

Florida's Environment - Central West Region¹

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Florida's Environment Series

Introduction

Central west Florida (Fig. 1) is a region characterized by numerous spring-fed rivers and streams that flow westward to the Gulf of Mexico. Large swamps and marshes associated with lakes form headwaters to many rivers in the region. Longleaf pine sandhill habitat was historically the region's major forest type, although intensely-managed pine plantations now predominate. Hardwood hammocks occur as scattered "islands" within pine flatwoods. DeSoto County harbors large tracts of dry prairie, scrubby flatwoods, rangeland, and sandhill communities.

Despite rapid growth, conservation lands constitute roughly 20 percent of the central west region (Table 1) and include a variety of natural areas and parks for outdoor recreation and wildlife viewing.

This document summarizes major rivers, lakes and springs, featured natural areas, and cultural aspects of Florida's central west region. For information on other regions in Florida, refer to "The Florida Environment: An Overview" and the other



Figure 1. Central west Florida region with counties. Credits: UF/IFAS

seven regional profiles available online (<http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>).

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Table 1. Conservation land acreage in Florida's central west region

County	Conservation Land Acres	% of Total County
Citrus	132,960	36%
Desoto	40,190	10%
Hernando	88,190	29%
Hillsborough	97,440	14%
Manatee	53,420	11%
Pasco	104,930	22%
Pinellas	17,800	10%
Sarasota	91,370	25%
Region Total	626,300	19%

Based on 2006 Florida Natural Areas Inventory Managed Conservation Lands. Florida State University.

Major West Rivers and Estuaries

The **Alafia River** originates in Polk County wetlands and empties into **Hillsborough Bay**. The Alafia's water quality ranges from good to poor as it flows through one of the world's richest phosphate deposits. Most of the **Anclote River** is derived from rainfall. The Anclote River has its beginnings in Pasco County wetlands and flows south to the northern part of Pinellas County. It also has three known bird rookeries.

The **Little Manatee River** is one of the least developed rivers in the Tampa area. From its origin in eastern Manatee and Hillsborough counties, this river flows 40 miles before it empties into **Tampa Bay**.

Calusa and Timucuan Indian sites are abundant along the **Manatee River**. The highly developed river begins its trek to Tampa Bay in the eastern Manatee County highlands and the flow is disrupted temporarily by the Manatee Dam.

The **Myakka River** flows 66 miles from Manatee County through Florida's largest state park, Myakka River State Park (Fig. 2). It continues its

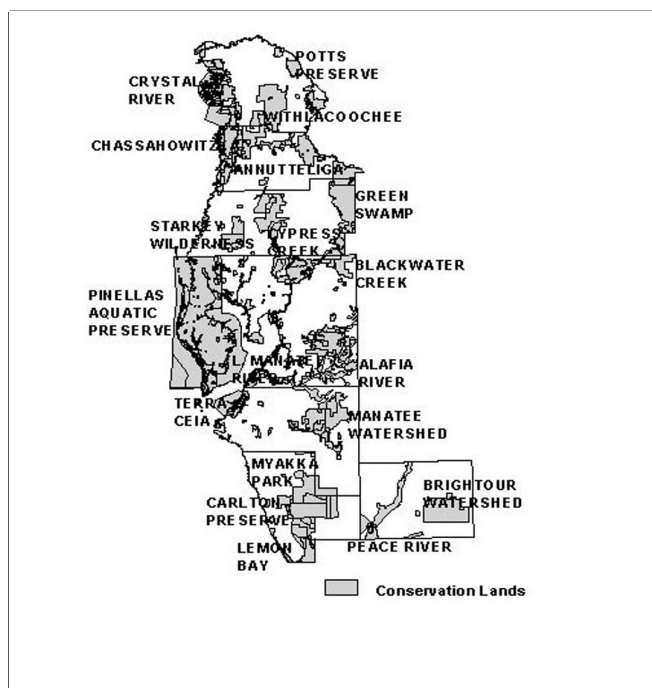


Figure 2. Central west Florida major conservation lands. Credits: UF/IFAS

path through Sarasota County and empties into **Charlotte Harbor**. Like many of the rivers in the central region, the Myakka River is home to endangered manatees. The Heritage Trail region encompasses numerous bays and rivers and bordered by aquatic preserves - **Tampa Bay, Sarasota Bay, and Terra Ceia Bay** (Figure 2). The regional coastline is vegetated primarily with salt marsh to the north, and mangrove forests to the south.

