

# New forest park features enchantment, rare species

By Kevin Spear

OF THE SENTINEL STAFF

The newest park in Orange and Osceola counties has an enchanted grove of craggy, moss-bearded oaks.

A short hike away in the park, called Split Oak Forest, there are ancient beach dunes where plants look gnarly and desperate as if pruned for a bonsai garden.

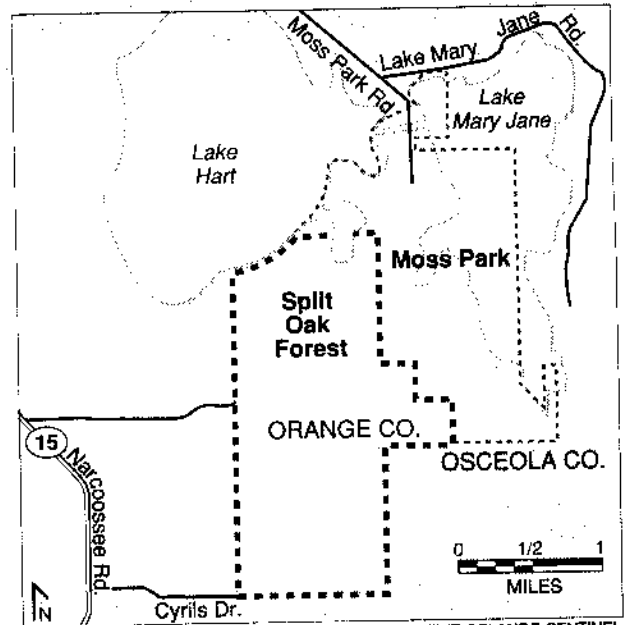
Farther on, hikers will walk across a forest floor covered with a plush layer of pine needles. Here stands the park's centerpiece: an oak that split in half 50 years ago

yet still thrives.

"If I bubble about this site, you'll have to excuse me, but I think it's just about the prettiest place Orange County has bought," said Sherry Hooper, who oversaw Orange County's effort to acquire the property.

When Split Oak Forest opens Thursday morning, visitors will have access to three fishing ponds and more than a dozen miles of trails within a 1,700-acre tract in south Orange and north Osceola counties.

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Split Oak Forest will be a bonus to people camping next door at Orange County's Moss Park.

But Split Oak Forest will serve a double duty. The site has been established as a place where land developers can pay for their sins of environmental destruction.

For example, when Orange County sought permission to fill wetlands for construction at its convention center, the South Florida Water Management District required the county to pay \$280,000 for the protection of Split Oak Forest.

That kind of "mitigation" for the destruction of wetlands is growing in popularity. Walt Disney World and the Greater Orlando Aviation Authority pursued a similar form of mitigation by buying and restoring ranch land in Osceola and Polk counties.

But that undertaking was much larger than the mitigation alternative that Split Oak Forest was designed to provide.

"This is more for mom-and-pop development," said Hooper, who in-

cluded small-scale commercial and residential builders on the list of users of Split Oak Forest.

Developers who must get permission to bulldoze burrows of protected gopher tortoises can turn to Split Oak Forest. Historically, developers have had to dig up gopher tortoises and move them to safer habitat.

Now, developers can get permission from the state Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission to wipe out gopher tortoises as long as they contribute to the protection of Split Oak Forest, where a number of gopher tortoises reside.

While that's bad news for gopher tortoises on a development tract, in theory the overall population of tortoises gains from the permanent protection of good habitat.

Split Oak Forest was purchased for \$8.6 million from investors headed by Maury and Daryl Carter, who have sold other large tracts to government conservation agencies.

A state conservation fund, Preservation 2000, contributed \$2.3 million; Orange and Osceola counties paid the remaining \$6.3 million.

For information about the 9 a.m. ceremony, call (407) 836-7816.