

When did the islands officially become “special”?

By Barbara Joy Cooley, president, Committee of the Islands, published June 24, 2010

Just about everyone seems to acknowledge that Sanibel is special and unique. Have you ever wondered when this notion of Sanibel’s special nature began?

Teddy Roosevelt seemed to be aware of it because he first came to Sanibel and Captiva to join a fishing party in 1914. In the 1930s, the secluded, natural setting of Sanibel and Captiva attracted famous people such as Edna St. Vincent Millay, Anne and Charles Lindbergh, and violinist Albert Spalding, among others.

In 1937, the cartoonist J. N. “Ding” Darling gave a speech to a large audience at a place called Fisherman’s Lodge. Historian Elinore Dormer describes this as the “turn of the road” for Sanibel and Captiva. In her book *The Sea Shell Islands*, Dormer wrote that, “With a sense of history, *The Islander* of the following week bore a cover sketch by Matt Clapp of two faces, the Spirit of Captiva and the Spirit of Sanibel, between them the lighted candle, ‘Conservation.’”

Official recognition of Sanibel and Captiva’s uniqueness came in 1939, when, largely through the efforts of “Ding” Darling helping islanders, the Florida Legislature passed a Special Act (Chapter 19936) to establish a “Game and Fish Refuge” encompassing the islands of Sanibel and Captiva. The Act made it illegal for anyone to “catch, hunt, trap or take any wild game, game animals, game birds, or game fish” except those that needed to be removed “in order to maintain a normal biological balance.”

Original Refuge Included Entire Island

Following the state designation, the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge was designated in 1945. Its boundaries then included the southwestern part of Captiva and *all* of Sanibel Island.

Nevertheless, Florida continued to sell off pieces of the nearly 2,000 acres of state-owned land on Sanibel for development. “Ding” Darling protested strongly against these sales, and tried to have a more permanent refuge established on the island. Eventually he gave up and sold his Sanibel property.

That left the Sanibel-Captiva Audubon Society to take up the cause in the late 1950s. Progress was made, bit by bit. After Darling died in 1962, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Darling Memorial Committee worked along with the Audubon group to establish a National Preserve in 1967. Finally the J. N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge was dedicated on February 4, 1978.

It is this legacy as a special, sanctuary island that eventually propelled Sanibel residents into incorporating as a city – to protect the island from overdevelopment. And it is why codes on Sanibel are particularly restrictive when it comes to development, to protect the natural environment and wildlife.

This is what the Committee of the Islands is all about; its mission is “To develop and promote policies and positions designed to maintain and enhance the quality of life on the islands and to preserve their unique and natural characteristics.”

If you have stories to share about the legacy of Sanibel and Captiva as special and unique places, we encourage you to send them to the Committee of the Islands at PO Box 88 on Sanibel, 33957, or to coti@coti.org. For more information about the Committee of the Islands, visit www.coti.org on the web.