CONSERVATION EDITION

Explore the FLORIDA WILDLIFE CORRIDOR

An Old-Growth Future at Nokuse Plantation
Love it like you built it. Because you did.

In support of Florida’s vibrant outdoor community, since 2014 the co-op has been able to contribute over $85,000 to stewarding the Florida Trail and other natural spaces around the state.

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Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), and a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida.

The Footprint Magazine welcomes your comments. The editors are committed to providing balanced and objective perspectives. Not all letters received may be published. Letters may be edited for clarity or length.

communications@floridatrail.org

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Florida Trail Association
1022 NW 2nd St
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OUR MAGAZINE
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,500-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

OUR GOAL
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association efforts; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

CONTRIBUTORS
Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

MEMBERSHIP
As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. To become a member, you can visit our website, mail in the form on the last page of this magazine, or call 352-378-8823.

ADVERTISING
Reach a highly targeted demographic of Florida outdoor enthusiasts by advertising with us or becoming a regular sponsor. Your advertising dollars directly support production and publication of this magazine and assist the Florida Trail Association in fulfilling its mission. Call 877-HIKE-FLA or email communications@floridatrail.org for more details.

The Footprint is printed with soy-based inks on paper with post-consumer content.
We ended our fiscal year on June 30th and the Florida Trail Association (FTA) is growing in memberships, revenue, and awareness across the state. We will share the official numbers with you soon. Thank you to all our members and donors for your generosity throughout the last year. Take a look at our donor appreciation page elsewhere in this issue.

Our Board of Directors, the committees of the board, and Chapter Council have been busy organizing themselves in line with our recently updated bylaws. The Chapter Council, now chaired by board member Leslie Wheeler, has met twice. These were the first meetings of the council in over a year. The new committees of the board: Advancement (fundraising and outreach), Finance, Governance, and Trails Development and Planning, have all been meeting, writing, or updating their charter documents and setting out agendas for the year. Committees can have non-board members on them, so if you have experience in any of these areas and would be willing to serve on a committee, please contact me. I will connect you with the appropriate chair.

We have had some changes to the board and staff since the last issue. Sean Spence resigned from the board and was replaced by Shawn Naugle at the June 7, 2022, meeting of the Board of Directors. Bill Bush, who was elected in 2021, also resigned his board seat. The seat vacated by Alan Bradshaw is still vacant. Trail Program Director, Kelly Van Patten, resigned her position. Kelly will be greatly missed but we wish her and her family great success in their new ventures in New York. Adam Fryska, Panhandle Trail Program Manager, has been promoted to Trail Program Director and we are in the process of replacing Adam in the Panhandle. We are also in the process of hiring for a Gateway Communities Coordinator, a new full-time position, and will shortly be advertising for an Administrative Assistant and a seasonal Technical Advisor. I am thrilled we are growing, expanding our capacity, and providing advancement opportunities.

Last year the Florida House and Senate unanimously passed the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act with the state purpose: “To create incentives for conservation and sustainable development while sustaining and conserving the green infrastructure that is the foundation of this state’s economy and quality of life.” In the year since its enactment, over 36,000 acres have been conserved in 14 parcels. One parcel will allow the Florida Trail to be relocated to a more scenic and primitive route than its current one.

You can see from the map in the center of this issue that protecting the wildlife corridor is intertwined with protecting the Florida Trail. There are approximately 18 million acres in the corridor and a little over half are on conserved lands. Where the Florida Trail is exposed, so is the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Having a completely protected Trail on conserved lands will in turn mean we will have a completely connected wildlife corridor. Protecting and enhancing the user experience on the trail also adds protection to our endangered species of flora and fauna, expands public recreation areas, and brings green infrastructure and tourism to all areas of the state.

Finally, you should receive some information on how you can get your copy of our limited edition 2023 calendar. Check your email and mailbox for details.

Happy trails,
An Old-Growth Future at Nokuse Plantation
by Adam Fryska, Panhandle Trail Program Manager

The scenic Cypress Creek Boardwalk is located near the S.R. 20 trailhead.

Nokuse (pronounced “no-go-see,” which means ‘black bear’ in the native Muscogee language) was the brainchild of M.C. Davis, a successful businessman and commodities trader who later in life dedicated himself to conservation causes. A native of the Florida Panhandle, Davis spent over $90 million of his fortune acquiring thousands upon thousands of acres of agricultural and timber land. With a team of biologists, Davis began the process of restoring native ecosystems that had long ago been replaced by sod farms and pine plantations. He declared that he was putting into action a 300-year plan, working to create a future that he himself wouldn’t live to see. This is the essence of conservation work; restoring and protecting landscapes not just for ourselves, but for future generations.