Featured Natural Areas (see Table 2 for detailed list of Natural areas)

Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park supports pine flatwoods, sandhills, hardwood hammocks, sand pine scrub, freshwater marsh, river swamp, and wet prairie habitats. Nearly 150 species of birds have been reported in the park.

Oscar Scherer State Park consists of pine flatwoods, scrubby flatwoods, and hardwood hammocks. The park is particularly well known for its Florida scrub jays.

Withlacoochee State Forest contains bottomland hardwoods and pine forest habitats. Fox squirrels are common in some areas.

Hillsborough River State Park includes 2,990 acres located along the Hillsborough River. The park includes river swamps, oak hammocks, and pine flatwoods. Located in a urban area, this park provides important habitat for resident and migratory wildlife.

Crystal River State Buffer Preserve stretches from the Withlacoochee River to the Homosassa River in coastal Citrus County, encompassing a wide variety of natural communities. These include scrub, flatwoods, upland mixed forest, and prairie hammocks.

Chinsegut Wildlife and Environmental Area in Hernando County features sandhills, freshwater marshes and prairies, hardwood hammocks, and the second-largest contiguous tract of old growth longleaf pine in Florida. Gopher tortoises inhabit the sandhills areas, while many species of frogs and salamanders find refuge in Mays Prairie.

Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge provides a place for approximately 250 species of birds, over 50 species of reptiles and amphibians, and at least 25 different species of mammals. This refuge consists of marshlands, swamp lands, shallow bays, and tidal streams.

Tampa Bay National Estuary encompasses 400 square miles. Estuaries like Tampa Bay are nurseries for young fish, shrimp, and crabs. As many as 40,000 pairs of birds--from the familiar brown pelican to the colorful roseate spoonbill--nest in Tampa Bay every year.

Cultural History

Modern development has changed much of the waterways in central west Florida, as there is evidence of human inhabitants for over 10,000 years. Calusa and Timucuan Indians lived here in ancient times, leaving behind shell middens and burial mounds, and more recently, Seminole Indians resided here, naming the Hillsborough river Lockcha-popka-chiska meaning, "river where one crosses to eat acorns."

Reflecting the history of the region, many of Florida's rivers hold names of Indian or Spanish origin. The Indian translation for Withlacoochee means "great little water" and the Myakka translates as "big water." Central west Florida was one of the first places explored by Spanish conquistadors. In 1539 Hernando de Soto arrived on Florida's southwest coast with 600 soldiers, sent by the King of Spain to explore, colonize, and conquer the Indians in the area which was then known as "La Florida." The resultant four-year, 4,000 mile journey was the first large-scale European mission into the interior of North America. Bradenton's *De Soto National Monument* is a testimonial to de Soto's mission and to his efforts in the name of Spain.

Modern historical landmarks also occur along the waterways. The Hillsborough River has over 246 historical structures, most found along Tampa's Historic District. Historical sites emphasize the

Table 2. Recreational and cultural opportunities in natural areas in central west Florida. (WMA=Wildlife Management Area, NWR=National Wildlife Refuge)

County	Natural area	Phone	Web site
Citrus	Potts Preserve (Apopka Lakes)	(904) 796-7211	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/potts.html
Citrus	Flying Eagle	(800) 423-1476	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/flyingeagle.html
Citrus	Lake Tsala Apopka	(352) 732-1230	http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/FW_forecasts_ncr.htm#tsala_ap
Citrus	Carlton Tract/ Half-Moon WMA	(904) 732-1225	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/
Citrus	Homosassa Springs State Wildlife Park	(352) 628-5343	http://www.homosassasprings.org/
Citrus	Crystal River State Buffer Preserve	(352) 563-0450	http://www.floridastateparks.org/crystalriverpreserve/default.cfm
Citrus	Crystal River State Archaeological Site	(352) 795-3817	http://www.floridastateparks.org/crystalriver/default.cfm

