

# 2023 State-Owned Lands Public Access Report

Division of State Lands  
Florida Department of Environmental Protection

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## **Executive Summary**

Pursuant to section 259.032(9)(f)4., Florida Statutes (F.S.), the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) Division of State Lands (DSL) prepares an annual report describing the percentage of conservation lands in Florida that are publicly accessible and the efforts of the managing agencies to increase public access to these lands.

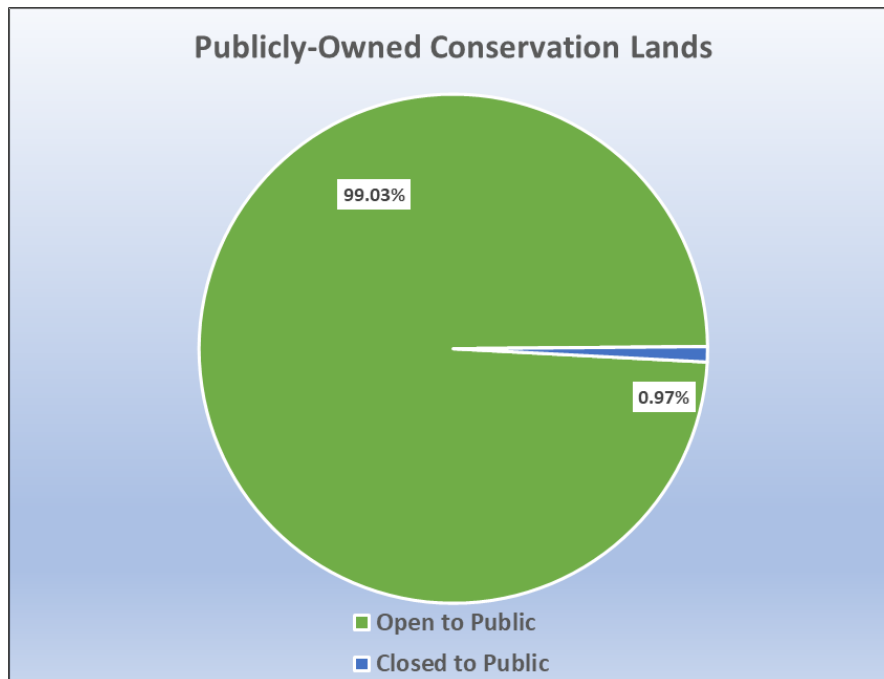
In preparation for this report, DSL analyzed land ownership information in the [Florida State-Owned Lands and Records Information System](#) (FL-SOLARIS) database that pertains to full-fee lands acquired by the State of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S. For such lands, DSL contacted the designated land managing agency to determine which tracts or parcels are closed to public access and why they are closed. In addition, DSL queried the land managing agencies to determine specific actions they are taking to increase public access to conservation lands in their stewardship, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in existing recreational opportunities.

This year's State-Owned Lands Public Access report determined that:

- Nearly all full-fee lands (99.03%) acquired by the State of Florida for conservation under Chapter 259, F.S., are open to public access;
- All managing agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public access to the less than 1% of land that is not open to the public, where appropriate; and
- There is an increased focus on enhancing public access and recreational opportunities on areas that are open to the public through traditional means and the use of new technologies.

## **Percentage of State-Owned Conservation Lands Open to the Public**

The table below represents state-owned conservation land data provided by land managers and verified by FL-SOLARIS and [Florida Natural Areas Inventory](#) databases. Acres of state-owned conservation land closed to public access was verified by the managing agencies. A total of 4,967,094.78 acres (99.03%) of state-owned conservation land are open to the public, with 48,715.39 acres (0.97%) closed to the public.



## **Efforts to Increase Public Use of State-owned Conservation Lands**

DSL contacted each of the land managing agencies to determine what efforts are being made to increase public access to the land they manage, including efforts to increase public awareness and participation in recreational opportunities. Each agency submits detailed information about recreational opportunities and enhancements on its conservation lands to the [Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory](#) (FORI) database managed by DEP's Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP). Recreational activities available on specific conservation lands can be accessed on the respective managing agency website or the FORI database.

Water management districts and state agencies are making a concerted effort to increase public use of the conservation lands they manage, both through traditional means (e.g., developing new trails and facilities) and by implementing new technologies (e.g., providing interactive maps on agency websites and GPS enabled mobile applications). The information below summarizes each main land management agency's recent actions and efforts to increase public access and awareness.