Davis passed away in 2015, but his beloved forests continue to thrive under the care of the Nokuse Plantation. Visitors can learn more at the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center, an environmental education facility at Nokuse that teaches students and the general public about the importance of biodiversity and conservation.

Not long after the initial land was acquired, Nokuse worked with the U.S. Forest Service and the Florida Trail Association to establish a permanent conservation easement across the landscape. A conservation easement is a legally binding agreement that permanently limits certain uses of a property. Conservation easements can be tailored so...
FTA volunteers maintaining the Florida Trail in Nokuse.

Photo courtesy of Bruce Varner
A scenic stretch of well-maintained Florida Trail in the woodland and prairie of eastern Nokuse.

Photo courtesy of Bob Deckert
that the landowner retains ownership and usage rights—the right to continue farming or raising livestock, for example—while still ensuring that the land remains undeveloped in perpetuity. The terms of the easement remain in force even if the land is sold or passed to heirs. In this case, the Nokuse easement ensures the FT will always have a protected corridor through the Panhandle. Davis sold a 9 mile conservation easement to the U.S. Forest Service for about $4 million dollars, while simultaneously donating another 8.25 mile easement. The proceeds of the sale were put back into managing and expanding the preserve.

Today Nokuse is part of the largest continuous acreage of longleaf pine and wiregrass savanna in the world, part of an ecosystem that once stretched across over 60 million acres of the American Southeast. The primary habitats here are xeric—meaning, “very dry”—sandhill uplands. These are fire-adapted forests of widely spaced pines in sandy soil. The Nokuse team is in the process of restoring these hills from farmed slash pine to native longleaf pine. Many millions of these distinctive trees have been replanted in this region over the past decades, and hikers can spot the distinctive grassy tufts of young longleaf pines that have been thickly planted along the trail. These young trees spend many years without growing much in height, devot-
The trail climbs out of a steephead ravine in Nokuse.

Photo courtesy of Jim Wilson
The Nokuse area is a unique section of the Florida Trail where conservation interests are the highest priority. As a result, hikers are required to take extra precautions to protect the wildlife and their habitat. Please stay on marked trails. Camping is only permitted at designated sites in the Lafayette Creek and Choctawhatchee River Water Management Areas. Hiking with dogs is discouraged, and pets must be leashed at all times. Thank you for helping to protect this special area!
FTA volunteers at work!

Photo courtesy of Jim Wilson
ing their energy to the development of a deep root system that allows them to thrive in the dry soil.

Wildlife conservation is also a major goal of the Nokuse project. The area is an ecological hotspot that serves as habitat for numerous common and rare Florida species, including black bears, alligators, bobcats, armadillos, gopher tortoises, and indigo snakes. Gopher tortoises are a particular success story; there are more than 3,400 located on the preserve, and their distinctive burrows can be spotted throughout the landscape. Many tortoises were relocated to this safe area after their home habitats were lost to development elsewhere in Florida. Nokuse also links together with surrounding public lands to form part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, an ambitious effort to connect Florida’s far-flung remaining wild places. One of the greatest threats facing wildlife is the fragmentation of native habitat, especially for wide-ranging species like black bears and panthers. One of the black bears that inspired the creation of the Florida Wildlife Corridor was tracked traveling over 500 miles in just 8 weeks; such species can’t thrive when isolated by development and habitat loss. Here in the Panhandle we have many pockets of wildlife habitat; to the west is Eglin Air Force Base, Blackwater River State Forest, and the Conecuh National Forest of southern Alabama. Further to the east are numerous Water Management Areas, State Parks, and the enormous protected expanse of Apalachicola National Forest and the St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge. Nokuse lies right in the middle, providing a critical link for wildlife.

It’s a happy coincidence that what’s good for wildlife also aligns with the FTA’s goal of a permanent protected trail corridor for hikers. The Florida Trail includes almost 30 miles of continuous footpath within the Nokuse Section, stretching from the border with Eglin Air Force Base to the Choctawhatchee River. This includes the FNST easement through the Nokuse Plantation, as well as sections of trail in the Lafayette Creek and Choctawhatchee River Water Management Areas. Beginning at the western trailhead on U.S. 331, the route meanders up and down between high piney ridges above Magnolia Creek and numerous large steeplehead ravines. A steeplehead ravine is a deep, spring-fed gully found in upland sandhill ecosystems. They are unique topographical features of Florida’s uplands, scattered along a relatively small section of the Panhandle. Erosion of the sandy soil forms a deep amphitheater-like bowl around the spring seeps, gradually widening downstream into broad valleys that feed into the streams and major rivers of the Panhandle. After crossing numerous such ravines, the trail enters the shadowy floodplain of Lafayette Creek. Here hikers carefully pick their way through a swampy lowland filled with deep mud, exposed roots, piles of storm debris, and low overhanging branches. A blue-blazed high-water detour is available for times when the main route is flooded.

