

Section 6: Manatee Park

On the south bank of the river looms the Florida Power and Light plant. Built in 1958, it used to burn diesel fuel to make electricity. Since 2002, it burns natural gas. Water for cooling the plant's hot engines comes from the river. The heated water flows into a canal that drains into Orange River.

On the west side of the canal and along the north shore of the river is Orange River Preserve, purchased by Lee County's Conservation 20/20 Program. A bird watcher there sees Nick fly above the canal. On the east side of the canal is Manatee Park. The land is owned by the power company. Lee County and other groups pay for the building and the people who work there.

Nick lands on the bank of the canal and hears a guide say, "I see a group of manatees just at the entrance. They come here when the temperature in the Gulf falls below 68 degrees." She shades her eyes with one hand and points with the other.

"Here's one," a girl says. She stands with her mother and brother on the

sidewalk behind a fence that surrounds the manatee viewing area.

"Look at its snout. It's ugly." A boy kicks at the ground with one foot.

Their mother says, "You're seeing it through the water, so it looks strange, like when you see your friend underwater in the swimming pool."

"Is it looking for something to eat?" the girl asks.

The guide says, "Manatees aren't fish, so they have to surface to breathe. They need air to live, just like we do."

"What do they eat?" the girls asks.

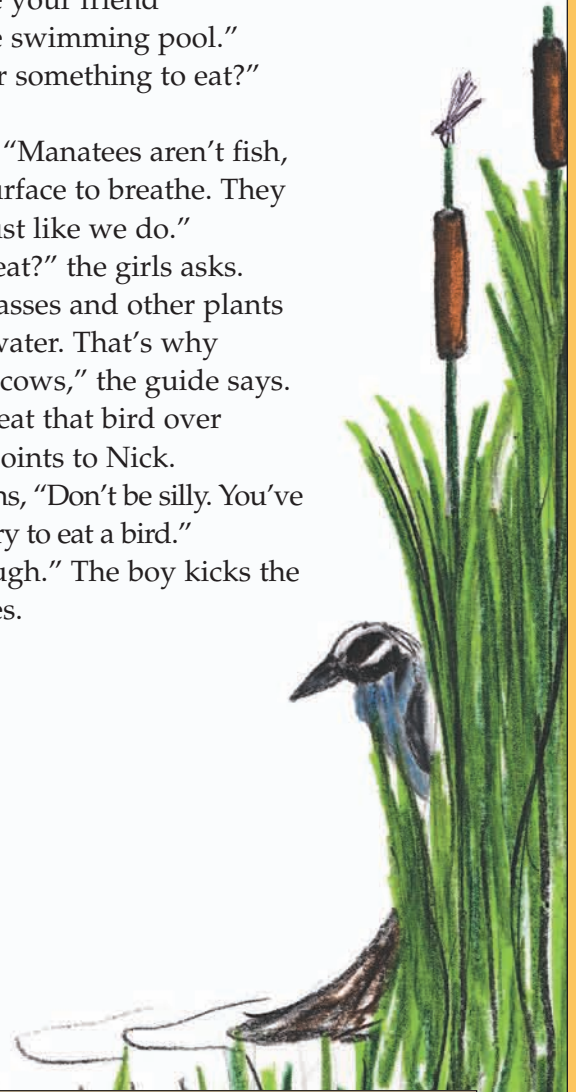
"They eat seagrasses and other plants that grow in the water. That's why they're called sea cows," the guide says.

"It won't try to eat that bird over there?" The boy points to Nick.

His mother laughs, "Don't be silly. You've never seen a cow try to eat a bird."

"I'd like to, though." The boy kicks the fence, and it rattles.

Nick flies away.



LEE COUNTY'S CONSERVATION 20/20 PROGRAM

by Carol Mahler

In 1995, some citizens wanted to preserve natural areas in Lee County. They asked the government to help, and in 1996, voters agreed to pay more taxes to buy wild lands. By 2008, the 20/20 Program had bought 97 parcels, nearly 21,000 acres, including Orange River Preserve and the Caloosahatchee Creeks Preserve, which protect part of the watersheds of Daughtrey's Creek, Cohn Branch, Chapel Branch, Bayshore Creek, Popash Creek, Stroud Creek and Palm Creek. Similar land acquisition programs exist in Charlotte, Polk and Sarasota counties.