### ***Department of Environmental Protection – Division of Recreation and Parks***

[The Division of Recreation and Parks](#) (DRP) is responsible for the development of Florida's recreation and parks system. DRP provides public access to the best of Florida's diverse natural and cultural sites by providing appropriate resource-based recreational opportunities and interpretation. The division promotes a statewide outdoor recreation program by offering a diverse, connected and balanced system of outdoor recreational resources, facilities and programs. DRP maintains over 2,275 miles of trails and approximately 100 miles of sandy beaches. There are 75 campgrounds located at 72 parks within a system of 175 separate management units located across the state. Recreational activities include bicycling, camping, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, swimming, hiking, horseback riding, nature study, picnicking, beach activities and visits to archeological and historic sites. The Florida State Park system is recognized as one of the best state park systems in the country and is the nation's only four-time Gold Medal Winner, as awarded by the National Association of Recreation and Parks. Florida State Parks hosted over 32 million visitors in Fiscal Year (FY) 2021-22.

The Florida State Parks [website](#) contains links for the public to learn more about the parks open for recreational use. The Florida State Parks [statewide map](#) displays information most useful to park visitors, such as entrances, points of interest, structures and trails. It is one of the most comprehensive and accessible web-based state park maps of its kind and received 425,471 page views in FY 2021-22 at a rate of 48.5786 views per hour. DRP also maintains FORI, a comprehensive inventory of existing outdoor resources and facilities in Florida. FORI provides details of parks, recreation areas, open spaces and other outdoor sites in the state, including those managed by federal, state, regional, county and municipal governments, commercial enterprises, non-profit organizations and clubs.

### ***Department of Environmental Protection – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection***

DEP's Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection's (ORCP) mission statement is "conserving and restoring Florida's coastal, aquatic, and ocean resources for the benefit of people and the environment." The "benefit of people" is through providing healthy ecosystems and fun, safe ways to experience those systems whether through on-site opportunities or off-site programs.

ORCP amplified public awareness of, and access to, ORCP-managed lands through a multitude of means, as evidenced by the continued increase in the number of visitors and volunteer hours over the years. The number of visitors on ORCP-managed lands continues to increase – from 799,524 in FY 2020-21 to 851,699 in FY 2021-22. The number of volunteer hours donated at ORCP's four upland reserves continues to increase, with 32,208 hours donated in FY 2020-21 to 54,671 hours in FY 2021-22.

Visitation increased through expanding education, outreach programs and existing facilities:

- Refreshing in-house and traveling exhibits;
- Establishing self-guided tours;
- Hosting visiting researchers and university groups (e.g., Alternative Spring Break, internships, etc.);
- Participating in local events;
- Enhancing ORCP's online presence through DEP and CSO websites;
- Expanding volunteer opportunities;
- Opening new primitive camping sites;
- Installing additional amenities (e.g., picnic tables, fire rings, etc.);
- Constructing new ADA-compliant trails, boardwalks and an observation tower with a camera for remote viewing;
- Making existing roads/trails more accessible (e.g., paving, adding low water crossings, etc.); and
- Constructing a new paddle craft launch site.

The latest improvements and upgrades include assuming management of a 0.6-mile boardwalk at the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve to facilitate repairs.

### ***Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – Florida Forest Service***

The Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Florida Forest Service (FFS) manages state forests using a multiple-use management concept, which includes providing the public with outdoor recreational opportunities. FFS makes every effort to utilize historic ground and vegetation disturbances, allowing public access and recreation without additional impacts to public land. The most common recreational activities include camping, hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing and paddling.

FFS has implemented programs to increase public use of the state forests including an online reservation system, photo contest, Trailwalker program for hikers and Trailrotter program for equestrian users. Many of the state forests contain segments of the 1,400-mile Florida National Scenic Trail, and others are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail. Geocaching is another recreational opportunity in state forests allowing visitors an outdoor treasure-hunting adventure utilizing GPS devices. FFS also offers off-highway vehicle riding opportunities to the public in three state forests.

The FFS [website](#) contains information to assist the public with locating outdoor recreational opportunities and increase public awareness of cooperative initiatives including the Friends of Florida State Forests Inc. and Florida Scenic Highways. Florida's state forests also serve as outdoor classrooms for all ages through educational programs. FFS also provides Operation Outdoor Freedom events for wounded veterans with outdoor activities for their enjoyment at no cost.