Beyond Lafayette Creek the trail climbs eastward back into the rolling hills of longleaf pine and wiregrass savanna, crossing numerous clear, sandy-bottomed streams and a few tîtì swamps. It is here that Nokuse’s restoration efforts are in peak display, with miles upon miles of young longleaf pine forests stretching to the horizon. Keeping in mind the preserve’s 300-year vision, we can imagine future hikers along the Florida Trail passing through a towering forest of gigantic old-growth trees. Eventually the trail crosses State Road 81 at the Seven Runs Trailhead and begins to descend towards the Choctawhatchee River. The final miles of this section pass south towards S.R. 20 through a mix of woodlands and prairie. A special highlight for hikers is the long, scenic boardwalk across Cypress Creek, built just a few years ago by FTA volunteers working with our long-time infrastructure partner, Framing Our Community. Backcountry campsites are also available at either end of the Nokuse Section; consult the FTA maps and guidebooks for further information.

The Nokuse Sections is maintained by the volunteers of FTA’s Choctawhatchee Chapter, based in the central Panhandle. For opportunities to join local trail crews or volunteer-led hikes, check out their Meetup page at: https://www.meetup.com/florida-trail-choctawhatchee-chapter/
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Hikers are welcome to join! You do not have to be a runner!

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For questions please email fta@floridatrail.org
In July 2021, three Florida teens had the chance to Live Wildly on a four-day 50-mile expedition along the Florida Wildlife Corridor, from Rainbow Springs State Park to Homosassa Bay. “It was such a great experience,” shares participant Mallori, 17. “We would wake up at 5 every morning to go out on the water or hiking. In the moment, it was a challenge, but it was such a good time.”

The Florida Wildlife Corridor encompasses nearly 18 million acres in Florida, stretching from the southern tip of Everglades National Park to Florida’s border with Georgia and Alabama. In June 2021, the Florida legislature recognized the ecological and economic importance of the Corridor by unanimously passing the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act, a landmark conservation legislation that, to date, has resulted in the protection of at least 36,445 acres and the investment of $32 million in public funds across the state.
organized by the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, the Spring to Shore expedition was an opportunity for three teenage girls—Mallori, Ava and Marin—to experience the Corridor firsthand. From a singing tour in the Withlacoochee River to a fishing event at the Yankeetown Marina, this next generation of Corridor champions got up-close-and-personal with the beauty of wild Florida.

Both Mallori and Marin point to paddle boarding through the intersection of Rainbow River and Withlacoochee River as their favorite part of the trip. “When we were in the water, the clear blue spring water of the Rainbow River met with the brown river water of the Withlacoochee River. It was just so different, how quickly the color went from clear blue to brown,” Marin says.

“It was so cool to see how the two rivers are connected, but they don’t cross each other. You can see the direct line where the Rainbow ends and the Withlacoochee starts,” Mallori adds.

Spending so much time in nature—away from houses, stores and highways—made the teens even more invested in conserving Florida’s wild areas. Mallori now hopes to major in marine science or environmental science when she attends college.

Marin offered a one-sentence summary about what she learned from the expedition: “By protecting our wildlife, we protect ourselves and Florida’s ecosystem.”

Along for the experience was Jenny Adler, a National Geographic explorer and underwater photojournalist. The resulting film, Home Waters, premiered in June 2022. To learn more about the expedition and to see the trailer for Home Waters, visit floridawildlifecorridor.org.

In addition to engaging a new generation of nature champions, the growing awareness of the Florida Wildlife Corridor campaign has re-energized land conservation in the state. Any conservation of land and water helps to secure a thriving future for the people, plants, and animals that call Florida home.
Florida Wildlife Corridor

- Florida National Scenic Trail
- Wildlife Corridor
- Conserved Land within the Wildlife Corridor

Gulf Of Mexico
Revealed along its trails
A footstep at a time
A paddlestroke away
A ride into the unknown:
Florida, naturally.

