



2003 INDUSTRY OUTLOOK

# ECO-BUSINESS

By Cynthia Barnett

FOCUS: ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION

## Mending Mother Nature

Florida is the global pacesetter in the fast-growing industry.

To see what's driving the state's environmental restoration industry, one need look no farther than the Florida Everglades. The \$7.8-billion rescue operation under way there is the largest ecosystem restoration project in the world.

But the Everglades rescue is just one example in the recent remarkable growth of an industry born in the 1950s to help restore mined-out phosphate lands. Restoration gained momentum during the 1970s and 1980s as real estate developers were made to mitigate their impact on the environment. It has come of age over the past 20 years as the state's sensitive ecosystems and efforts to establish a regulatory structure have brought it to national prominence in restoring wetlands and other ecosystems.

"There is little doubt that Florida is leading the nation — indeed, the world — in ecosystem restoration," says Don Ross, president and CEO of North Port-

based EarthBalance, which is working on wetlands mitigation and other restoration projects from south Florida to Maryland's Chesapeake Bay. At the company's native plant nursery in DeSoto County, Ross fingers tiny sea oat shoots grown from seeds harvested by his employees on St. George's Island. The seedlings will be replanted in dunes along the Florida Panhandle and South Carolina coasts.

Quantifying the economic impact of the restoration industry — it does not have an association — is difficult. Business owners, most in firms of fewer than 10 employees, claim growth rates between 15% and 20% a year for the past decade. "Florida has the industry sewn up because Florida has the jewels," says Steven Godley, president of Tampa-based Biological Research Associates. Launched as a two-man company in the 1970s, Godley now has six Florida offices, 70 employees and \$10 million in annual revenue. "Florida has a tremen-



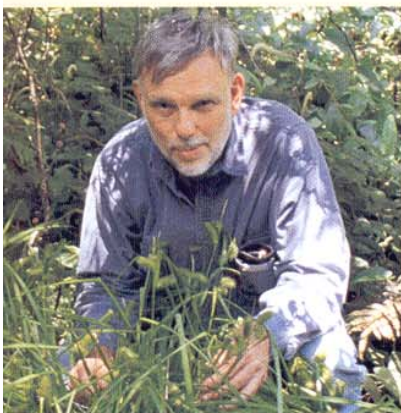
**Leading the World:** Don Ross, CEO of EarthBalance, says Florida is No. 1 in ecosystem restoration.

dous amount of resources and a tremendous awareness of their value," he says.

Godley and others predict growth will keep accelerating as housing developments, public works and other major projects calculate environmental restoration costs as a standard element of getting their projects not only approved, but appreciated.

At Barry University in Miami Shores, visiting professor of management Betty Diener has been studying the industry from Florida to China. She estimates that any major U.S. development project these days will spend between 7% and 10% on environmental restoration. Diener says Florida's early adoption of restoration practices means the state's eco-companies are well-positioned to grow nationally and around the globe.

"Because of the Everglades project and the attitudes here, the companies have a tremendous opportunity in Florida, and a tremendous opportunity to export," Diener says. "Even though the vegetation might be different elsewhere, it's Florida that has developed the principles." □



**'Pinnacle':** André Clewell's Quincy company has global reach.

### WHAT IS ENVIRONMENTAL RESTORATION?

The industry is made up of biologists, botanists, engineers and others who work on environmental reclamation, restoration, mitigation and ecological engineering, which involves using the natural environment instead of built materials to solve engineering problems. The industry's tools range from earth-moving to planting and sprigging to complex engineering design. "We've reached a pinnacle where we can restore just about any ecosystem in Florida — even the worst phosphate mines," says André Clewell, a former FSU botany professor who is president of AF Clewell Inc. His Quincy-based company is working on ecological restoration projects across the globe.