

BIODIVERSITY

doing the right thing

RMC Group is giving a large area of quarry land near the Florida Everglades to a university with an international reputation for wetlands research. The site will become a living laboratory in which scientists will study techniques to restore the State of Florida’s shrinking wetlands

When a mining company digs the final bucket of stone from a quarry after years of work, it is faced with a problem: what to do with the enormous hole in the ground it has created?

The solution, in the case of a Florida company of RMC Group, one of the world’s largest heavy building materials firms, was not simply to hand the quarry back to the state with a dowry to pay for restoration, as it could have done, but instead to give the land to Florida International University (FIU), which has an international reputation for wetlands research, and to support the creation of one of the first study programmes in the world to focus specifically on wetlands restoration.

‘Philanthropy was part of the motivation for the company,’ says RMC Group’s international environment director Noel Morrin. ‘We naturally want to do the right thing and behave in a socially responsible manner when restoring land.

‘But our local management took the decision to proceed for practical business reasons. The industry needs to build its knowledge on how to restore areas where mining has taken place.

‘Creating a centre of expertise in wetlands restoration will give our industry as a whole, and not just RMC South Florida Inc [a subsidiary of the US holding company RMC Industries Corporation], access to research of great value for the future,’ he adds.

The 1105-acre (448ha) site, which lies to the south of Miami, is the first of several in the area which the company is giving to the university.

By 2022, when quarrying will end, the company will have donated around 2100 acres of wetlands to FIU, which plans to turn the area into a ‘living laboratory’ for wetlands restoration techniques. The company is also giving the university \$600,000 (£410,000) over the next five years, and matching funds from the state of Florida will bring the value of the gift to more than \$1million.

The cost of giving the land to the university and helping to establish the study centre was higher than the cost of the dowry it would have had to pay to the state, according to RMC South Florida.

Ronald Jones, a professor of biology at FIU and

the study centre will increase our knowledge of how to restore wetland habitat of value to conservation



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director of its Southeast Environmental Research Center, says the site is of particular nature conservation value because it lies between the Biscayne National Park, the Crocodile National Refuge and the Everglades National Park, which forms part of the largest continuous wetland system in the US. ‘All of this area is part of an ever-shrinking critical habitat for around 68 endangered and threatened species’, he says.

‘This presents a real opportunity for our students to gain practical experience. A key piece of land will

■ the Florida Everglades, which are within 13 miles (20km) of the site RMC is donating to Florida International University, are home to around 68 endangered species, including the bobcat

be restored to the Everglades system. Our mission is to ensure that the restoration of this land is done right first time.' The university will spend some of the money donated by the company on creating a degree programme in wetland restoration. Several of its departments are involved in the initiative, including biology, earth sciences, environmental studies and the research center headed by Jones. Two graduate students are already working on the project and an internship programme with another US university is under discussion.

'The programme will be training a new type of professional – one sorely needed by the industry,' says Jones, who has spent 15 years working in Biscayne Bay, the adjacent marine waters, and the Florida Everglades.

The professor believes this is the first wetlands restoration programme associated with limestone mining in Florida, and perhaps the US. 'It's definitely the first to do it on the scale and with the initial involvement of a university, and where the university is treated as a partner in the restoration and mitigation activity,' he says.

The company will restore all the land it is donating under the watchful eye of the university scientists. At their suggestion, it has already begun removing alien plants such as Australian pine, Brazilian pepper and Burma grass, which grow rapidly and crowd out indigenous plants, to create a habitat for American alligators, white pelicans, bobcats and other native animals.

'Handing the land back to the state with a legacy would have brought us no benefits in terms of our reputation in the state,' RMC South Florida explains.

the company

RMC Group is the world's fifth-largest building materials company. It has 35,000 employees and operates in 27 countries. In the latest financial year the company made pre-tax profits of £171million on turnover of £5,215bn. It:

- has worked with nine global competitors to deliver a two-year worldwide study of how the cement sector can contribute to a more sustainable society. This work has been carried out under the auspices of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development
- is introducing a common set of rules for measuring and reporting both the energy efficiency record of its aggregate operations worldwide, and the carbon dioxide emissions from its cement plants
- has worked with a wide range of stakeholders since the mid-1970s to develop techniques for protecting and enhancing biodiversity at its sand and gravel pits and quarries
- owns the Bonny Doon quarry and Davenport cement works in California where the federally threatened red-legged frog lives
- has provided free resources since 1999 to ecologists and a high school in Florida for making 'reef balls', which are used to create artificial coral reefs in the Upper Keys
- made provisions in 2001 of £74.6m for land restoration.

'Creating a wetland study centre won't just help to protect the shrinking Florida Everglades; it will help to grow our business. Florida is a high growth state and so important to our businesses there. The licence to operate is a great business driver.' The company reports that closer links have begun to be forged with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection since it began working with FIU.

This case study suggests that the traditional image of the relationship between the mining industry and the environmental lobby – a mud-stained campaigner lying in front of a huge yellow digger – is changing. When the stone is dug from the Florida quarry, the diggers will stay on – only this time they will be helping environmental scientists create a living laboratory.

Further information:

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■ RMC Group plans to donate more than 2100 acres (850ha) of wetlands in total to Florida International University and is providing financial support to turn the area into a living laboratory for the study of wetlands habitat creation



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This case illustrates how a positive environmental protection and enhancement policy can have long-term benefits for the community. The restoration of quarry land to its former status may not always be the best policy – but funds set aside for this may provide solutions to related problems which would not otherwise be possible.

Outstanding features of the case are:

- Mutual benefit for company and community
- Long-term environmental gains for the region
- A university enabled to enhance environmental preservation skills for generations of students
- The mining industry shows campaigners that quarried land is not useless.

SIMON WEBLEY, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS