RESCUE OR ABUSE?

by Reed Noss

The conservation of native plants *in situ* is a major goal of the Florida Native Plant Society. Although individual species of plants could perhaps be perpetuated in botanical gardens, seed banks, and backyards, they fundamentally belong in natural ecosystems, interacting with other organisms.

Therefore, we must guard against abuses of gathering native plants from the wild. Collecting seeds or seedlings poses little threat, except possible damage from too many trampling feet.

The technology now exists, however, to remove and transplant even adult trees, and it is the collection of adult plants from the wild that is most likely to lead to abuse.

Even when we believe we are quite literally "rescuing natives from the bulldozer," there have been cases when we have prematurely resigned ourselves to an area's destruction, perhaps as an excuse to enrich our gardens or nursery stock.

A biologist working for the state told me recently that some nurseries are enthusiastically removing plants from tropical hammocks on North Key Largo that are privately owned and slated for development. But "slated" need not be destiny, for, at the same time, both state and federal agencies are pursuing acquisition of some of these tracts as habitat for rare and endangered species. Now the public will be inheriting an impoverished resource! Concurrently, rare orchids and valuable mahoganies are being poached from "protected" public land in this area.

Rescue of individual plants can be of positive value to conservation, but only if all possible means of preserving these areas have proven ineffective.

Many FNPS members also remove plants from the wild, either for sale or for transplanting to our own yards. We need to reexamine the potential impacts of this practice. Perhaps removal is justified only from areas *unquestionably* doomed to destruction, after all attempts to preserve the natural habitat have failed. In buying native plants from a nursery, a little judicious inquiry about where those plants came from may be in order, and perhaps (for nursery people) a little policing of our peers.

I was distressed to hear rumors that

some individuals active in FNPS may be guilty of indiscriminate removal of plants from the wild. Although the credibility of these rumors, or what constitutes "indiscriminate," is uncertain, it still concerns me. When the matter was brought up at the FNPS board meeting in July, several in attendance knew of instances of abuse, though not necessarily by FNPS members or by nurseries specializing in native plants. The FNPS has a responsibility to deal with this problem.

I hope that none of us, in our zeal for growing native plants in our own backyards, loses sight of our most important mission: saving plants and associated organisms in natural ecosystems, where they fundamentally belong.