

The size of the Hillsborough River watershed makes it difficult for residents to understand their impacts on its health. Some find it hard to believe that what they do in their yard can affect the health of a the river 10 miles away. Do you know where your place is in the watershed?

Watershed History

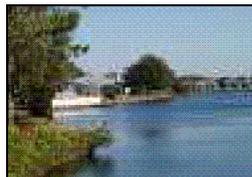
Geological data suggests that the Hillsborough River has been flowing for about 27,000 years. Humans first made their way to this area 12,000 - 15,000 years ago. The riverine swamp forest we see today has quite a different ecology than the original which had existed in the watershed for ten to fifteen thousand years. Large cypress forests no longer line its banks. Upland regions were cleared for cattle ranching. In 1528 Narvaez, a Spanish explorer, landed near Tampa Bay. He and the four hundred men with him found the Timucuan culture established in the area.

DeSoto, another Spaniard, came to Tampa Bay in 1539 and landed at what was probably the mouth of the Hillsborough River. A survey of the river was completed by the Spanish. The river was named after the English Lord Hillsborough, Governor of west Florida. In the early 1800's, Fort Brooke was constructed at the mouth of the Hillsborough River and Fort Foster was established at the current Hillsborough State Park location. In 1895, an electrical dam was built on the river but was destroyed several years later. In the early 1900's the river was heavily logged for its valuable cypress.

A water treatment plant was built at the reconstructed dam to provide drinking water to the city of Tampa. Today the watershed remains somewhat pristine in its northern reaches while the lower section has been challenged by increased development. The Tampa Bypass Canal was completed in the 1980's to help protect areas such Temple Terrace and Sulphur Springs from historic flooding. Water can now be diverted to the Palm River and McKay Bay. Stormwater runoff now is the greatest threat to the health of the Hillsborough River watershed.

Coastal Zone

The coastal zone is the end of the road for watersheds; it's where waterways eventually drain to the sea. It provides a special setting as water, weather, sand dunes, rocks and coastal plants and animals converge. It is also a mainstay to the American economy in terms of employment, transportation, recreation and living. Because all water eventually makes its way to the coast, pollutants collected by water upstream will end up there as well. To keep our coasts healthy, it is essential to look at the things done in our own backyards.



The River

The Hillsborough River begins in the Green Swamp area and flows southwest, discharging into Hillsborough Bay. Lakeland, Dade City, Plant City, Land O'Lakes, Zephyrhills, Temple Terrace and part of Tampa lie within the watershed. The Tampa Bypass Canal was built to protect areas from flooding, and the Hillsborough River Reservoir provides most of the drinking water for residents of Tampa. The watershed reflects a wide variety of land uses from rural to urban. The river has been impacted by man-made activities through the years. From its meager start in northern Polk County, the river winds its way through pristine wetlands and uplands, cattle pastures, local and regional park land, suburbs, a man-made reservoir and into a channelized, urban conveyance on its journey to Hillsborough Bay...eventually flowing into Tampa Bay. Fresh water mixes in the bay with salt water from the Gulf of Mexico forming an estuary, a nursery for marine life...providing food and shelter for young fish. Many of the activities that have contributed to the economy and lifestyle of the region unfortunately have also impacted the health of the watershed. Historically, industry, logging and agriculture operations have either gone away or they have reduced impacts to water quality. Residential and commercial development for homes, businesses, schools, and roads creates impervious surfaces where upland and wetland plant communities once existed. This change in landscape forces water to flow more quickly in channelized paths rather than as sheet flow across the land. The result is greater volumes of stormwater runoff carrying oils, fertilizers and pesticides, and other pollutants to adjacent surface water bodies. In order to reduce stormwater pollution, we must all make behavior changes. This is our responsibility!



Lawns and Gardens



Most people living in the Hillsborough River watershed take pride in having an attractive lawn. Residents spend hours mowing lawns, planting shrubs and trees and making sure everything is healthy and attractive. Indeed, having a well-groomed yard can be beneficial to the watershed. Maintaining vegetation keeps soil in place and prevents rain from washing it into streams and lakes. Unfortunately, residents sometimes contribute to watershed pollution. Fertilizers are helpful, but, if over-applied, nutrients can wash into water bodies causing excess algae and poor water quality. Grass lawns often require the most water in the landscape. Native shrubs and plants tend to require less care and water to remain healthy and add to the aesthetic beauty of the yard.