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Investigating the Ecological and Economic Significance of Saw palmetto in South Florida

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Problem Statement:

What is the ecological and economic significance of Saw palmetto in South Florida?

Background

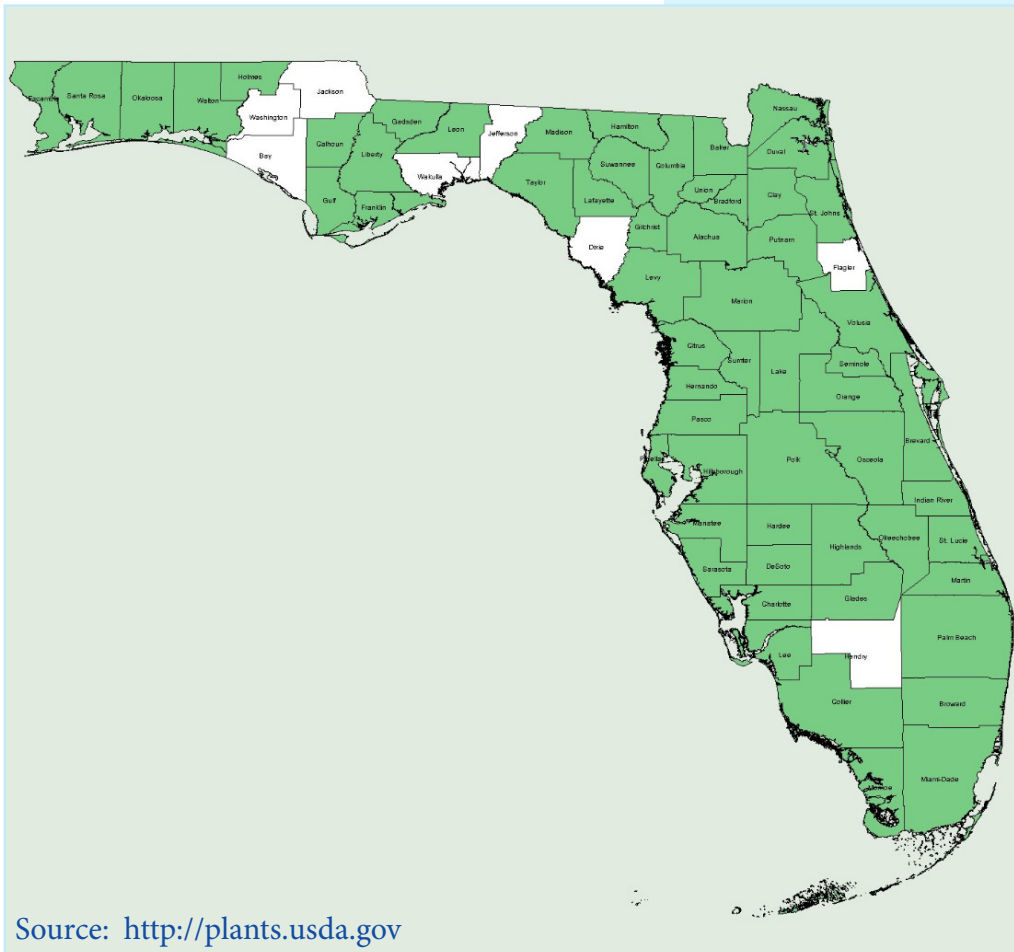
Saw palmetto (*Serenoa repens*) is an endemic species in the southeastern United States and populations of the plant exist throughout the state of Florida. Saw palmetto is the dominant woody plant in dry prairies and pine flatwoods of South Florida, and it is believed that drainage projects in the region have helped to promote the expansion of the plant. The ecological importance of this native plant is linked to its use for protection, nesting, and as a food source for many species of wildlife.

Several birds and ground-nesting rodents rely on the saw palmetto for supporting and protecting their nests. The stems of the plant are often used

by the endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow (*Ammodramus savannarum*) and the native Florida wood rat (*Neotoma floridana*). Visitors to state parks may be able to spot a white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginiana*) near the plants, either seeking protection from potential predators or for using the plant as a buffer from the wind during the winter. The Florida panther uses patches of the plant as sites for both daytime resting and for the creation of dens during breeding season.

The saw palmetto serves a vital role as a sought out food source for many of the herbivorous species that share its habitat. The palm heart is often consumed by feral pigs. When the fruit (or berry) ripens around August each year, it is sought out by several mammals including the black bear (which is a threatened species in Florida), white-tailed deer, raccoon, opossum, and

Distribution of Saw Palmetto in Florida



even cattle. Insects also eat the fruit when it is on the plant, but will also forage on fruits that have fallen to the ground.

The plant has become economically important as well. Even if you have never visited one of the many habitats that the saw palmetto thrives in, you may have come across the plant in a nursery or a local neighborhood. Saw palmettos have become a very desirable landscape plant for homeowners. It has several characteristics that make it an excellent choice for those looking for a native plant that requires very little maintenance. The saw palmetto is naturally resistant to both insects and drought and it does not require the use of fertilizer to promote growth.

