



THE
LONGLEAF
LEADER

Partnerships

Photos by Christina Larson



Longleaf Destinations

Shoal Sanctuary Nature Preserve

Originally a longleaf forest, Shoal Sanctuary in north Walton County, Florida, is the revival of land exploited for a century and abandoned to succession growth. Since purchasing the first of eight adjoining parcels in 1990, Robert and Christina Larson have worked tirelessly to restore the natural forest. The elimination of invasive tallow, wisteria, cogongrass, the mass reduction of laurel oaks, yaupon, and sand pines, and the planting of over 14,000 seedlings has brought about a thriving longleaf community. Today Shoal Sanctuary serves as an ecological, educational forest program, offering hiking and guided tours to visitors.

Eco-Education & Stewardship

Both retired teachers, Robert and Christina bring diverse backgrounds and experiences to Shoal Sanctuary. Robert taught humanities, philosophy, and sculpture at Northwest Florida State College for three decades. Chris was the first female paramedic in Okaloosa County and taught psychology

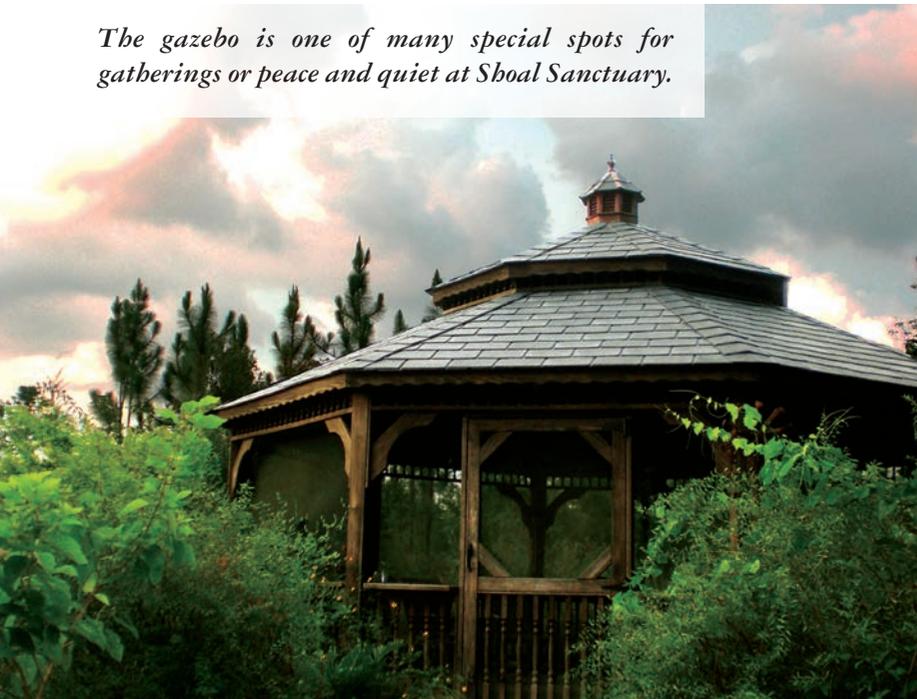
at the University of West Florida. Together, the Larsons were foster parents, caring for 145 at-risk children over a span of twelve years. Their passions for caretaking and education run deep.

In 1990, the Larsons ventured on a steep learning curve to implement best stewardship practices on their property. They work with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S Fish and Wildlife Service, Florida Forestry Service, The Nature Conservancy, South Walton Community Council, the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Florida Land Steward Program, agricultural extension departments, biologists, mycologists, and master gardeners. In 2008, the couple became certified in Type-II wildland firefighting, coordinating 14 prescribed burns to promote a healthier natural environment for flora and fauna. To reduce their carbon footprint, they fitted the farmhouse with solar panels. In 2020, they expanded Shoal Sanctuary from 50 to 115 acres and were recognized by the Florida Forest Service as "outstanding Florida forest landowners."

Prescribed burn at “Madonna of the Orbs” sculpture



The gazebo is one of many special spots for gatherings or peace and quiet at Shoal Sanctuary.



Lo & Behold longleaf pine



Along with restoring longleaf pine, the Larsons have planted other imperiled conifer trees on their property. Connie Barlow, paleo-ecologist and world authority on the Florida torreya (*Torreya taxifolia*), entrusted 40 seeds to Shoal Sanctuary. The nonprofit Archangel Ancient Tree Archive cloned and then donated 50 redwoods—the largest deciduous conifers on Earth—to Shoal Sanctuary. Of the over 100 species of redwood that once existed, the three remaining species all grow at Shoal Sanctuary amid the longleaf forest. These assisted migration projects are just one of several unique points of interest for Sanctuary guests.