FloridaHikes.com
Trail information, how-to, reviews, guidebooks & more
Doug Sphar tells me. We met to discuss his long history with the Florida Trail Association and conservation in Central Florida. When I first started in my role as Regional Trail Manager with the FTA, Doug was the first section leader to invite me out with him. Armed with his custom-made maps, we spent the day driving and hiking throughout the property, Doug proudly showing me infrastructure and azaleas left over from the homestead, a beautiful ghost of the property’s past.

During our most recent talk, he told me about the uniqueness of Tosohatchee. He knows all about this area, better than most. “In 1979, the Florida Trail Association local members were given access to the land before it opened to the public. Bill Arbuckle, Karl Eichhorn, and I were able to walk it and lay out trails,” said Doug. Trails he designed and cared for until his recent retirement as section leader in 2022. Formally named William Beardall Tosohatchee Wildlife Management Area, this area was first occupied by the Timucua Native Americans and has a long history of ranching and hunting. Tucked in Christmas, Florida, Tosohatchee continues to attract outdoor enthusiasts of all types.

When the Florida Trail Chapter laid out the trail system, Doug said they focused on making sure there were opportunities for hunting and recreation. “We laid the trail out in a way that you could experience all the ecosystems in one weekend. With the original two campsites, you could come out on a Friday night and stay the weekend.” He said he believes the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission considers Tosohatchee a “showcase property” because it offers so much to a broad user base. Those hoping to see birds, butterflies, and wildflowers are never disappointed in this diverse section of Florida. “Public lands do best when they are managed for the habitat and public access is fit into that,” Doug believes. “As the state statute says, proper usage is encouraged but should not be in conflict with the primary use (such as conservation, water mitigation, recreation etc.).”

Doug’s passion for Florida Conservation has not been restricted to the Tosohatchee boundaries. Since moving to Florida in high school, he watched Central Florida and Cocoa Beach change and slowly disappear. “I think people forget Florida used to have open range,” Doug said.

“Environmental regulation depends on citizen enforcement,” Doug shared. Over the years, this mentality has driven him to stand up for public lands, holding public officials accountable for not completing projects when or how they told the community they would at times or physically blocking projects other times. “The first thing I was involved with was a dam that was going to be built near the 419 in this area. They were two weeks away from this project being complete. The new requirement for an environmental impact study halted the project while they did the study,” Doug shared. “The impact study came back so bad, that the state of Florida had to stop the project. That was the first time I ever testified against a project.” Remnants of the unfinished dam and levees can still be seen today.

From there, Doug was a regular voice in public hearings and meetings. His activism has not gone unnoticed and he has been a nominee to many boards and committees including the Brevard County Recreational Advisory Committee. In that role, he had the chance to review and approve land management plans. This helped give him the first look at what the public should hold their elected officials accountable to. In public meetings, Doug is always prepared with the
Doug is making a lasting impact on the Space Coast. Member of countless environmental organizations, voice for what’s right, and dedicated volunteer of the Florida Trail Association. When I asked him what others can do to make a difference as he has, he said this: “You won’t work yourself out of a job. There is always more to do.”

EUGENE

Hiking with Eugene Stoccardo means pausing for two things: Caesar Weed and birds. He can spot the tiniest Caesar Weed sprout along the side of the trail and he can name a bird with a glance. I am lucky enough to share in both these passions and consider Eugene my ally in a statewide FTA campaign to banish the invasive Caesar Weed forever. Eugene is also an opinion I seek out when I have questions about current events and development in Central Florida.

A resident of Florida since 1978, Eugene describes himself as a life-long activist. He says he watched as Florida changed from two-lane roads with cows to the sprawling development we see today. Animals were displaced, habitats destroyed. “I just saw there was nothing
good about the way we were doing things,” Eugene remembers.

A member of many environmental groups, Eugene first got involved with Florida Scrub-Jay surveys in 1986, something he still does today. “I have been able to visit every county in Florida and some offshore islands doing surveys,” said Eugene. “I have gotten to know the families of animals out there. They have routines just like us. The jays don’t like to get up too early. Once it’s hot, they want to be back at the pool hanging out.”

This love and understanding of the Scrub-Jays and other species have led Eugene to a life of activism. In the 1980s and 1990s, Eugene first got involved in advocating for the preservation of land surrounding the Econlockhatchee River (Econ for short). “We were fighting development and formed a coalition calling for responsible development in the region. I did a lot of recon work for birds and plant species that were at risk,” Eugene shared. “A buffer for development was put in place and stands today.” Since then, he hasn’t stopped fighting for the lands that the birds and plants require to call home. As a nominee to the Orange County Charter, Eugene has the opportunity to serve as an advisor for the community. Most recently, his attention has been on Split Oak Forest.