Saw palmetto has also become commercially valuable due to the medicinal uses of the plant. Many of the native Florida tribes, including the Seminole and Miccosukee, have utilized the saw palmetto to treat urinary and reproductive problems and respiratory illness. An extract of the saw palmetto fruit, called Permixon, is most commonly used in the treatment of prostate gland hypertro-

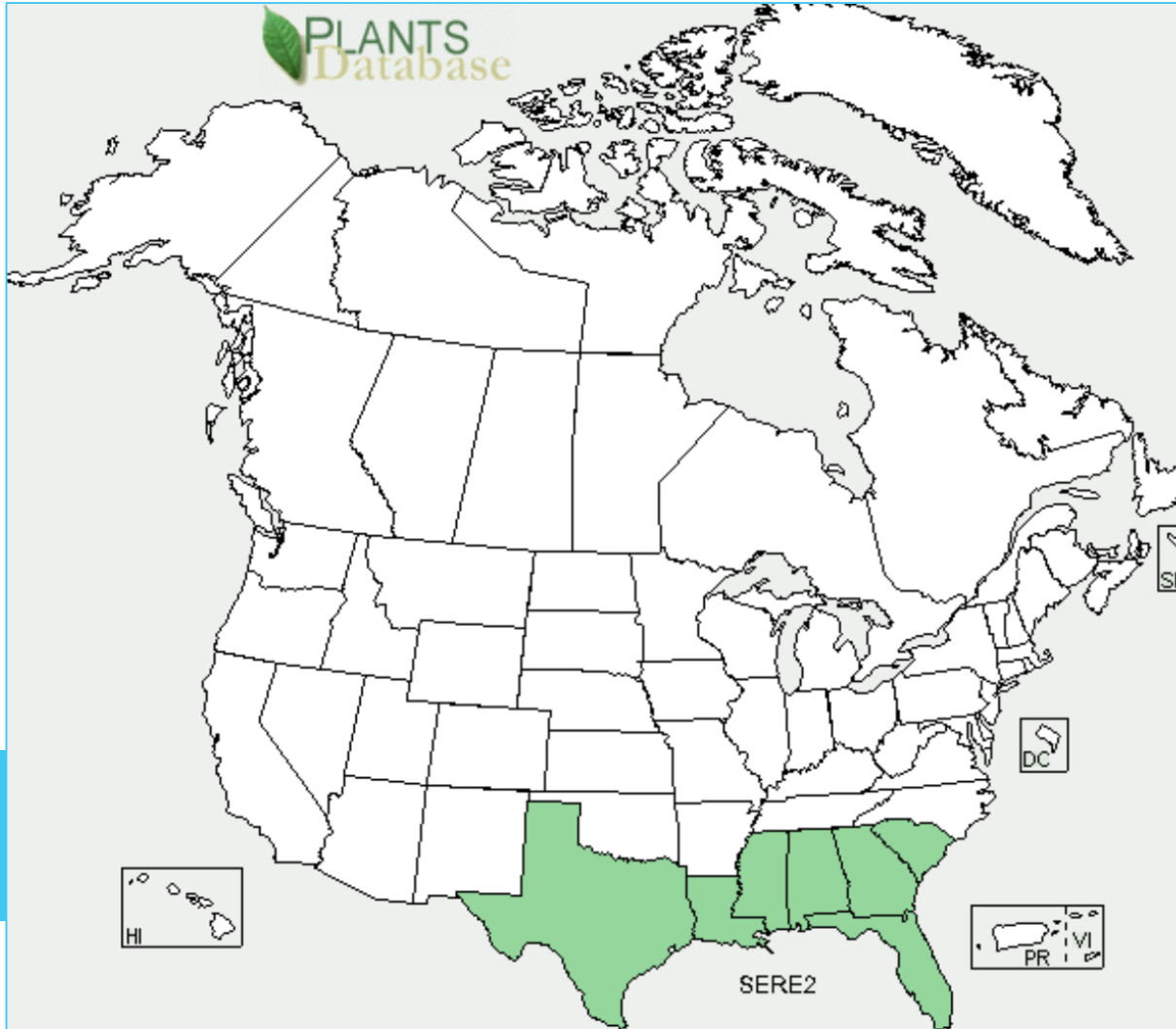
phy. In the past two decades, the pharmaceutical demand for saw palmetto berries has increased significantly. A trip to your local health food store will inevitably reveal several saw-palmetto based products on the shelves in caplets, tablets, and liquid form. All saw palmetto products are classified as herbal supplements and are not currently regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Most recently, saw palmetto has been cited as a possible treatment for male pattern baldness.

Implications and Conclusions

If saw palmetto fruit continues to be a sought after commodity, there is potential for harvesters to begin removing the berries for profit. The effect of berry picking could prove to have major effects on local ecosystems. It is possible that the loss of seeds (and seed dispersal) plant populations across the state could decline. Reduced saw palmetto populations could potentially result in similar population declines in the species that depend on the plant for food, nesting, or protection.



US distribution of Saw Palmetto



Source: <http://plants.usda.gov>