### ***Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission***

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) provides a variety of wildlife-focused recreational opportunities statewide on areas within the Wildlife Management Area (WMA) system. FWC maintains more than 2,100 miles of roads and more than 1,000 miles of trails that allow the public to access and explore the agency's managed lands. In addition, FWC develops and maintains public access infrastructure on agency-managed areas such as boat launches, visitor entrances, check stations and wildlife viewing structures. Recreational opportunities include hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, hiking, paddling and horseback riding. Information on area-specific opportunities is available at [www.MyFWC.com/recreation](http://www.MyFWC.com/recreation). Statewide programs such as the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail encourage the conservation of Florida's native habitats and species and promote awareness of the premier wildlife viewing opportunities on Florida's WMAs and other public lands.

FWC engages the public in planning access and recreational opportunities for each managed area through the management plan development and public hearing process. The agency increases public awareness and participation through outreach and programs that educate the public about fish and

wildlife conservation, hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, boating and shooting sports. When access improvements are made, FWC promotes them through newsletters, websites, social media and special events. FWC also partners with VISIT FLORIDA and local and regional tourism organizations to promote awareness of the WMA system.

FWC continues to improve access to state lands for people with disabilities by constructing facilities that meet or exceed ADA standards. The agency also engages audiences by providing volunteer opportunities for species monitoring and habitat restoration efforts, interpretive programs and infrastructure development and maintenance.

### ***Department of Military Affairs***

The goal of the Department of Military Affairs is to open the entire Upchurch Milling and Storage Company tract to public use once current natural community restoration work is completed. The agency is working on acquiring or establishing easements on adjacent private lands to facilitate public access to this conservation property, which is managed by Camp Blanding Military Reservation.

### ***Northwest Florida Water Management District***

The Northwest Florida Water Management District (NFWFMD) has many facilities available to support public recreation on lands it owns and manages. These include boat ramps, tent and RV campsites, canoe launches, fishing piers, hiking trails, horseback trails and parking areas, pavilions, picnic tables, restrooms and wildlife viewing trails.

NFWFMD has expanded public recreational activities on land purchased with public funds, with the most popular activities being hunting, fishing, camping, paddling, hiking and wildlife viewing. These recreational activities are compatible with natural resource protection and land use priorities. NFWFMD's [website](#) lists conservation lands and facilities available for public access and recreation.

### ***Suwannee River Water Management District***

The Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD) owns 160,420 acres, of which 155,451 acres are open to the public for recreation. Public lands include a variety of facilities and features to enhance the public user experience. SRWMD engages with community and user groups to encourage youth and mobility-impaired hunts, further increasing access where possible. In FY 2021-22, SRWMD launched an [interactive web map](#) that displays district lands, facilities and recreational features.

### ***St. Johns River Water Management District***

The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) provides a wide range of recreational opportunities available to the public on its managed lands including hiking, canoeing, kayaking, boating, fishing, bicycling, horseback riding, camping, geocaching, wildlife viewing and hunting. The District emphasizes ecosystem viability while also offering compatible public recreation opportunities. SJRWMD holds regular recreational public meetings to discuss land management activities and recreation with stakeholders. The District works closely with state and local government partners to identify opportunities to enhance SJRWMD-managed lands that not only provide valuable ecological benefits but also increase opportunities for outdoor recreation. SJRWMD partners with state agencies on special hunts for youth and disabled veterans on its lands and actively promotes the array of recreational opportunities available through traditional outreach and social media. The District also constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvements that enhance public use, including boat ramps, restrooms, picnic pavilions, storm shelters, observation towers and boardwalks. Camping is allowed at 59 sites across SJRWMD-managed lands. SJRWMD utilizes an online reservation system to manage reservations at 22 of these campsites. During FY 2021-22, these 22 sites were reserved for a combined total of more than 3,000 nights.

Informational kiosks on SJRWMD properties provide on-site guidance to visitors, while SJRWMD's [website](#) features an interactive recreation guide with regularly updated detailed information about public

access and recreational activities. The recreation web pages had approximately 380,000 page views in FY 2021-22.

Nearly 40% of those page views were to the Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive and Lake Apopka North Shore pages. Lake Apopka Wildlife Drive is a popular outdoor recreation destination featuring 11 miles of driving trails along levees within a network of wetlands that attracts an estimated 180,000 visitors annually. Another popular destination for the public is the marshes of the Upper St. Johns River Basin. SJRWMD manages agreements with concessionaire groups that provide organized airboat tours of the upper basin marshes at two separate conservation areas, Blue Cypress and Three Forks. These agreements help increase recreational opportunities, support the local economy through ecotourism and allow SJRWMD to control impacts to the natural systems. SJRWMD also administers Special Use Authorizations to parties seeking use of agency land not typically allowed due to agency rules. This includes providing access for people who are mobility impaired to conservation land through a vehicular access permitting process.

