

Forest Canopy Walkway
at the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center

Department of Environmental Management
Environmental Lands Division

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Two attachments:

- Aerial photograph with proposed location for the *Forest Canopy Walkway* at the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center.
- Drawing of proposed *Forest Canopy Walkway* at the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center; certain elements (such as tower stabilization cables) are not included.

In 2006, staff members for the County's Environmental Lands Division proposed a *Forest Canopy Walkway* adjacent to the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center in Tarpon Springs, FL. With four supporting towers, its total span will be approximately 300 feet, and its maximum height will be 75 feet, the latter providing an observation platform with a stunning 360-degree view of the local environs. The facility will stretch through a hardwood swamp (adjacent to a pine flatwoods community) and will be accessible without the need for any specialized climbing gear from a new system of boardwalks and bridges installed at the education center. Its hours of operation will coincide with those at the center and will be supervised by staff and volunteers.

The *Forest Canopy Walkway* at the Brooker Creek Preserve Environmental Education Center will be an outdoor facility designed for observation and study of Pinellas County's subtropical forests, providing a data-base for scientists while affording the public an opportunity to learn about the biological complexity of this relatively unexplored ecosystem. It is estimated to cost \$350,000 plus endowment for ongoing maintenance and repairs.

The treetops of the world's forest represent an unexplored frontier for ecologists, educators, students, and the general public. Typically, the canopy is that layer of forest that is active photosynthetically, thus providing a sugary habitat for much of the system's

biological diversity. Nearly a dozen walkways exist in the eastern United States, one of which is located at the Myakka River State Park (Sarasota, FL). Opened to the public in Spring 2000, the Myakka River structure receives hundreds of visitors per day during season and provides a living laboratory for students of all ages. It has also been featured in numerous domestic and foreign documentaries. A walkway in Pinellas County will likely provide similar popular access into the treetops of a hardwood swamp in central Florida, complementing the education programs at an already-popular nearby education facility. Such a walkway system will also allow our visitors, staff, and volunteers to access a substantial scientific network for a newly emerged branch of science called forest canopy ecology. The educational and eco-tourism impacts of a *Forest Canopy Walkway* at the Brooker Creek Preserve argue unequivocally for such laboratory in what National Geographic calls the “high frontier” of the world’s forests.