Where's the Proof?

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The *Atlas of Florida Vascular Plants* (http://www.plantatlas.usf.edu) of the University of South Florida Institute for Systematic Botany and the Florida Center for Community Design and Research provides the user with distribution and nomenclature information on all native and naturalized seed plant and fern species reported for Florida. The most used feature on the website is the mapping feature, which provides county by county distribution of species. The *Atlas* is continuously updated as new information becomes available. It now gets about 25,000 hits a week! Since the *Atlas* became available on the web in 1995, communications from people reporting the sighting of new county records or even species they believe to be new to the State has increased each year. After checking the *Atlas* database to verify that the species is not documented from a particular county or from the State, my usual response is: Did you collect an herbarium (or a voucher) specimen?" In other words, "do you have the proof?" Depending on the expertise of the person, the response varies considerably. Some know exactly what I mean and usually provide me with a specimen or information that a specimen has been deposited in another herbarium. Some of them actually seek out new records and collect specimens for us to "fill in the gaps." Others who deposit or file specimens on a regular basis in other herbaria, such as Loran Anderson at Florida State University, Kent Perkins at the University of Florida, and Keith Bradley who puts his specimens in Fairchild Tropical Garden, send us new information on a regular basis. This type of cooperation is greatly appreciated and contributes to our knowledge of the distribution of Florida species, making our easily accessed database even more useful. Funding for development and maintenance of the web site is currently provided by the Florida Department of Transportation.

Science requires proof through experimentation and documented observation. The report of the occurrence a plant species in Florida, and subsequently its report on the *Atlas* or in publication, needs to be substantiated. This is done by the collection of a specimen and placing it in an herbarium where it will be permanently preserved and will be available for study by others when necessary. If the species is not documented in this manner, there is no record that the plant ever existed at that location or even existed at all. It is like the Loch Ness Monster, Bigfoot, the Skunk Ape, UFO's, where the evidence

For the Record:

Florida Exotic Pest Plant Database

Established in 1995, this database contains over 5,000 occurrence records of Florida EPPC Category I and II pest plant species on public lands, currently with 322 public conservation lands represented in 91% of Florida's 67 counties. The intent is to raise awareness among the public, policy makers, and land managers of the extent of the invasive exotic plant problem in conservation lands. For example, the information has been quite useful in supporting legislative funding for the recently established statewide control program targeting these pest plants.

Building the database has been almost entirely a volunteer effort by conservation land managers and other veteran observers of Florida's natural landscapes. Since 1999, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Bureau of Invasive Plant Management has supported data entry and maintenance in collaboration with the Florida Exotic Pest Plant Council (EPPC). The Bureau is now funding a pilot project with the Florida Natural Areas Inventory, Florida State University, to begin filling in data gaps and improving the database to include links to a GIS-based mapping system. Eventually this work will allow generation of distribution maps with an estimated acreage of infestations by species in public conservation lands (local, state, and federal). Right now, no maps are "maintained," i.e., regularly generated, from the database.

Accessibility of the location details for each record does allow anyone to check a listed occurrence—to "see for themselves." Nonetheless, because most of these records constitute "sight records," "observational data," or "anecdotal evidence" in scientific parlance, the preparation of herbarium voucher specimens has been encouraged since the beginning as additional confirming documentation. It is especially important when the occurrence represents an infestation in a county not previously documented for the species in the herbarium-based Plant Atlas database housed at the University of South Florida, a basic resource on vascular plant distributions in the Sunshine State.

The EPPC-DEP occurrence database provides a focus on Florida's exotic pest plants. With continued contributions and updates, it is and will be an essential tool in determining priorities and policies for invasive plant management. To contribute to it, query it, or comment on it, visit the website: HtmlResAnchor www.fleppc.org/database . —K.C. Burks, FDEP