### ***South Florida Water Management District***

The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) provides a wide variety of nature-based recreational opportunities on public lands managed by the agency. These activities are managed to maximize the diversity and extent of public recreational activities provided on SFWMD-managed lands, while still providing resource protection measures necessary to ensure the lands are properly managed for their conservation values and long-term public benefits. Popular recreational activities provided on SFWMD-managed lands include hiking, bicycling, fishing, camping, hunting, canoeing/kayaking, powerboating, air boating, horseback riding, wildlife viewing, star gazing and geocaching.

SFWMD owns approximately 322,558 acres of managed conservation lands, of which 320,650 acres (99.4%) are open to the public for recreation, and 1,907 acres (0.6%) are closed as part of two mitigation banks. SFWMD constructs and maintains a variety of infrastructure and capital improvement facilities designed to enhance public access and support recreational opportunities on SFWMD-managed lands. These facilities and improvements include barns and paddocks to support equestrian use, restrooms and pavilions at campgrounds and day-use sites, canoe and kayak portages, boardwalks, hiking trails, boat ramps, trailheads with informational kiosks and parking areas. In addition to the construction and maintenance of recreational facilities, SFWMD hosts quarterly recreation forum meetings to solicit input and receive suggestions from the public on ways to expand and enhance recreational opportunities on public lands.

SFWMD's [website](#) provides area-specific recreation information, updates on new recreational opportunities or emergency actions that have the potential to affect public recreation, a recreational guide, and a link to the Special Use License system where the public can reserve no-cost permits for camping, equestrian use, expanded vehicle use to access remote areas and other recreation-orientated activities. Special Use Licenses are utilized to provide public recreational opportunities on properties where space limitations require the number of participants to be regulated to maintain a high-quality recreational experience and for resource management purposes. From Oct. 1, 2021, to Sept. 30, 2022, SFWMD's recreation website was visited 80,553 times to obtain information and updates on public use and recreation opportunities on SFWMD-managed lands. The website was also utilized by the public to obtain 9,322 no-cost Special Use Licenses that expand recreational use on conservation lands in an environmentally sensitive manner. The website and utilization of Special Use Licenses continue to serve as valuable tools to promote recreational use and inform the public of the large number of recreational opportunities available on lands managed by SFWMD.

SFWMD also actively partners with other governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations to expand and facilitate the administration of recreational programs and activities on lands managed by SFWMD. These partnerships include working with local governments to develop and maintain recreational infrastructure and public access sites, coordinating with state agencies to assist in the

management and administration of hunting activities, and collaborating with non-governmental organizations that actively participate in SFWMD's volunteer program to support and enhance recreational opportunities on district lands. The volunteer program provides campground hosts and other services such as trail posting, trail maintenance and the construction of public-use pavilions that help support SFWMD's recreation program.

### ***Southwest Florida Water Management District***

The Southwest Florida Water Management District (SWFWMD) provides numerous recreational opportunities to the public while encouraging nature-based activities by providing information in a printed recreation guide and on the agency's [website](#) that receives more than 1,032,000 page views a year. SWFWMD partners with state and local governments to acquire lands that protect water resources and provide additional recreational opportunities. Approximately 99% of these lands are available for public use and recreation. SWFWMD provides bird-watching opportunities that are part of the Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail, paved and off-road biking, hiking including access to the National Scenic Trail, boating, canoeing, backcountry, primitive and equestrian camping, fishing, horseback riding, hunting, inline skating, kayaking, picnic facilities and a multitude of wildlife viewing opportunities.

SWFWMD is committed to helping Florida residents and visitors enjoy public lands. As part of that effort, SWFWMD has published georeferenced maps for many of the most popular recreation areas. Georeferenced maps enable the public to view their current location on special applications available for smartphones and tablets. SWFWMD has begun to upgrade the trail marking system to align with georeferenced maps and continues to update signage, sign-in boxes, and kiosks throughout recreation areas to guide visitors to specific sites. Additionally, SWFWMD continues to maintain trails and campground amenities such as pavilions, picnic tables, and fire rings and has transitioned to an automated online camping reservation system.