Join the movement to protect it at LiveWildly.com

#LiveWildlyFL
Eugene clearing a downed tree off the trail.
Split Oak Forest is a 1,689 acre parcel of land shared by Orange and Osceola County and managed by FWC near Lake Nona in Orlando. This land has been designated as conservation land and is a habitat for gopher tortoises and Florida Scrub-Jays. The Central Florida Express Authority currently has plans to place a new toll road through the forest. This plan was recently approved by the Florida Communities Trust Board (a governmental land acquisition committee administered by the Florida Department of Community Affairs) despite opposition from environmentalists in the region like Eugene. “They are trying to say there will be no impact. Think about what that would do to land management techniques. Fire would no longer be an option if there is a highway there and fire is necessary for the species that would be on both sides of that toll road,” he said. Eugene and the Friends of Split Oak are advocating for a no-build solution to this toll road. In 2020, Orange County voters overwhelmingly voted in opposition of this road. At this stage, it will be up to the elected officials in Orange and Osceola Counties to decide how to proceed.

This brings us to Eugene’s call to action for citizens. He said the approach is twofold. “First,” he said, “we need eyes watching agendas. Get agendas for public meetings and read them.” Thanks to Florida Sunshine Laws, access is often just a click away. “Second is to get to know the people in the seats of power. Build rapport with them. They depend on input from citizens they can trust,” he shared. And though he didn’t say this directly….I imagine Eugene would tell everyone to go pull some Caesar Weed on their next hike.

Doug and Eugene have demonstrated that change can happen with a single voice. Whether you advocate for the Florida Trail or an environmental issue local to home, find something you care about and speak up. As Florida continues to grow and our green spaces continue to shrink, the flora and fauna that make Florida so special need you more than ever.
During a hike on the Florida Trail, you may hear the whir of a plane above you contrasted against the blue sky in the Ocala National Forest. Others may have memories of driving to their favorite trailhead with loved ones. For some, watching the trains near Lake Okeechobee deliver endless carts filled with harvested cane is an enjoyable addition to a hike. So, what do planes, trains, and automobiles have in common with trails? As I’ve discovered this summer - a lot!

As a member of the Next Generation Coalition with the Florida Trail Association, I’m passionate about how people enjoy the outdoors here in Florida. With that passion, a fascination follows of how trails represent a parallel between recreation and transportation. We use cars to get from point A to point B and everyone accepts that cars and roads are pieces of our overall transportation system. What about trails? Both a day hike in Apalachicola and a thru-hike have points A and B, with your feet and the dirt beneath you essential pieces of your movement.

Should trails be considered at the same level as our paved roads and bridges regarding a mode of transportation? As a climate policy intern this summer with the U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT), I’ve witnessed first hand how trails, climate resiliency, and connecting communities are centerpieces in various policies.

The Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) within the Department supports the Recreational Trails Program which was created in 1991 through the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act. Through this program, the FHWA funds eligible trail projects across the nation such as the construction, restoration, and maintenance of trails. The recent passage of the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law includes major investments into the longevity of our trails, as well as connecting more communities with the outdoors.

Through a partnership between USDOT and the National Park Service, investments in historically underserved communities, as well as climate and severe weather resiliency are a focus point of a $1.73 billion investment under the Federal Lands Transportation Program.

My work as an intern is within this realm where I’ve worked on projects such as audits of our transportation modes highlighting the...
changes we need to make in order to improve our resilience in a future with rising seas, increasingly dangerous natural disasters, and other impacts brought on by climate change.

This investment in our trails as well as combating climate change has strong roots in the numerous trail and climate advocates across the country. The Florida Trail is no stranger to this kind of political advocacy. Events like “Hike the Hill” give passionate advocates access to lawmakers to discuss the importance of continued investments into our trails. It is vital that we continue to support those who do this important work. Everyone who steps onto a trail becomes an advocate for these unique spaces. Whether you choose to call your senator, write your local city commissioners, or just talk about the time you spend outdoors with others, you are participating in the important advocacy of our shared outdoor spaces.

During my time in D.C. and as a member of the Next Generation Coalition, I have been privileged to be surrounded by many individuals who are deeply passionate about the outdoors and the work needed to promote the protection of our natural world. Trails are a special mode of transportation—one that offers a unique opportunity to be truly immersed in your surroundings as you pass by onto your next destination. As you rack up the miles on your path wherever you go, think about how you got there. Treasure the memories you’ve made along the way and embrace the ones you look forward to making in your future.

