



# PUBLIC LANDS

CONSERVED AREAS PROTECT WATER,  
WILDLIFE, AND HUMAN HEALTH.  
FROM FUNDING LOCAL PARKS TO  
ACQUIRING LARGE HABITATS, WE  
ADVOCATE FOR THE CONSERVATION OF  
NATURAL FLORIDA.

Myakka River

# CONSERVATION LANDS

## INVESTING IN FLORIDA'S FUTURE

Florida has a proud history of conserving land for nature, wildlife, and people. Both native and new Floridians understand the need to protect our natural environment because it is the reason we choose to live, retire, and raise our families in this beautiful state. For visitors, our natural environment is the “Real Florida,” and the health of our economy depends directly upon the health of our ecosystems.

Since 1963, Floridians have consistently supported raising public funds for land conservation, even when it means imposing additional taxes. Widespread approval of local ballot measures and statewide constitutional amendments have provided funding to preserve land and protect healthy rivers, springs, beaches, and other natural areas.

With 21.5 million residents and growing, Florida's population places significant demands on our natural resources, and most importantly, our drinking water. Natural, undeveloped land adjacent to water bodies filter pesticides, fertilizers, and other pollutants, allowing clean water to replenish the Floridan aquifer, which supplies 90% of our state's drinking water. Protecting land is the most cost-effective way to protect our water supply, as it is far less expensive to buy land or conservation easements to protect water resources than to restore a degraded system, like the Everglades.

Land conservation also aids in coastal resiliency and makes our \$11.5 billion fishing industry<sup>1</sup> and \$94 billion tourism industry<sup>2</sup> possible. Smart land policy includes investing in Florida's future in the form of strategic and science-based land acquisition that will protect areas with the highest environmental value and help guide new growth and development away from critical natural resources. Protecting these areas will ensure important conservation goals are met, such as protecting Florida's rich biodiversity, recharging our aquifer and drinking water supply, and minimizing floods.

Florida already has a nationally recognized conservation and recreation lands acquisition program: **Florida Forever**. Thanks to the Water and

Land Conservation Amendment, which passed in 2014 with 75% voter approval, we now also have a dedicated funding stream to purchase and protect critical conservation lands. This funding comes from documentary stamp taxes, which is a revenue source generated through real estate transactions.

The Florida Forever program provides a clear roadmap for investing in our conservation future. It uses science-based criteria and a strategic plan to protect our most valuable lands and waters. Investments in Florida Forever, the Florida Communities Trust, and the Rural and Family Lands Protection Program protect our priority conservation lands and preserves, support community parks, and maintain working landscapes for the benefit of all Floridians. A core purpose of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment is to restore Florida Forever funding to its pre-recession level, which was a steady \$300 million annually. Funding was slashed in 2009 in response to the recession. However, as the economy improved, conservation funding did not recover. From 2016 through 2020, the Legislature only appropriated \$ 248.2 million to the Florida Forever program. Before the 2008 recession, lawmakers used bonding to protect areas that faced an imminent threat of development. The legislature's Florida Forever bonding authority expired per statute in 2020; lawmakers should restore this authority as soon as possible, especially as borrowing rates are at historic lows.

## STATE PARKS

State parks are living natural museums where we can experience Florida as it once was and protect those cultural experiences for generations to come. The Florida Park Service is the premier state park system in the United States, having won the national state parks Gold Medal Award four times in the last two decades. In 2019, Florida State Parks & Trails served more than 29 million visitors, generating \$2.27 billion in direct economic impact on local economies throughout the state. Our parks contributed more than \$150 million to the state's general revenues via sales taxes and created more



than 31,000 jobs in local economies.<sup>3</sup> In many of Florida's more rural counties, state parks are one of the most essential attractions drawing visitors to the area and supporting small businesses that depend on tourism for survival.