### State-Owned Conservation Lands Open to Public Access

Managing Agency	Total State-Owned Managed Conservation Acres	Acres Closed to Public Access	Acres Opened to Public Access	Percent of Land Open to Public Access	Percent of Land Closed to Public Access	Reasons Why Land is Closed to the Public
Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services – Florida Forest Service	1,168,453.32	0.00	1,168,453.32	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
Department of Environmental Protection – Division of Recreation and Parks	783,401.51	0.00	783,401.51	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
Department of Environmental Protection – Office of Resilience and Coastal Protection	59,143.00	0.00	59,143.00	100.00%	0.00%	All acres are open to the public.
Department of Environmental Protection – Mining and Mitigation Program	5,506.00	5,501.00	5.00	0.09%	99.91%	Closed acres include mitigation and reclamation sites currently under active restoration or monitoring. There are two opportunities for public access via a canoe/kayak launch in Polk County.
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission	1,506,924.00	37.00	1,506,887.00	99.99%	0.01%	A restriction in the deed prohibits public access to Judges Cave site because the cave is a maternity roost site for the federally endangered gray bat. The area was acquired by The Nature Conservancy and transferred to FWC in January 1983. Janet Butterfield Brooks Preserve deed restriction requires the site to be open for guided tours only.
Northwest Florida Water Management District	211,451.99	23.38	211,428.61	99.99%	0.01%	Life estate retained by Seller, his wife and children as recorded in O.R. Book 1594, page 0537, public records of Leon County, Florida.
South Florida Water Management District	322,557.50	1,907.25	320,650.25	99.41%	0.59%	The Loxahatchee Mitigation Bank and Corkscrew Mitigation bank are currently managed through a public/private partnership agreement and are closed to public access due to ongoing wetland restoration activities. These mitigation banks encompass a total of 1,907.25 acres and will be open for public use once ongoing restoration activities are complete.
St. Johns River Water Management District	432,171.65	21,057.73	411,113.92	95.13%	4.87%	At Twelve Mile Swamp Conservation Area, 19,534 acres are currently encumbered by a timber lease with private hunting rights reserved until 2025 and will be open for public access when the lease ends. At Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area, 1,320 acres are encumbered until 2026 by a peat harvesting lease and will be open for public access when the lease ends. An additional 144.49 acres at Emeraldal Marsh Conservation Area are closed for public safety related to adjacent land use. The Crane Creek M-1 Canal Restoration Project includes a 59.24-acre water treatment parcel that is closed to the public.

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<b>Suwannee River Water Management District</b>	160,420.00	4,969.00	155,451.00	96.90%	3.10%	4,969 acres were purchased for a water supply/water quality project such as municipal wellfields or spray fields and are currently closed to the public. Of these 4,969 acres, 2,677 acres are in the Double Run Creek and West Ridge Tracts. Both were purchased for future water resource development projects. Once completed, the tracts may be opened to the public. There are 60 acres in the Newberry Wellfield Tract, which are leased to the City for water supply and recreation. The Double Run Creek tract is managed by the Florida National Guard at Camp Blanding and has a hunting lease.
<b>Southwest Florida Water Management District</b>	343,392.40	4,480.36	338,912.04	98.70%	1.30%	1,926.41 acres are part of reservoirs, 1,521.23 acres are a regional water treatment system, 1,029.36 acres are mitigation sites, 2.70 acres are related to water control structures, and 0.66 acres are data collection sites.
<b>Department of Military Affairs</b>	1,577.07	1,577.07	0.00	0.00%	100.00%	Camp Blanding - Upchurch Milling and Storage Company Tract currently has no access without crossing military training lands or private property and is undergoing restoration of longleaf pine-wiregrass natural community. The Department of Military Affairs is working on acquiring or establishing access easements.
<b>Department of Corrections (PRIDE)</b>	18,237.00	9,097.00	9,140.00	50.12%	49.88%	Areas that are not open to the public are utilized by PRIDE and are not compatible with public use. The 9,140 acres of conservation lands open to the public represent the Raiford Wildlife Management Area, which is split between Union Correctional Institution and Florida State Prison. The Raiford WMA is open to the public for hunting and other recreational use in accordance with FWC rules and regulations applicable to the WMA.
<b>University of Florida</b>	2,574.73	65.60	2,509.13	97.45%	2.55%	Life estate was approved by the Board of Trustees in May 2002. Public access will be allowed when the original owner is deceased or no longer lives adjacent to the property.
<b>Total</b>	<b>5,015,810.17</b>	<b>48,715.39</b>	<b>4,967,094.78</b>	<b>99.03%</b>	<b>0.97%</b>	