



30x30: The Future of Florida Conservation

Prioritizing conservation is an investment in the future of Florida. Conserved waters and lands support wildlife and biodiversity while providing people with clean air and water, food, and recreational opportunities. Strategically increasing land and water conservation—in conjunction with a transition to clean, renewable energy—also helps to reduce climate change impacts and moderates Earth’s warming temperatures.

The 30x30 Campaign is a global campaign to conserve at least 30% of our land and oceans by 2030. Worldwide efforts are on track to protect 17% of the land and 10% of the ocean by the end of 2020. In Florida, we’re well on our way to achieving these goals thanks to our long history of conservation funding programs like Florida Forever, Florida Communities Trust, the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program, and others. Funding at the national level, like the Land and Water Conservation Fund, and local land-buying programs have also made a difference.

All Floridians deserve access to our state’s natural areas and the benefits they provide. Seventy percent of low-income communities across the country live in nature-deprived areas.¹ To address these inequities, which are particularly pronounced in Black and Latinx communities, more proactive measures are needed. Federal, state, and local programs must prioritize new parks and green spaces in low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods to meet the needs of current and future generations.

Threats to Our Natural Lands

Florida’s natural environment faces numerous threats. Human infrastructure (like roads and development) permanently fragments wildlife habitat and severely reduces or eliminates its ecological value. As Florida’s population increases, growth management decisions will determine the fate of our natural spaces and our water, wildlife, and quality of life.

As lands are encroached upon by urban development, implementing necessary management practices to maintain ecological health, such as prescribed fire, becomes more difficult. Connectivity of conservation lands allows safer and more efficient burning. Strategies to control invasive species that can outcompete native plants and wildlife are also needed.

Climate change seriously threatens coastal and inland areas. As sea levels rise, coastal areas become flooded more frequently and saltwater can enter and permanently damage freshwater resources. Protected coastal natural areas buffer our communities from flooding and storms as well as store carbon and mitigate climate change impacts.

To make our communities more sustainable and resilient, we need to protect our most valuable natural areas first and implement practices to conserve our water, prevent pollution, protect biodiversity, and stabilize our changing climate. The choices we make today will have a lasting legacy on our natural areas and Floridians in the future.

Oceans and Coastal Areas

Some of Florida’s ocean and coastal areas are protected through various mechanisms. About 419,000 acres are part of the National Estuarine Research Reserves system, and 2.2 million acres are within state aquatic preserves. The Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary encompasses 2.4 million acres and includes five marine zones with varying protection and management levels.

The Florida Keys Tortugas Ecological Reserve protects coral reefs and other critical marine habitats.

(Photo by Carlton Ward, Jr.)



How 30x30 Works

Achieving the 30x30 goal in Florida will require additional strategic acquisition of lands and waters that support biological diversity and our human population. It will also require enhancing the level of protection on existing conservation areas and improving management strategies.

Florida's conservation lands are classified by their protection status and the type of management that occurs. Areas that are permanently protected with adopted management plans comprise 22% of Florida's existing conservation lands. The majority (about 62%) of Florida's 10.6 million acres of conserved lands are at the lower level of protection.²

HIGHER LEVEL OF PROTECTION (22%)

These lands or waters are permanently protected and managed exclusively for biodiversity conservation. There is a mandated management plan and natural events, such as fire, are allowed to occur without interference or are mimicked through active land management.



The Kissimmee Prairie Preserve State Park is home to the largest expanse of dry prairie in Florida, a globally imperiled habitat. Active management for biodiversity has fostered this pristine ecosystem. (Photo by Lindsay Cross)

MID LEVEL OF PROTECTION (16%)

These lands are permanently protected and have a management plan. They are generally managed for their natural value, but there may be habitat manipulation to support uses such as hunting and fishing or to create recreational infrastructure.

LOWER LEVEL OF PROTECTION (62%)

These lands may be maintained for multiple uses, including mineral extraction, timber harvesting, agriculture, or recreation. They may include conservation easements that could allow some land cover conversion.

Recommendations

- Fully fund the suite of Florida Forever conservation programs and support local and national conservation programs like the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund.
- Ensure that all Floridians (with a focus on Black and Latinx communities) have access to the benefits of nature by prioritizing new parks and preserves close to where people live now and in the future.
- Enhance protection of existing conservation areas by elevating lower levels to mid or higher protection levels.
- Create additional marine protected areas and aquatic preserves.
- Discontinue the dangerous practices of oil and gas extraction on land and offshore.
- Improve management practices to increase carbon storage, climate change mitigation, and biodiversity.
- Mandate Best Management Practices to reduce pollution sources and restore prescribed fire management.
- Increase non-extractive or exclusion zones in wildlife management and aquatic preserve areas.
- Encourage smart growth management practices that protect natural areas and reduce sprawl.

¹ Data Source: "The Nature Gap" by Center for American Progress.

² Data source: Florida Natural Areas Inventory. Florida Conservation Lands database, September 2020.

