



The Tree That Walks

By Jack Ryan

DRIVING SOUTH from Miami on U.S. 1, Florida visitors can leave the mainland and journey from key to key via the Overseas Highway to Key West. In the keys, land has become a scarce commodity. Man attempts to add to the available land by filling in the relatively shallow waters around the keys. Nature performs a similar feat.

A few hundred yards from shore are tree-covered islands, which originated as seedlings of the Red Mangrove. *The Tree That Walks* is the name given the Red Mangrove by the Indians of South Florida. The mangrove provides a unique method of creating land by means of its remarkable "walking" root system, performing a vital ecological service.

The long, slender seed of the mangrove drifts until it lodges in the shallows around the keys. The seed sprouts, takes hold of the bottom and begins to grow leaves.

As the seedling grows, it sends out branches bearing more leaves and sprouts roots from above the water-line, like branches reaching into the water. The root system continues to grow, sending out roots from roots, and the young mangrove begins its "walk." The root systems of several adjacent seedlings may merge; the island starts to grow. Several nearby islands may merge.

As the root system becomes more and more entangled, silt, leaves and other debris are trapped beneath the island. This decomposing organic matter attracts many small crustaceans. The root system provides nourishment and protection for shrimp, crabs and lobsters.

Fish venture in, also for protection, and to feed on the crustaceans. These fish may, in turn, be eaten by the larger game fish. Thus, the mangrove root system begins a food chain that eventually leads to Man.