## COMMUNITY PARKS

For many families in Florida's metropolitan areas, much of their time spent in the natural world occurs at community parks. In addition to recreational benefits, parks are economic engines for communities seeking to attract and retain residents and businesses. Proximity to parks raises the property values of homes and businesses and provides cost-free exercise and recreation.

Florida Communities Trust (FCT) is the state's only program aimed at urban open space conservation needs. Created in 1991, it provides state matching funds for local governments and land trusts, resulting in nearly 600 local and regional parks. With 70% of low-income communities across the country living in nature-deprived areas, we must

prioritize new parks and green spaces in low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods to meet current and future generations' needs.

## 30 X 30

The 30x30 campaign is a global effort to protect 30% of our land and oceans by 2030. Florida is well on its way due to its strong history of conservation programs, like Florida Forever. Florida can be a global leader in this program by improving management on its existing lands to optimize biodiversity and climate resiliency and by increasing the protection status of its current public lands and water bodies. Removing dangerous extractive practices like oil and gas drilling from public lands, like Big Cypress National Preserve, is one way to enhance protections and advance the goals of 30x30.

One of FCT's economic benefits is that the cost of maintaining the land is paid by local governments, placing no additional burden on state land management funds.

## **PUBLIC HEALTH**

Time spent in nature is not only good for our physical health but also improves our mental wellbeing. The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the importance of accessible, safe places for people to gather, exercise, and recreate. Our parks, whether they are expansive or pocket-sized, keep communities healthy and connected.

## **WORKING LANDS**

Wide open spaces provide refuge for wildlife and water. Working landscapes, like ranches or forests, can benefit conservation and agricultural production. The Rural and Family Lands Protection Program (RFLPP) funds easements to protect agricultural lands and the conservation benefits they provide. Conservation easements pay landowners a portion of the land value in exchange for limiting future development. This means that agricultural practices can continue, but the land cannot be converted to urban uses, like

commercial developments. Maintaining working landscapes provides water quality benefits as wetlands and undeveloped areas filter pollutants and recharge the aquifer. Wildlife can also use the areas for hunting, breeding, or as movement corridors connecting to other conserved lands.

## **CONSERVATION LANDS AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS**

Climate change is the greatest threat facing our natural areas, wildlife, and human population. Parks and natural lands, especially in Florida's urban areas, are green infrastructure that can provide multiple solutions to mitigate the climate crisis. Strategically placed shoreline parks and natural lands buffer cities from rising seas, coastal storms, and flooding.

Trails provide carbon-free transportation and link residents to popular destinations. Shady green spaces reduce the urban heat island effect, protect people from heat waves, and reduce summer energy use. Water-smart parks, playgrounds, and green alleys absorb rainfall, reduce flooding, and recharge drinking water supplies while saving energy for water management.



# LAND MANAGEMENT

Managing our protected lands is a critical, on-going component of conservation. Lands protected using conservation easements are managed by the private landowner, reducing the state's management cost and burden. Examples of management methods include the restoration of water flow, removal of invasive, non-native species, and prescribed fire. Below are several management strategies that may be jointly implemented.

## MANAGING FOR WATER SUPPLY

In Florida, 90% of our drinking water comes from our underground aquifers. Keeping our water safe from pollution and depletion starts with protecting the lands and wetlands that recharge them.

## MANAGING FOR RECREATION

To provide the best recreational opportunities for Floridians and visitors alike, it's crucial to provide steady funding to maintain our state parks, wildlife management areas, state forests, aquatic preserves, and other conservation lands. Infrastructure such as signage, public restrooms, boat ramps, and ADA-accessible recreational equipment enhances visitor safety and experiences.

## MANAGING FOR HABITAT AND WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

Some conservation lands are managed primarily for their value as wildlife habitat or for their biodiversity. Florida is a global biological hotspot and is a haven for more than 120 endangered plant and animal species. Habitat loss is among the most severe threats these species face, making the

preservation of ecologically endangered lands and wildlife corridors key to their continued survival. Prescribed fire and other techniques can combat the invasion of non-native species that compete for resources with native plants and animals.

