

## **Chapter Five - Outdoor Recreation Issues and Recommendations**

Important tasks for those involved with SCORP are examining outdoor recreation issues, anticipating emerging trends and providing recommendations to improve recreation opportunities for their fellow citizens and visitors. Florida is among the most populous and dynamic states in the nation, and perpetual social, technological, economic and environmental changes continue to affect people's lives, including how and where they recreate. Although these considerations do not lend themselves readily to quantitative analysis, it is nonetheless important that decision makers take them into account.

This chapter discusses issues affecting outdoor recreation in Florida, and outlines recommendations for implementing the 2018 SCORP. The plan's priorities and strategies resulted from many forms of input, including: the SCORP workgroup, meetings with outdoor recreation stakeholders, research of nationwide trends and issues, the 2016-2017 Outdoor Recreation Participation Survey, public workshops, open house events and online questionnaires.

### **VISION FOR AN OUTDOOR RECREATION SYSTEM**

Florida's diverse public and private outdoor recreation lands, facilities, programs and managing agencies collectively contribute to the state's wealth of recreational opportunities. While tremendous progress has been made in acquiring the needed lands and providing the facilities and programs to support public use of these lands, more collaboration is required. The efforts of recreation suppliers need better integration, and many communities need better connections to nearby parks and trails. The following statement describes the vision for an ideal, but as yet unrealized, outdoor recreation system for the Sunshine State.

*Florida's ideal outdoor recreation system will be a diverse, connected and balanced system of resources, facilities and programs that provides the state's residents and visitors with a full range of outdoor recreation opportunities, regardless of their age, gender, ethnic background, economic status, physical or mental ability or location within the state. The system will be coordinated at the state level with all agencies and suppliers working in tandem, and with ample opportunities for the public to participate in decision making. It will further the public's understanding and appreciation of Florida's environment and outdoor recreation resources.*

### **PRIORITY AREAS, GOALS AND STRATEGIES: A METHOD FOR IMPLEMENTATION**

Four priority areas were chosen for Florida's 2018 plan, covering a broad range of outdoor recreation topics. In this chapter, each priority area is discussed and specific goals and strategies are presented to address the identified issues and to implement the specific plan components. Current examples of how Florida is working towards its vision of an ideal recreation system are also provided.

To help implement the plan, FDEP's Office of Park Planning staff will reach out to outdoor recreation providers, organizations and advocates at all levels to help coordinate activities. The FDEP will also create a new web page to demonstrate how each of the SCORP's strategies are being addressed. While some of the recommendations below are quite specific and intended for implementation by particular agencies or organizations, others are broader in scope or more "aspirational," to be undertaken by multiple entities across a wide spectrum of suppliers. Public and private recreation providers throughout Florida are called upon to help make the 2018-2023 plan's implementation a reality.

#### **Priority Area 1: Health and Wellbeing**

- **Goal 1-1:** Increase the promotion of active and healthy lifestyles in the outdoors.
- **Goal 1-2:** Increase the number the recreation facilities, programs and opportunities in urban areas and rural communities.

#### **Priority Area 2: Public Access, Accessibility and Connectivity**

- **Goal 2-1:** Promote the diversity of recreation participants through the development of inclusive and welcoming programs and facilities.
- **Goal 2-2:** Improve universal accessibility on all public lands.
- **Goal 2-3:** Ensure that appropriate conservation lands and waters are open and accessible for public use and are widely promoted.
- **Goal 2-4:** Coordinate providers, agencies and organizations to better connect and promote lands and opportunities.
- **Goal 2-5:** Promote local parks and trails, and neighborhood connectivity.

#### **Priority Area 3: Economic Opportunities and Ecotourism**

- **Goal 3-1:** Promote the economic benefits of outdoor recreation and ecotourism in Florida.

#### **Priority Area 4: Resource Management and Stewardship**

- **Goal 4-1:** Encourage the conservation and protection of Florida's natural, historical and cultural resources.
- **Goal 4-2:** Support natural, historical and cultural resource management to ensure high quality outdoor recreation experiences for Florida's residents and visitors.

## Priority Area 1: Health and Wellbeing

*Summary: Promoting active lifestyles in the outdoors while improving recreation opportunities in underserved communities is essential to improving the health and wellbeing of all Floridians.*

### Quality of Life

Regular physical activity and time spent outdoors are essential to a person's health and overall quality of life. The connection between physical activity, exposure to nature and good health is widely acknowledged, yet many people simply do not make adequate time for exercise or outdoor activities. It is sometimes easy to forget how important recreation is, but one need only recall that the word "recreate" literally means a re-creation of ourselves. Recreation should be thought of not as a luxury, but rather as a necessity.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only one-half of U.S. adults and about one-quarter of high school students meet the minimum guidelines for aerobic physical activity. In addition, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that the average American now spends 93% of their entire life indoors and in automobiles, leaving only 7% for time in the out-of-doors. Outdoor recreation is needed today more than ever.