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Citrus	Yulee Sugar Mill Ruins	(352) 795-3817	http://www.floridastateparks.org/Yuleesugarmill/default.cfm
Citrus	St. Martins Marsh Aquatic Preserve	(352) 563-0450	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/stmartins/
Citrus	Ft. Cooper State Park	(352) 726-0315	http://www.floridastateparks.org/fortcooper/
Citrus/Hernando/ Pasco	Withlacoochee State Forest	(352) 754-6896	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/withlacoochee.html
Citrus/Hernando	Chassahowitzka NWR	(352) 563-2088	http://www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka/index.html
Hernando	Chinsegut Wildlife and Env. Area	(352) 754-6722	http://www.myfwc.com/Recreation/View_Destinations_site-wc03.htm
Hernando	Perry Oldenbury Mitigation Park	(352) 754-6722	http://www.myfwc.com/RECREATION/WMASites_PerryOldenburg_index.htm
Hillsborough	Alafia River State Recreation Area	(813) 987-6771	http://floridastateparks.org/oletariver/
Hillsborough	Hillsborough River State Park	(813) 987-6771	http://www.floridastateparks.org/hillsboroughriver/default.cfm
Hillsborough	Bullfrog Creek Mitigation Park/WMA	(407) 207-7292	http://www.hillsborough.wateratlas.usf.edu/watershed/default.asp?wshedID=4
Hillsborough	Canal Park & Lake Tarpon	(813) 855-5588	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/lake_tarpon_outfall_canal.html
Hillsborough	Cockroach Bay State Preserve	(813) 744-6100	http://www.floridastateparks.org/littlemanateeriver/default.cfm
Hillsborough	Tampa Bay National Estuary	(727) 893-2765	http://www.tbep.org/estuary.html
Hillsborough	Little Manatee River State Recreation Area/Canoe	(813) 671-5005	http://www.floridastateparks.org/littlemanateeriver/default.cfm
Hillsborough	Flatwoods Wilderness Park	(813) 975-2160	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/lh-flatwoods.html
Hillsborough	Ancient Native Village Living History Museum	(813) 641-8545	http://www.ancientnative.org/
Hillsborough	Henry B. Plant Museum	(813) 254-1891	http://www.plantmuseum.com/
Hillsborough	Tampa Bay History Center	(813) 228-0097	http://www.tampabayhistorycenter.org
Manatee	Myakka River State Park	(941) 361-6511	http://www.floridastateparks.org/myakkariver/
Manatee	Braden River Canoe Trail	(941) 729-9177	http://www.paddling.net/places/showReport.html?679
Manatee	Terra Ceia State Buffer Preserve	(813) 744-6100	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/terraceia/
Manatee	Passage Key NWR	(352) 563-2088	http://www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka/passagekey/
Manatee	Lake Manatee State Rec. Area	(813) 741-3028	http://www.floridastateparks.org/lakemanatee/
Manatee	De Soto National Monument	(941) 792-0458	http://www.nps.gov/deso/
Manatee	Madira Bickel Mound State Archaeological Site	(941) 729-9177	http://www.floridastateparks.org/madirabickelmound/default.cfm/
Pasco	Cypress Creek	(800) 423-1476	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/cypresscreek.html
Pasco	Crystal Springs Preserve	(813) 715-9707	http://www.crystalspringspreserve.com/