## MANAGING FOR FOOD SUPPLY

Agricultural lands protected through conservation easements may be managed to ensure the healthy and safe harvest of food, livestock, and timber products. As Florida's second-highest-grossing industry, agriculture employs 2 million people and contributes more than \$104 billion to the state's economy each year.

## MANAGING FOR CLIMATE AND RESILIENCY

Natural areas can aid in our fight against climate change and sea level rise. Aquatic and terrestrial plants store carbon in their root systems or the soil, reducing the atmosphere's carbon dioxide levels. Restoration of wetlands like seagrasses and mangroves can reduce climate impacts and provide a buffer for damaging storms and hurricanes.

<sup>1</sup> Southwick Associates. "Economic Impacts of Recreational Fishing in: Florida." Fact sheet. American Sportfishing Association. October 2018. Web. <https://asafishing.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/ASA-Congressional-Fishing-Contributions-2019-Senate-version-Florida-Update-06262019.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Rockport Analytics. "Picking Up the Pace: Florida's Tourism Performance Jumps Into a Higher Gear, the 2018 Contribution of Travel & Tourism to the Florida Economy." Report. Visit Florida. 2020. Web. <https://www.visitflorida.org/media/30679/florida-visitor-economic-large-impact-study.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Florida Department of Environmental Protection. "State of Florida Land Management Uniform Accounting Council 2020 Annual Report (FY2019-20)" [http://publicfiles.dep.state.fl.us/DSL/OESWeb/FLDEP\\_DSL\\_OES\\_LMUAC\\_AnnualReport.pdf](http://publicfiles.dep.state.fl.us/DSL/OESWeb/FLDEP_DSL_OES_LMUAC_AnnualReport.pdf). 2020.



# CONSERVATION LANDS

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement the intent of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment (Florida Constitution Art. 10, Sec. 28) by statutorily dedicating at least \$300 million per year of the Land Acquisition Trust Funds to fund the suite of Florida Forever conservation programs.
- Reauthorize the use of bonding for conservation funding.
- Maintain adequate fund balances to ensure flexibility and competitiveness in acquiring or protecting new lands.
- Ensure adequate funding for land management, with preference given to practices that retain and, where possible, restore natural processes and native populations of plants and animals.
- Adequately fund the management of our state's awarding-winning state parks system.
- Appropriately staff conservation departments to maintain efficiency and effectiveness in the Florida Forever programs.
- Prioritize new parks and green spaces in low-income Black and Latinx neighborhoods to meet the needs of current and future generations.
- Participate in the global 30x30 campaign to protect 30% of our land and oceans by 2030 as a leader and example of how the 30x30 goal can drive economic success and stability.

# WILDLIFE

Florida boasts some of the nation's highest concentrations of rare plants and animals. From the endangered Florida panther and threatened Florida manatee to the more common great blue heron and wild turkey, when we protect habitat for wildlife, we are protecting the natural systems upon which our economy and quality of life depend.

Florida is one of the most species-rich states in the nation. With more than 80 different ecosystems, the state supports more than 100 species listed as endangered, threatened, or of special concern. Many rare species are found only in our state—like the Florida bonneted bat and the Florida scrub-jay. While it is difficult to quantify all the ways that Florida's wildlife and their habitats enrich our quality of life, there are many tangible benefits to preserving strong and healthy ecosystems. Animal, plant, and marine biodiversity keeps ecosystems functional, which in turn allows us to thrive.