These public spaces are managed by the National Park Service, preserving outdoor spaces for everyone to enjoy.

The Metropolitan Branch Trail (MBT) is a perfect example of a rail-to-trail repurposing project that has provided a public space for community and outdoor recreation.

Austin poses after an event with stakeholders discussing the future of transformative policies for our national transportation system.
Northwest Florida was recently designated as a Sentinel Landscape by the federal departments of Defense, Agriculture and Interior. The purpose of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape (NWFLS) is to create a regional approach to land stewardship and coastal and natural systems resilience that emphasizes collaboration to achieve mutual objectives to foster and accomplish land conservation, private land stewardship, resiliency and sustainability initiatives in Northwest Florida.

Northwest Florida has exceptional biological diversity. The region hosts more than 75 tracts of critical public and private conservation lands managed by our partners protecting 2.6 million acres of habitat. The region is home to 29 federally endangered, 20 threatened and two candidate species including the red-cockaded woodpecker, gray bat, Eastern indigo snake, Panama City crayfish, flatwoods and reticulated salamanders, mussels, Okaloosa darter, Gulf sturgeon, beach mice, snowy plover, and loggerhead and green sea turtles. These species can benefit from innovative stewardship practices on the private and public lands surrounding and connecting our military installations. With the designation of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape, Florida is now the first state with two sentinel landscapes, the other being Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape along the Kissimmee River.

A primary objective of the Sentinel Landscape partnership is to enhance the resiliency and sustainability of natural systems in a changing climate with a growing population and expanding network of roadways. The Sentinel Landscape designation is the result of a supportive partnership of four dozen federal, state and regional agencies and non-governmental organizations including the Florida Trail Association (FTA) and the USDA Forest Service (USFS). Our partnership will implement projects that will bolster mission resilience and provide sustainable social, environmental, and economic benefits to local stakeholders.

Maintaining the region’s forests and agricultural areas will provide opportunities to enhance the existing outdoor recreation provided on our working lands. This collaborative effort seeks to sustain working farms and forests, and conserve habitat through providing incentives to landowners to voluntarily maintain land uses that help ensure Department of Defense (DoD) installations and ranges in Northwest Florida can continue to host a diverse and growing set of military missions.

The 16-county Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape extends from Escambia County (Pensacola) to Jefferson County.

Above, Longleaf pine forest at the Tall Timbers Research Station.
Coastal scrub and dunes

The Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape with the Florida Trail shown in orange
(Monticello). This region has hosted military bases since Spanish colonization and is now home to six of the nation’s most important installations and ranges. Nearly the entirety of Northwest Florida supports installation missions as it is under a Restricted Airspace, a Military Operations Area, is within a military installation, and/or is used to access the Eastern Gulf Testing and Training Range. Spanning 165 miles along the northeastern Gulf of Mexico coast, these installations include: Eglin and Tyndall Air Force Bases; Hurlburt Field; Naval Air Stations Pensacola and Whiting Field; Naval Support Activity Panama City; the Eastern Gulf Testing and Training Range; as well as remote sites and outlying airfields essential for aviator training.

We will conserve areas for natural resource-based recreational opportunities like the Florida Trail, wildlife viewing and hunting, and stream and river corridors along our paddling trails providing additional experiences for millions of residents and tourists who enjoy the panhandle’s emerald beaches. Through FY2020 the DoD reported to Congress that along with partners in other federal agencies and the State of Florida, it has invested $60 million to conserve 35,241 acres within the NWFSL.

As the Florida Trail extends the length of Florida, it passes through the NWFSL, the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape (along the Kissimmee River) and the proposed Northeast Florida Sentinel Landscape (between the Ocala and Osceola National Forests.) Since the sentinel landscape partnership program focuses on conserving land, there may be opportunities to help close gaps in the FT. An objective for sentinel landscapes is to provide public access to lands voluntarily conserved. The FTA and the USFS are key partners and have committed to building hiking trails on conserved lands that close gaps in the FT.

One thing we have done to promote public access to conservation lands is ask partners to jump start the effort to build a bridge for the Florida Trail over the Yellow River, closing a gap in the trail between Eglin Air Force Base and the Yellow River Water Management Area. Currently, thru-hikers are exposed to a hazardous 20-mile walk along the road shoulders of busy SR 85 and US 90 to reach connecting trail segments. The FTA, USDA Forest Service, Eglin Air Force Base, Northwest Florida Water Management District and Emerald Coast Regional Council, all NWFSL partners, are the key players to close the last significant gap in the Florida Trail west of the Choctawhatchee River. The FTA is leading the effort by submitting a grant proposal to build the Yellow River Bridge and connecting trails to the federally-funded America the Beautiful Challenge Program.