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County	Natural area	Phone	Web site
Pasco	Jay B. Starkey Wilderness Park	(813) 834-3247	http://portal.pascocountyfl.net/portal/server.pt/community/parks_and_recreation/248/home
Pasco	Green Swamp	(800) 423-1476 (904) 796-7211	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/greenswamp.html
Pasco	Withlacoochee River Park	(352) 567-0264	http://www.swfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/areas/withlacoocheeriverpark.html
Pasco	Pioneer Florida Museum, Dade City	(352) 567-0262	http://www.pioneerfloridamuseum.org/
Pinellas	Lake Tarpon	(727) 934-3696	http://www.laketarpon.org/
Pinellas	Sawgrass Lake Park	(727) 527-3814	http://www.pinellascounty.org/park/16_Sawgrass.htm
Pinellas	Lake Seminole Park	(727) 549-6156	http://www.pinellascounty.org/park/08_Seminole.htm
Pinellas	Boyd Hill Nature Park	(727) 893-7335	http://www.stpete.org/boyd/
Pinellas	Anclote Key Preserve State Park	(727) 469-5942	http://www.floridastateparks.org/anclotekey/
Pinellas	Honeymoon Island State Park	(727) 469-5942	http://www.floridastateparks.org/honeymoonisland/
Pinellas	Caladesi Island State Park	(727) 469-5918	http://www.floridastateparks.org/caladesiisland/
Pinellas	Pinellas County Aquatic Preserve	(813) 744-6100	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/pinellas/
Pinellas	Pinellas National Wildlife Refuge	(352) 563-2088	http://www.fws.gov/chassahowitzka/pinellas/
Pinellas	Fort Desoto County Park	(727) 866-2484	http://www.pinellascounty.org/park/05_Ft_DeSoto.htm
Pinellas	Boca Ciega Bay Aquatic Preserve	(941) 721-2068	http://www.dep.state.fl.us/coastal/sites/pinellas/
Pinellas	Egmont Key NWR	(352) 563-2088	http://www.fws.gov/egmontkey/index.html
Pinellas	Egmont Key State Park	(727) 893-2627	http://www.floridastateparks.org/egmontkey/
Pinellas	Florida Holocaust Museum	(727) 820-0100	http://www.flholocaustmuseum.org/
Pinellas	Florida International Museum	(800) 777-9882	http://www.floridamuseum.org/
Pinellas	St. Petersburg Museum of History	(727) 894-1052	http://www.spmoh.org/home.html
Sarasota	Oscar Scherer State Park	(941) 483-5956	http://www.floridastateparks.org/oscarscherer/
Sarasota	Myakka River State Park	(941) 923-1120	http://www.floridastateparks.org/myakkariver/
Sarasota	Myakka State Forest	(941) 365-0100	http://www.fl-dof.com/state_forests/myakka.html
Sarasota	Sarasota Bay National Estuary	(941) 359-5841	http://www.sarasotabay.org/
Sarasota	Stump Pass Beach State Park	(941) 964-0375	http://www.floridastateparks.org/stumppass/

importance of central west Florida's rivers to humans throughout history.

Additional Information

Published Resources

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Online Resources

Central Gulf Coast Archeological Society,
<http://www.cgcas.org/>

Florida Division of Historical Resources,
<http://www.flheritage.com/>

Florida Fish & Wildlife Commission Wildlife Viewing Sites,
http://www.myfwc.com/recreation/View_index.htm

Florida's Historic Places,
<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/florida/lessons/places.htm>

Florida's Museum of Natural History,
<http://www.flmnh.ufl.edu/>

Florida Natural Areas Inventory,
<http://www.fnai.org>

Florida's Scenic Highways,
<http://www.floridascenichighways.com/>

Florida State Parks,
<http://www.floridastateparks.org/>

Florida Water Management Districts,
<http://dlis.dos.state.fl.us/fgils/wmd.html>

P.K. Yonge Library of Florida History,
<http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/spec/pkyonge/index.html>

Taino Timucua Tribal Web Page,
<http://www.hartford-hwp.com/Timucua/index.html>

Touring the Georgia-Florida Coast,
<http://www.nps.gov/history/nr/travel/geo-flor/g-fintro.htm>

Visit Florida, <http://www.visitflorida.com>