



Paying Private Landowners to Conserve Wildlife Habitat: A Unique Approach to Conservation.¹

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General Comments

I recently visited a grove and while the manager and I watched a flock of ducks reel above the retention reservoir, a Peregrine Falcon swooped in and caught a hapless duck on the wing. The Peregrine Falcon is an endangered species that migrates south in the winter along with the ducks that provide it's lunch. News reporting the decline of wildlife, the collapse of fisheries, and the degradation of ecosystems is constant, depressing, and eventually, numbing. And then you see a falcon in action, hear a turkey gobble, or see a bear cross the road and you realize that wildlife makes our lives richer and their loss would indeed be tragic.

Our society operates on market forces - goods and services are provided in response to demand and the majority of our daily decisions have an economic basis. Demands for goods and services, and particularly for space, are increasing rapidly in southwest Florida. Southwest Florida is one of the fastest growing regions in the country, increasing from approximately 94,000 persons in 1960 to over 700,000 today. Population growth, particularly in coastal counties, creates substantial economic incentives for land to be purchased and converted from agriculture

and native habitats to urban developments - a worst-case scenario for most species of wildlife. Some species of wildlife depend upon large areas of native habitat for their survival. For example, it is estimated that only 30-80 Florida panthers survive, the majority of which live in southwest Florida. Continued conversion and fragmentation of remaining native habitats in south Florida is considered the primary threat to the survival of the panther as well as 12 other mammal, 25 bird, and 11 reptile and amphibian species that are listed as endangered, threatened, or as species of special concern. Whereas the conservation of remaining native habitat is considered crucial to saving species such as the panther and black bear, preserving the agricultural lands in south Florida is also critical because agricultural lands provide food and cover for many species of wildlife. Maintaining a mix of agriculture and undeveloped native habitats, therefore, will be vital to ensuring a diversity of wildlife continues to exist in south Florida.

How do we ensure healthy wildlife populations will persist for future generations to enjoy? Regulatory mechanisms, such as the U.S. Endangered Species Act of 1973, have been largely controversial

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1. This document is WEC 142, one of a series of the Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. First Published: December 2000. Please visit the EDIS web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>
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and ineffective at preventing the loss of wildlife habitat and the decline of endangered species, particularly on private lands. Private landowners argue that it is unreasonable for them to bear the costs of protecting wildlife habitat and saving endangered species when the benefits accrue to society as a whole. Consequently, a strict regulatory approach creates anti-conservation sentiments among some private landowners that view endangered species as economic liabilities.

Public acquisition of sensitive lands and important wildlife habitat is one alternative to regulation. Although public ownership can ensure priority is given to conservation goals, there are several drawbacks to relying solely upon this approach. First, purchase of private lands requires a willing seller and many landowners are not interested in selling, or are reluctant to enter negotiations with the federal government or powerful state agencies with regulatory authority. A second drawback is the cost of managing previously farmed lands, particularly when invasive exotic plants must be controlled. Finally, society does not have the resources to purchase and manage all remaining wildlife habitat existing on private lands and societal needs and local economies may be better served by maintaining land in private agricultural operations. Hence, new and innovative strategies are needed that encourage private landowners to maintain and manage habitat for wildlife and other ecological functions.

An alternative to regulatory prohibitions or public acquisition that is being promoted by private landowners in southwest Florida is to draft resource conservation agreements (RCA) and pay private landowners to manage wildlife habitat on their lands for periods of at least 25 years. This initiative is referred to as the Private Lands Project and is being spearheaded by the Florida Stewardship Foundation. The project proposal, which includes a draft of the proposed RCA and an opportunity to submit comments, is described in detail on the Internet at <http://fl-panther.com>. To summarize, the RCA proposes three levels of protection that would be compensated through federal estate and income tax breaks. The first level of protection surrenders all non-agricultural development rights, which would prevent conversion of agricultural lands to urban

sprawl. The second level of protection surrenders additional agricultural development rights, which could be used to preserve remaining native habitats and prevent conversion of pastureland to more intense forms of agriculture. The third level of protection actually involves restoration of agricultural lands to native habitat, which could be used to create wildlife corridors or for other purposes.

Many questions will likely surface as this process proceeds. One of the primary questions is whether RCA are a more economical alternative to taxpayers than public acquisition. We investigated the costs associated with the purchase and management of the Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge, Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve, and the Picayune State Forest, a combined land area of 888,774 ac. These sites are all located in southwest Florida and support similar habitats, plants, and animals, and they all represent important habitat for the endangered Florida panther. The most appropriate way to combine purchase and management costs into a yearly amount is to report them as an annualized cost, similar in concept to the mortgage on your home, but with an infinite life span. Assuming a nominal interest rate of 5% and an infinite life to public ownership, the annualized cost of purchase and management of these public lands was calculated as \$30/ac. It is important to recognize that the \$30/ac annualized costs for these public lands are for managing undeveloped and predominately wetland habitats. Properties supporting agriculture such as citrus and vegetables have commercial value and, assuming landowners would be willing to sell, the purchase and management of these private lands would be greater than the \$30/ac reported for the public lands we reviewed. Based on a review of 462,241 ac, the Florida Stewardship Foundation estimated the annualized cost to purchase and manage agricultural lands in southwest Florida at \$80/ac. The Florida Stewardship Foundation also calculated incentive payments based on potential lost revenues associated with intensification of land uses according to the proposed RCA. The estimated annualized incentive payments calculated in this manner were \$33/ac, essentially the same amount taxpayers spend for the public lands in southwest Florida that we included in our study.

Whether RCA as described in the Private Lands Project, or some modification thereof, are eventually implemented remains to be seen. Nonetheless, the incentive-based approach to conservation on private lands provides an exciting and equitable new tool for forging public-private partnerships in protecting habitat for wildlife and other ecological services important for the public good.