Direct economic benefits associated with conserving Florida's wildlife and habitat include increased tourism, recreation, and fishing. International and domestic tourism now accounts for more than 106 million visitors to Florida each year. Tourists delight in catching a glimpse of our charismatic creatures, and through activities like birdwatching and ecotourism, they pump billions of dollars into local economies each year. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) reports about \$6 billion in annual spending on wildlife viewing activities alone.<sup>1</sup>

## DEVELOPMENT & HABITAT FRAGMENTATION

With 21.5 million residents, Florida is the third most populous state in the nation and growing. Experts at the University of Florida Bureau of Business and Economic Research predict that by 2070, our population will increase by another 14 million residents. Development consumes and divides natural and agricultural areas essential to wildlife, putting more pressure on existing conservation lands. Coastal development exerts additional threats to marine and beach-dwelling plants and animals.

If development occurs as it has in the past, Floridians will lose roughly 5 million acres of agricultural and natural undeveloped lands by 2070.<sup>2</sup> The proposed creation of 330 miles of new and expanded toll roads and utility corridors by the legislatively-mandated Multiple-Use Corridors of Regional Economic Significance (M-CORES) program will have profound implications. If built, the toll roads and resulting development threaten to destroy and fragment habitat for and increase deaths of Florida panther, black bear, gopher tortoise, and many other species.

## THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND INVASIVE SPECIES

Our changing climate is already affecting wildlife and the habitats they call home. Rising sea levels force animals and vegetation to move to higher ground or more northern latitudes. Freshwater resources are becoming more saline as water sources and freshwater habitats become more scarce. Coral reefs, coastal beaches, sand dunes, and wetlands—our first line of defense against damaging storms or hurricanes—are in severe decline, along with their ability to protect against stronger waves and storm events.

On top of development pressures and a changing climate, invasive non-native species such as Old World climbing fern, Brazilian pepper, Burmese pythons, cane toad, and lionfish also threaten native plants and animals. According to the National Park Service and FWC, removing exotic invasive species costs Florida taxpayers more than \$500 million each year. Those costs pale in comparison to the harm they cause to natural systems.<sup>3</sup>

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

Permanently protecting rare species' habitat and completing and securing the Florida Wildlife Corridor, a statewide network of vital conservation lands and important waterways, will enhance wildlife habitat connectivity and protect natural systems that are crucial to protecting our water supplies. The good news is that more than half of the



Corridor is already protected. Connecting existing public lands with private lands through acquisition, easements, and incentives will preserve wildlife habitat, enhance food and freshwater supply, and foster rural economies.

## MARINE AND COASTAL WILDLIFE

Some of Florida's most charismatic wildlife species are found in our freshwater, marine, and coastal environments. Like the Florida panther, animals like sea turtles and Florida manatees are considered umbrella species because when we protect their habitat, we also ensure the survival of myriad other fish and wildlife species.

Florida is globally important for sea turtles. Florida's beaches provide nesting habitat for five of the world's seven species of sea turtles: green, leatherback, loggerhead, Kemp's Ridley, and hawksbill), all federally listed as either threatened or endangered. More than 90% of all sea turtle nesting in the United States occurs on Florida's beaches. Our beaches host the world's largest nesting aggregation of loggerheads and almost all the nesting in North America for green turtles and leatherback turtles.

The Florida manatee, a subspecies of the West Indian manatee, feeds on seagrasses and other vegetation and thrives in warm waters. They can be found along the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, as well as our springs systems, shallow rivers, bays, estuaries, and canals.

These and other marine wildlife face many serious threats in Florida. Sea turtles require dynamic and healthy beaches, pollution-free coastal waters, natural dunes, and the ecosystem services these coastal systems provide. Storms, inappropriate coastal development, and sea level rise associated with climate change erode essential nesting areas. Over half of Florida's sea turtle nesting beaches are designated as critically eroded. Sea walls and other forms of coastal armoring on the beach deter or prevent sea turtles from nesting, increasing shoreline erosion, and locking up sand vital for the natural post-storm recovery of beaches. Bright lights along the coast from homes, businesses, and streetlights can discourage adult turtles from emerging from the surf to nest or cause them

to abandon a nesting attempt and can disorient hatchlings, leading them away from the ocean to die on land. A warming climate is heating beaches and the ocean with numerous adverse impacts to sea turtles, including a skew towards female turtles as sex determination of hatchlings in a nest is temperature dependent.