Sculpture Trails & Hiking

Visitors can spot hundreds of Larson sculptures along five miles of hiking trails. “Creation Totem” with its indigenous symbols is a central point. “Sentinel,” Larson’s signature piece, keeps a watchful eye over the forest. A dance company came to Shoal Sanctuary, and two dancers performed a beautiful pas de deux on “Haiku” sculpture. “Emu Observation Station,” a

spiral stairway that hugs a live oak, invites climbing. “Council Compass” is surrounded by PineHenge, a circle of longleaf pines planted by Boy Scouts. Unlike stuffy, hands-off museums, Larson sculptures welcome viewers’ touch as the different textures are part of the enjoyment. Robert’s artwork has been purchased by Paramount Pictures, museums, churches, universities, banks, corporations, and private collectors across the U.S., Europe, and Asia.

Hikers confident in their navigation skills can borrow a detailed trail map. Roads are marked with leaf-shaped signs created from repurposed campaign placards. Lo and Behold, a section of forest between Lo Creek & Behold Creek, hosts a whimsical Fairyland, installed by Girl Scouts. Nestled amid aspiring young and old-growth longleaf are benches and gazebos offering relaxation spots along the way. “Getting out among the trees boosts physical and mental health,” says Robert. “Even a short hike is rejuvenating. Strolls through a forest are said to improve the human immune system. As mystic theologian Thomas Merton proclaimed, ‘Nothing has

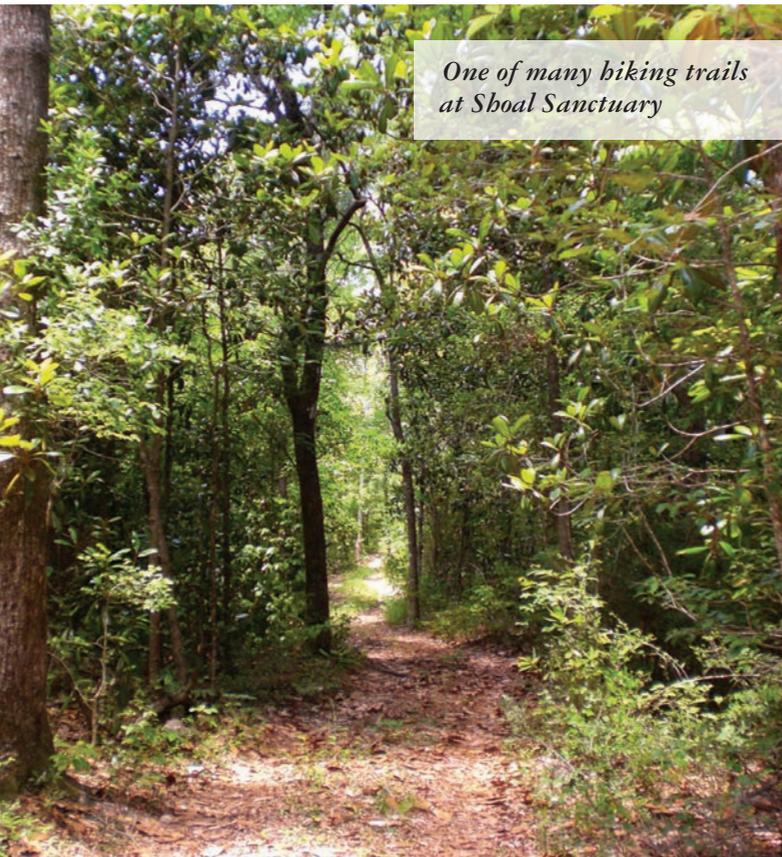


“Sentinel” amid longleaf



Longleaf pine cones

Robert and Christina Larson



One of many biking trails at Shoal Sanctuary

For the Larsons, Shoal Sanctuary is a living tribute to God’s creation. The care for their family forest is apparent. Taking the time to lift a fallen branch off a longleaf sapling, the Larsons know even the smallest of trees may become a magnificent giant in centuries to come.

Reservations are required to visit Shoal Sanctuary.

Call (850) 651-0392
or email LarsonStudio@cox.net.
In the meantime,
enjoy a virtual visit at ShoalSanctuary.com.

ever been said about God that hasn’t already been said better by the wind in the pine trees.’ ”

Visitors Welcomed!

Over the years, Shoal Sanctuary has been blessed by a Cherokee chief, a Catholic bishop, an evangelic minister, an Egyptian priestess, and a Zuni medicine man. Visitors have come from as far away as Lithuania, Namibia, Bolivia, Japan, Germany, Sweden, and the South Pacific islands. Guests are

invited to inscribe a message on the sign-in walls inside the farmhouse, some of which are deeply philosophical. One simply declares, “Carson will never fight again.” Chris recalls assuring the 6-year-old writer that rather than making impossible promises, striving to use words instead of fists is what’s important. As Robert said, “Peace is a full-time commitment, something you work at every day. It doesn’t happen after the last plate is thrown. It’s an ongoing effort rather than an attainable goal. Peace is a verb.”

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COVER Longleaf pine flatwoods at Eglin Air Force Base, Florida. Photo by Vernon Compton.

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