

## Florida boasts some of the nation's highest concentrations of rare plants and animals.

From the iconic Florida panther and West Indian manatee to the more common Great Blue Heron and Wild Turkey, when we protect wildlife 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 types of ecosystems, Florida supports more than 100 species that are listed by federal and state wildlife officials as endangered, threatened or of special concern. Many of these 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 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 reports about \$6 billion in annual spending on wildlife viewing activities alone.<sup>2</sup>

### DEVELOPMENT & HABITAT FRAGMENTATION

With more than 20 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. Florida's wildlife is feeling the squeeze. Development consumes and divides natural areas and agricultural fields that are essential to wildlife, putting more pressure on existing conservation lands.

If development occurs as it has in the past, Floridians will lose roughly five million acres of agricultural and natural undeveloped lands by 2070.<sup>3</sup>

### CLIMATE CHANGE & INVASIVE SPECIES

Our changing climate is already affecting wildlife and the

habitats on which they depend. 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 serious decline, along with their ability to protect against stronger waves and storm events.

On top of development pressures and a changing climate, the introduction of invasive non-native species such as Old World climbing fern, Brazilian pepper, pythons, and lionfish, also threaten native plants and animals. According to the National Park Service and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the removal of exotic invasive species costs Florida taxpayers more than \$500 million each year, and those costs pale in comparison to the harm they cause to natural systems.<sup>4</sup>

### THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

Permanently protecting rare species' habitat and



**Species like the Red-cockaded Woodpecker, which relies on old-growth longleaf pine forests to survive, may disappear unless we protect the places where these rare animals live.**

Red-cockaded Woodpecker  
photo by USFWS

completing the Florida Wildlife Corridor—a statewide network of vital conservation lands and important waterways—as well as installing safe wildlife crossings, will enhance wildlife habitat connectivity and, in turn, 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.

This will help ensure adequate conservation lands for wildlife, abundant water supply for people, and protection of Florida's rural cultural heritage. ■

## Policy Recommendations

- Implement the intent of the Water and Land Conservation Amendment (Art. 10, Sec. 28) by statutorily dedicating at least one-quarter of the Land Acquisition Trust Funds to the Florida Forever and Florida Communities Trust programs.
- Support programs that maintain Florida's rural and working agricultural lands, such as Rural and Family Lands and Florida Forest Legacy.
- Strengthen incentives to protect, manage, and restore 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.
- Install wildlife underpasses in key panther and bear mortality hot spots.
- Incentivize urban re-development, rather than green fill and urban sprawl, through expedited permitting for re-development and re-use projects.

<sup>1</sup> Florida Panther Net. [Floridapanther.net.org/Florida](http://Floridapanther.net.org/Florida) Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2016. Web.

<sup>2</sup> "Economic Benefits of Wildlife Viewing in Florida." [Myfwc.com/Florida](http://Myfwc.com/Florida) Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2011. Web.

<sup>3</sup> "Florida 2070 Report." [1000friendsofflorida.org/1000](http://1000friendsofflorida.org/1000) Friends of Florida, University of Florida Geo Plan Center, Florida Dept. of Agriculture & Consumer Services. 2016. Web.

<sup>4</sup> Beck, Sandy et al. *Florida Invaders*. National Park Service and Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, 2nd Ed. 2013.