

Green Swamp Preserve Has New Advocate

BY MARJORIE MEGIVERN

In her rumpled khaki slacks and black T-shirt encircled by a white zebra, with her quick smile and cropped dark hair, Linda Gentoli seemed every inch the environmentalist, a friend of swamps and living things everywhere.

She began her relationship with Brunswick County's Green Swamp last September, the first steward of the southeast coastal plain, under the North Carolina Nature Conservancy.

"This is the first regional office in the state," Gentoli said of her suite in Wilmington's Cotton Exchange. "Our state office is in Chapel Hill, but my jurisdiction is New Hanover, Brunswick Pender and Carteret counties."

The state operation is under the National Heritage program, a private, nonprofit conservancy effort that finds pristine areas to protect. Each state is autonomous, Gentoli said, but receives help and information from the parent program.

"The Green Swamp was once a huge area," she explained, "and some years ago, Federal Paper gave 16,000 acres that it owned there to the conservancy. This was an old pocosin area in the center of the swamp, wetlands with lots of peat and domed in the middle. Such longleaf pine swamps are rare and most in the country have been taken over for timber."

Inside this lush area, accessible only from N.C. 211, five miles north of Supply, there are several endangered species, including the red-cockaded woodpecker, the rough-leaved loose stripe, Venus fly-traps and pitcher plants.

What does the conservancy do to preserve such treasures? "We do lots of management," Gentoli reminded. "For example we do control burning to increase the habitat for these plants. Fires get brush out of the way so plants can grow."

She said a few public tours were conducted through the Green Swamp in the spring to show off the beauty that blooms in some fashion all year round. "We'll do more this summer when we get in-

terns," she added. "College students will serve as guides through the summer months. But people can walk through it themselves any time."

In addition to this swamp, Brunswick County boasts two other small preserves under conservancy protection. "There's Myrtle Head near Exum, an area of about 80 acres," Gentoli said, "and a 150-acre location known as Old Dock off N.C. 130 near Whiteville." Neither of

these is open to the public.

Playing nursemaid to swamps and endangered species is a whole new career for this Boston native, but her education and experience are closely related. She earned a degree in wildlife management at the University of New Hampshire and has worked in fish and wildlife management in Alaska, New York and Massachusetts. Most recently, she spent five years in south Florida.

"When I turned 40," Gentoli laughed, "I began wondering what I wanted to do when I grew up, and I heard of this position about that time. I had come across conservancies a few times and a hodge-podge of a lot of things about the job fit my resume."

The rest is very recent history. Gentoli was hired, moved to Wilmington with her two daughters, eight and 13 years old, and settled into her offices.

She is not planted behind a desk, however, and enjoys her field work around the region. The new conservancy steward can even be found in Brunswick County's famous Green Swamp on occasion, checking on wildlife and plant life in this pristine place that is, itself, becoming an endangered species.

For information about the county's preserves or to schedule a tour of the Green Swamp, call Gentoli at 762-6277.

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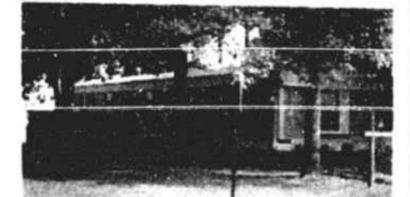
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