Being designated as a Sentinel Landscape provides NWFSL
partners with greater access to funding and assistance from federal, state and local government, as well as private sector programs to better address the complex and often conflicting demands of population growth, economic development, rural vitality, military readiness, and natural resource protection in Northwest Florida.

Despite a growing population, the opportunity still exists in Northwest Florida to create a network of lands that conserve watersheds, wildlife habitat, agricultural lands, forests, and outdoor recreation opportunities that support the missions of Northwest Florida’s military installations. But these opportunities may be fleeting. Between 2010 and 2018, the populations of the five counties home to the six principal installations increased between 6 and 30 percent. Development can limit the use of prescribed fire on conservation lands, negatively impacting the quantity and quality of surface and ground waters, and threatens ecologically and economically important estuaries on the Gulf of Mexico. Changes in land use also reduce the recreational opportunities and the quality of life of residents and visitors as well as our service members. Finally, development in the wrong places may threaten military missions.

With the rapid population growth and land use conversion surrounding the military installations, state and regional transportation plans call for widening many highways and constructing new highways. Wildlife crossings will be key to helping protect wildlife movement of wide-ranging species like the Florida black bear. Wildlife crossings such as the two that have been built under U.S. 331 connect and protect habitat in Eglin Air Force Base and the 50,000-acre Nokuse Plantation to the east.

Climate change will significantly alter low-lying coastal areas, threatening not only infrastructure but also habitat of endangered and threatened species. Increasing storm intensity and frequency heightens the urgency of regional collaboration to mitigate the effects of extreme weather, storm surge, sea level rise, and coastal erosion on mission capabilities and natural systems.

Extreme weather events, such as Hurricane Michael’s destruction of Tyndall Air Force Base in 2018, directly impacted national security by degrading mission capabilities. It also diverted significant national

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**RESOURCES TO LEARN MORE ABOUT SENTINEL LANDSCAPES**

Defenders of Wildlife has developed two online applications for the public to learn more.

The first is a story map that has static maps, pictures and narrative. Visit: [https://defenders-cci.org/app/NWFSL_SentinelLandscape/storyMap/home.html](https://defenders-cci.org/app/NWFSL_SentinelLandscape/storyMap/home.html)

The second is a web map application where you may view and turn on and off many resource data layers, zoom in and out, draw and measure on the map, print it and share it. Visit: [https://defenders-cci.org/app/NWFSL/](https://defenders-cci.org/app/NWFSL/)

The Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape website: [https://sentinellandscapes.org/landscapes/northwest-florida/](https://sentinellandscapes.org/landscapes/northwest-florida/)
defense resources with approximately $4.5 billion being appropriated for Tyndall Air Force Base’s reconstruction. Hurricane Michael affected 2.8 million acres of Florida timber lands through the heart of the NWFSL. With 80 percent of those lands owned by more than 16,000 private landowners, there is much uncertainty as to how much of the damaged forest land will be converted to land use not compatible with the military mission of nearby installations.

Landscape-level conservation is essential for listed species recovery and for working lands to persist despite the threats of climate change and land use conversion. A key strategy for our sentinel landscape is to conserve the Florida Wildlife Corridor, which extends east and west across Northwest Florida. Our partners are also working to conserve the dozen north and south river corridors connecting upland habitats to estuaries critically important to maintaining the Gulf of Mexico’s ecology.

Over the past several years, NWFSL partners including the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Forest Service, the U.S. Navy, Santa Rosa County and The Trust for Public Land, have acquired over 9,800 acres of forest land that are managed as part of the Blackwater River State Forest and by Santa Rosa County. These conserved lands protect the flight paths from Naval Air Station Whiting Field and provide additional public recreation land as part of Blackwater River State Forest. We have also encouraged Santa Rosa County and the Florida Park Service to work together to pursue funding to extend the Blackwater Heritage State Trail from Naval Air Station Whiting Field through these recently conserved lands to Blackwater River State Forest.

Thriving and recovering populations of listed species on non-military lands provide potential to reduce the regulatory burden associated with on-installation training and testing. Restoring habitats and maintaining connections between public and private conservation lands will help reduce the risk to military operations. For example, the successful stewardship of Eglin Air Force Base, Apalachicola National Forest and the Red Hills ensures that three of the largest remaining populations of the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker will continue to thrive.

