

## COMMENTARY

# This land is your land

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Stop to think about where you are for a second: You're reading the paper. You're sitting in a room, maybe in a restaurant or an office — but wherever you are, there are people nearby.

And they're not showing you enough respect.

Never mind that you're dazzling in appearance, effervescent in personality, brilliant in analysis, true to your word, punctual as the Atomic clock, fit as a tuned fiddle and otherwise irresistible (I take it I have all that right). You're also filthy rich. The fact is, you're a member of the landed gentry.

What these people don't know, and what I'm here to tell you in case you don't know it yourself, is that you, the reader, own 17,582 acres in Lee County. That's right, you own 23.3 square miles of prime real estate. Your holdings are going to increase in quantity, too. Count on it. Or just count it.

So far, you've spent only about \$131 million amassing your estate over the last decade or so.

Heck, it's worth probably three or four times that figure on the open market.

So where is it? Scattered all over the county, unpretentiously posed behind little green and white signs that say: "Boundary: Conservation 20/20."

You've heard about this, right? About 11 years ago, some clear-sighted crazies decided to increase your property taxes — actually increase them, and in a strongly Republican

county, too, a move so absurdly forward-looking they called it "20/20," for perfect vision. What could they have been thinking?

So they began taxing you half a mil each year, which is about \$50 on every \$100,000 of your property value. And that can add up, especially if you're already rich. A guy with a million-dollar home, for example, might have to pay \$500 a year, which personally saddens me. (The current county commissioners are probably saddened too, but not enough to prevent them from voting 5-0 recently to continue the program.)

These visionaries began using your money to buy up environmentally sensitive land, and I'm here to tell you: Down market or no down market, owning almost 18,000 acres these days makes you rich. Oh, and I should mention the \$46.6 million you had in the bank as of last month, just for buying more land, and the additional \$24.6 million you have in a perpetual fund you don't touch — the interest pays for all the upkeep on that land, which happens to be beautiful.

No broken down old mines or former waste dumps or unwanted junk acreage for you, no sir. From border to shining border — those are county borders I'm talking about, but break into song here if you want to — and from sea to shining river or creek or pond, your land contains hammock woods and old cypress strands and wet prairies and mangrove swamps and pine flatwoods and Gulf front and riverfront and uplands and lowlands. You'll find panthers and bear and deer and turkeys and scrub jays and eagles and butterfly orchids and golden leather fern and thousands of other creations.

Parcels range from just a few acres to a couple thousand or more, depending on

where you are. And finding out where you are — or where your land is — is easy. You just visit this website, with maps and descriptions: [www.leeparks.org/2020/pre-serves.html](http://www.leeparks.org/2020/pre-serves.html).

Know this, too: You can walk, paddle, crawl, skip, swim, hop, float or stagger across every single inch of your property any darn time you want to, no matter who says otherwise. And somebody might.

A couple of weeks ago, my wife, Amy, and our two youngest boys, D.P. and Nash, rolled with me under the tidy four-strand barbed wire fence that surrounds 171 acres of your 20/20 land called the Alva Scrub.

Way back in the scrub, about 100 yards from a tight little string of board chutes and abandoned cow pens that mark the history of this parcel, we saw a black bull down and dying. He lay on his side, blood oozing from his nostrils — a big muscled beauty with skin gleaming hot and dark as obsidian in the mid-day sun. Surrounded by flies and moaning pitifully, his breath came ragged and small.

In the distance, the bull's little herd grazed on open pasture, already consigning their big black to bovine history.

But since he wasn't quite history yet, I got on the cell phone and tracked down the cattleman who holds the cattle lease on that particular 20/20 parcel. Several of your 20/20 properties have cows on them, which is a great deal for the cattlemen, since they pay almost nothing for the leases. Their only significant obligation is to maintain the fences already built with your money.

When the man answered the phone, I described the bull and its location. Then I told him that the animal needed shooting (since I grew up around cows and cattlemen, I was confident of my opinion).

The first thing he told me, and the second thing too, was that I had no right to be on that land — I was trespassing, he said. "The county people told me no one's allowed on that land," he insisted. "You're not supposed to be there."

Later he told me he'd shot the bull himself that morning, and dragged it out in the scrub.

Which led me to two conclusions: He doesn't know that you (and I) own that land, and he can't shoot worth a damn.

But just to make sure I was on solid ground, I called the 20/20 people.

"No, it's all public, anybody can go," says Peter De Witt, a 20/20 land stewardship coordinator. "We don't allow off-road vehicles, and that's one of our biggest problems, or guns, but there aren't too many rules."

Not only that, but if you want Peter — a trained wildlife biologist, like almost all his colleagues — to give you a guided tour (say you're squiring a small group), or you want the code to a locked gate, you just call him up. The 20/20 office, it turns out, includes none of that invasive species called the Wilt-ing Bureaucrat. His direct telephone, listed on-line: 239-461-7436.

And one other thing. Feel free to tell your friends about all this. But try not to brag too much; it's unbecoming in the very rich.

### If you go

- ▶ **What:** Lee County 20/20 wild lands, 17,000 acres
- ▶ **Open To:** the public, every last member of it
- ▶ **Cost:** free as a bird
- ▶ **To Enter:** just roll under the fence, or...
- ▶ **Restrictions:** no hunting, no four-wheelers
- ▶ **Website with maps:** [www.leeparks.org/2020/c2020.html](http://www.leeparks.org/2020/c2020.html)



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