Harmful Algal Blooms (HAB) are an increasing threat for all aquatic species that depend upon seagrasses and other Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) for their survival. Excessive water withdrawals and pollution of the Floridan aquifer decreases needed freshwater supplies. Boat strikes, pollution, marine debris, and oil spills endanger numerous aquatic wildlife species. More information on HABs can be found in the section on water quality.

Protections at the state and federal level have helped sea turtle and manatee populations rebound. Currently, sea turtles are doing well in Florida, and nesting numbers are stable or rising slightly. Estimates of manatee populations have increased from fewer than 1,000 individuals to approximately 8,800 today thanks to the Federal Endangered Species Act and the Florida Manatee Sanctuary Act of 1978 that helped establish manatee protection speed zones and habitat preservation areas. However, the combination of watercraft collisions, persistent harmful algal and red tide blooms, and continued loss of seagrass communities resulted in record-breaking manatee mortalities in 2017-2019. Fortunately, the Legislature has also recognized the importance of maintaining a vital private-public partnership to rescue, rehabilitate, and return to the wild those manatees suffering from watercraft injuries and other illnesses.

Florida's treasured wildlife species will only survive with continued dedication by the Florida legislature, residents, businesses, and tourists alike to protect them and their habitat.

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<sup>1</sup> The 2011 Economic Benefits of Wildlife Viewing in Florida. Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2011, [myfwc.com/media/5067/2011-economics-benefits.pdf](http://myfwc.com/media/5067/2011-economics-benefits.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> 1000 Friends of Florida, University of Florida Geo Plan Center, Florida Dept. of Agriculture & Consumer Services. 'Florida 2070 Report,' 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Beck, Sandy et al. Florida Invaders. National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2nd Ed. 2013.

# WILDLIFE

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Implement the intent of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment (Florida Constitution Art. 10, Sec. 28) by statutorily dedicating at least \$300 million from the Land Acquisition Trust Funds to the Florida Forever programs, including Florida Communities Trust programs.
- Support programs that maintain Florida's rural and working agricultural lands, such as Rural and Family Lands Protection Program and Florida Forest Legacy.
- Repeal the M-CORES program and redirect funding to other pressing needs of the state, including protection of wildlife habitat.
- Prevent habitat fragmentation and reduce conflict with wildlife through sound transportation and land use programs, installation of wildlife crossings, and programs that encourage responsible homeowner practices.
- Strengthen coastal development laws that allow and even incentivize inappropriate development along the beach and too close to the surf.
- Enhance the protection of less-developed coastal lands by supporting targeted land acquisitions and increasing incentives for coastal conservation through public and private programs.
- Incentivize urban redevelopment, rather than green fill and urban sprawl, through expedited permitting for redevelopment and reuse projects.
- Install appropriate wildlife crossings and fencing in crucial panther and bear mortality hot spots.
- Strengthen incentives to protect, manage, and restore wildlife habitat.
- Require widespread use of sea turtle-friendly lighting along the beach to keep nesting beaches dark.
- Educate the public on measures they can take, such as removing food waste, discouraging nest predators, and reducing predation of sea turtle nests and other beach-dwelling animals.
- Commit to meaningful strategies to combat climate change and sea level rise. Enact strong federal policies to significantly reduce the state's and nation's global warming pollution; promote cleaner, safer energy resources; and provide dedicated funding for safeguarding our natural systems.
- Support additional Springs Protection including Support for Ocklawaha River Restoration to protect essential natural warm water winter habitat refuges for manatees.
- Continue funding for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Manatee Rescue/Oceanaria Reimbursement Program.
- Continue funding for FWC Manatee Research and Management Programs.
- Support FWC Boater Safety Education Programs and Legislation.