Nokuse Plantation and Eglin Air Force Base are working to restore gopher tortoise populations, which could help recover the reptile and their commensal species. The Air Force has partnered with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to restore habitat for the endangered Okaloosa darter since 95 percent of its entire range is found on Eglin Air Force Base. This partnership is allowing the Okaloosa darter to be removed from the Endangered Species list.

The partners for the NWFSL have established several objectives, actions, and measurable results to gauge its success. To put us on the pathway to success we have formed three work groups to help us collaboratively achieve our regional resiliency and sustainability goals: Climate Resiliency, Private Lands Stewardship, and Natural Systems. These work groups are our conservation delivery network through virtual monthly meetings. We also host virtual monthly Partner Collaboration calls which FTA and USFS staff join. If you would like to join a work group or would like more information, please email me at Kwimmer@defenders.org.

In addition to being Coordinator of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape, Kent is a lifetime member of FTA (member since 1985) and is currently the Apalachee Chapter’s Trail Coordinator. He is a former FTA Board member, officer and staff member (1999-2012) leading the FNST program, and Kent served as FTA’s Interim Executive Director (2010) and as President of the Partnership for the National Trails System (2011-2012), and Chair of the Apalachee Chapter (1993-1995).
Salt marsh at sunset, St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge
Photo courtesy of Justin Grubb/Running Wild Media
When thru-hikers reach the Gateway Community of Lake Butler on the Florida Trail, a few thoughts may come to mind. Lake Butler is a special achievement for a thru-hiker because it is located half-way between the northern and southern termini. It is time to reflect on the challenges and scenery behind them and think about the length of trail that still lies ahead.

Upon reaching Lake Butler, a Florida Trail hiker is in need of some rest, some shade to cool down, and some food to beat the hiker hunger. If they have time, maybe they will take a look around and see some of the old homes and buildings that still grace Main Street and downtown, a glimpse into Old Florida.

Recently, I stopped in and visited Lake Butler. One of my first stops was Spire’s Deli inside the IGA grocery store. I recommend the catfish platter. Later, I visited the local Union County Public Library. Inside, I found a small collection of publications all devoted to Lake Butler and its long, rich history. Here, I found a picture of a woman named Esther Laurie King.

Esther was born and raised in Lake Butler. By 1902, she was working as a teacher in the school she was brought up in. She was twelve. Two years after the Florida Trail was chartered in 1966, Esther died and bequeathed her estate to the Union County High School from where she graduated and where she also taught. King’s estate was worth a half a million dollars.

Recently, the Florida Trail has been privileged to see our trail host several other remarkable women who have passed through Lake Butler on their thru-hikes. Some have gone by quickly, setting records for fastest known times, and others have been more circumspect.

Florida Trail thru-hikers agree that they are grateful for the trail and the natural beauty of the state preserved within its network. Most hikers will never know the many names and faces of the Florida Trail Association members whose donations of money as well as hard work have shaped the trail into what it is today.

A Greek proverb goes: “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they will never sit in.” Thru-hikers like Kriste “The Wandering Raven” Waddell, Jessica “1800” Rodriguez, Shayna “Splash” Kott, and Amy Valentine Ansbough are not going to wait for men to plant trees. They are planting them now.

The Advancement Committee of the Florida Trail Association is dedicated to connecting people to Florida’s natural beauty and to promote the network of trails within our state. To achieve this, we must continue to celebrate the examples set for us by inspirational thru-hikers such as Wandering Raven and Splash.
But we might also think about the example set for us by an educator such as Esther Laurie King. In her own way, she planted trees she would never rest under. She always remembered her small hometown in Florida and the friendships and education she enjoyed while she lived there. Her gift was her way to insure that Lake Butler would endure, its schools would stay open, and its students had opportunities to go to college. When you read the Footprint, please consider the many ways you can promote the protection of the Florida Trail and keep it natural for generations to come.

Becoming a member is a great step. Have you considered making membership a gift to a friend or loved one? This holiday season will be full of new shiny gear, lighter tents, and an array of hiking shoes. So many products to choose from! But maybe this year, follow the lead of Esther Laurie King and make a gift to someone you will never meet.

A hiker who will rest in the shade of a tree you planted.

Planned giving is an easy and flexible way to meet your philanthropic goals while protecting the Trail you love. Whatever stage in life, your financial circumstances and your charitable goals, let us show you how to make a gift that benefits you and your loved ones as well as the Florida Trail
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more available online
floridatrail.org/shop
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter.
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