

Gopher Tortoise to Have New 'Homes' at White Oak

By Michael Stone

The gopher tortoise, an animal native to the terrain of White Oak, will soon have some new territory on the plantation to explore.

Natural landscape artist Alan Sonfist, of New York City, designed two habitats for the tortoises that were constructed beside White Oak's Spare Lake.

One is a circular formation of boulders on high ground. The other is a low-lying area that was dug out to resemble an actual white oak tree.

"It's a human-made object," Sonfist said, "but at the same time, it's a compliment to the native animals, especially animals that are potentially becoming extinct."

The gopher tortoise is a victim of habitat loss and is classified as Threatened in Florida.

Sonfist's design is meant to resemble the preferred environment and plant species of the tortoise. He has a list of plants, some rare, that he will return to plant in the two habitats in the fall, thus completing the project.

He said he couldn't estimate how long this project's planning took because he's always thinking about new landscape and nature ideas.

White Oak staff members have been assisting in the actual construction, and Sonfist said their "positive energy is working out very well."

"The staff here is fantastic. The shaping of the structures is just how I envisioned," said Sonfist, who stayed at White Oak in late June and early July as part of a Jacksonville University program and through the support of Mark and Kimbra Walter, the owners of White Oak.

White Oak Director Steve Shurter said Sonfist's project "combines two of the lesser-known aspects of White Oak: the arts and the animals that naturally call this land home."

"Sometimes our conservation work with exotic wildlife overshadows our thriving art programs and our efforts to protect the native animals," he said. "So the fact that we are developing both in one project signifies that we are moving forward in all our areas."

Nature as a 'Sanctuary'

Sonfist completed his first natural landscape project in the mid-'70s after about 10 years of planning and government approval. It was turning an unused plot in New York City's Greenwich Village into forested habitat as part of an urban renewal project.

After its public popularity and success of attracting birds, Sonfist said the project served as model for other reconstructed natural habitats in the city.

In all his projects, Sonfist attempts find a medium between natural landscape and art. He draws much of his inspiration from his childhood, growing up near a forest and river amid the vast metropolitan sprawl of New York City—his “sanctuary.”

“All my work relates to that magical experience as a child of how the forest influenced me in the thinking of my neighborhood and the world,” he said. “The cliché is that I’ve been doing this my whole life.”

Another current project Sonfist is working on: a green park on the outskirts of Florence, Italy meant to recreate wetlands that were a casualty of agricultural development. He was the only person from the U.S. invited to work on the project, which is being organized by the Worldwide Fund for Nature.

In all his projects, Sonfist tries to devote a portion to educating about the environment, and he’s planning to do the same on his work at White Oak.

“If anything,” he said, “people will hopefully come away with a love of nature.”

A Keystone Species

The gopher tortoise is a medium-sized land turtle native to the coastal plains of the southeastern United States. The burrows it digs in sandy soil average 14 feet long and 6 feet deep. Those are shared by 350-plus species, making the tortoise especially important in its ecosystem. Such species that play enormously critical roles in their environments are called “keystone species.”

The tortoise’s habitat of longleaf pine forests has suffered an overwhelming decline—90 million acres to 2 million—because of agriculture, development, and logging. The declining numbers have in turn seen drops in indigo snake and Florida gopher frog populations, which depend on gopher tortoise burrows.

As a species classified as Threatened, the gopher tortoise is protected by state and federal laws in most of its range.

The native White Oak population was enlarged in the late ‘90s when another Florida population was brought in before their habitat was lost to development. The tortoises were released onsite after being quarantined to make sure they didn’t possess any harmful bacteria.

The tortoises at White Oak have attracted researchers in their study of its demographics and reproduction.

More information on White Oak's native species and art programs is available at WhiteOakWildlife.org, and updates are made on the "White Oak Conservation" Facebook page.