home, even Louisiana has now found more environmentally-friendly (and most certainly less harmful) ways to do away with the debris after the sugar cane harvest. People: Speak Up!

Oh yes, the plastic straws.... NOW being banned in many Florida municipalities. Miami Beach is doing its thing as we speak : at this time of writing signs are going up all over South Beach to let the sunbathers know: No More Plastic Straws. And the local restaurants are no longer supplying plastic straws. DO we have to spell out HOW harmful plastic straws are? Let me mention, having just returned from an overseas trip, the most disgusting (purposefully macabre) TV commercial in Europe mandating the ban of plastic straws.... a big, beautiful sea-turtle filmed under water with a plastic straw firmly embedded, protruding from its nose cavity! (Yes - we KNOW you're grossed out reading this, but it brought the message across!)

And we have a wonderful surprise for you when joining our picnic in August! Your most environmentally safe reusable straw to take home.

We also discussed the fact that in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century it seems all but impossible to get the younger generation involved in any organizational venue. This goes for not just our Sierra Club, it also came to haunt the National Audubon organization where some county chapters had to elect not to hold monthly presentations anymore, due to dwindling attendance. In fact, even erstwhile well-known ethnic associations seem to be battling to same problem. When discussing the How and Why, all over Florida the experience had been the same. We hear the echoes all around that "people nowadays do not have time anymore for evening get-togethers", due to either lengthy, ever increasing commuter time, or a much more transitional populace.

We heard from some other Florida groups where recent arrivals stayed in the county for a year or two years and then just moved to another county or even across the country. Therefore, their argument goes "there's no point in joining anything". This most certainly goes for the heavy student population here in Florida, who are here just for some semesters and then move on. Hopefully when coming to our general meetings, they'll bring some friends... they do not need to be members! And we'd like to see the younger membership more often.

On a positive note, we're delighted about the progress in elevating the Tamiami Trail! Real progress is being made and it's only a matter of a very short time when this major project has been completed all the way from Miami to Naples. Thankfully, the newly opened up spaces will not only improve the water flow but also greatly benefit our wildlife.

The plastic bag ban ordinances are still on the books, oh yes. But communities like first Coral Gables and now other municipalities as well have dared challenge this totally obnoxious rule on the books – so far without ramifications. Maybe that battle is finally being won.

We could mention many more issues we handle at our Sierra conferences. But this is just to give some idea of what goes on behind the (Sierra) scene.

And... if ANY of our Broward readers have something they'd like to bring up: please let us know! There's another quarterly conference coming up in September; your Chair and Vice-Chair will gladly put your thoughts or concerns on the conference agenda. We're realizing evermore that what we thought were isolated issues in our own chapter turn out to be a statewide concern, more often than not.



**Broward Sierra Club's General Meetings - The first Thursday of each month we have committee reports and an educational program on conservation or environmental issues.**

**DIRECTIONS:** Fern Forest Nature Center, 201 Lyons Road South, in Coconut Creek is just south of Atlantic Blvd. on the west side of the street. (From the south, NW 31 Ave. becomes NW 46 Ave., and then Lyons Rd. as you pass under the turnpike.) Committee reports begin at 7:30, and the program follows. The meeting is open to the public at no charge.

### **Broward Sierra Club's General Meeting for August is cancelled.**

Instead, we are having our annual picnic at Dr. Von D. Mizell-Eula Johnson State Park. If you would like to attend, please register at Meet-Up:

<https://www.meetup.com/Broward-County-Sierra-Club-Group/events/263037461/>