Physical inactivity has consequences at the individual and societal level. Obesity, with its strong links to hypertension (high blood pressure) and heart disease, continues to be a nationwide epidemic. The CDC reports that one out of every two U.S. adults is now living with a chronic disease, such as heart disease, cancer or diabetes. Not only do these conditions contribute to disability and premature death, they also contribute to rising health care costs for everyone.

**Quote:** "People who cannot find time for recreation are obliged sooner or later to find time for illness." – John Wanamaker

Although adult obesity rates nationwide appear to show signs of leveling off, the CDC reports that 69% of U.S. adults are overweight, and more than one third (36.5%) of adults are obese. Equally alarming is the proportion of youth (ages 2 – 19) who are obese (17%); the obesity rate for adolescents is 20.5%. More than 29 million Americans (9.3%) have diabetes, and more than 200,000 youth were diagnosed with either type 1 or 2 diabetes from 2000-2012. The incidence among children and teenagers continues to rise at a rate of 1.8% annually for type 1 and 4.8% annually for type 2 diabetes.

How does Florida compare with other states? Currently, only 36 percent of Floridians are at healthy weight, according to a 2016 report by the Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The report indicates that Florida's adult obesity rate is 27.4%, up from 18.4% in 2000 and 11.4% in 1990. Rates are even higher, however, for people of color (35.2% for Blacks, 26.8% for Latinos and 25.7% for Whites), which needs to be addressed.<sup>1, 2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alliance for Biking and Walking. 2016. *Bicycling & Walking in the United States: 2016 Benchmarking Report*. 177 pp.

<sup>2</sup> The Trust for America's Health and the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. *The State of Obesity 2017*. Better Policies for a Healthier America. 2017.

One bright spot is that Florida's adult obesity rate is currently the 14<sup>th</sup> lowest in the nation. However, Florida ranks the 11<sup>th</sup> highest for adult diabetes (11.8%) and 16<sup>th</sup> highest for hypertension (33.5%). Fifty percent of Florida's adults meet the recommended minimum weekly aerobic physical activity, the same percentage as the U.S. population (Alliance for Biking and Walking, 2016).

Our busy schedules, sedentary office environments, overuse of electronic devices and all manner of competing demands in today's fast-paced society are partly to blame for our collective physical inactivity. The figures above may also indicate a lack of awareness of recreation's impact on health and quality of life, or perhaps a lack of motivation to be active.

#### Spotlight Box: **Tackling Obesity-Related Diseases**

If Body Mass Indexes were lowered by 5 percent, Florida could save 2.1 percent in health care costs, which would equate to savings of \$34.4 billion by 2030.

In addition, the number of Floridians who could be spared from developing new cases of major obesity-related diseases includes:

- >500,000 people from type 2 diabetes
- >465,000 from coronary heart disease and stroke
- >400,000 from hypertension
- >218,000 from arthritis
- >43,000 from obesity-related cancer

- *Trust for America's Health*

However, there are additional factors that can limit opportunities to be active outdoors. For example, socioeconomic status and travel costs can preclude involvement in sports, or from visiting parks and other natural areas, which are often located away from urban centers. Safety concerns and lack of mentors are often cited as additional reasons why people of color are not involved in certain types of outdoor activities.

The good news is that Florida's abundant parks, trails and other public lands and waters offer excellent opportunities for millions of people to reconnect with nature and to enjoy healthy exercise, physical activity, relaxation, reflection and even challenge and risk. Providing access to public lands through high-quality systems of parks, greenways, open space and other natural areas plays a major role in creating and maintaining active, healthy communities.

### Spotlight Box: **Improved Access Leads to Better Health**

What's the best way to motivate people to get outside and get healthy? The answer may be as simple as improving access and increasing local opportunities. A group of studies reviewed in the American Journal of Preventive Medicine showed that "creation of or enhanced access to places for physical activity, combined with informational outreach" produced a 48 percent increase in frequency of physical activity, along with an "increase in aerobic capacity, reduced body fat, weight loss, improved flexibility and an increase in perceived energy."

E.B. Kahn et al. 2002. *The Effectiveness of Interventions to Increase Physical Activity*. American Journal of Preventive Medicine 22:4S. Pp. 87-88.

"Park Prescription" programs, which use health care professionals to prescribe physical outdoor activity to prevent or treat health problems, are increasingly popular and should be continued. These federal, state and local initiatives use free park passes to encourage people to get outdoors, exercise and to take advantage of nature's physical and psychological benefits. The Florida Park Service continues to participate in the Nature Play Prescription program in collaboration with Florida's Department of Health (FDOH) and Get Outdoors Florida!; since 2014, more than 35,000 prescriptions have been issued. Other public providers are encouraged to take part in prescription programs as well.

### Spotlight Box: **Florida State Parks: A Healthy Choice**

Florida State Parks has developed an identity as a partner in individual and public health. Programs which support this are Florida Park Fit, Fitness Trainers in Parks and Nature Play Prescription. Florida Park Fit encourages visitors to think of parks as outdoor gyms. From trail running to swimming and kayaking to 5Ks, parks are a great way to discover alternative paths to fitness. "Florida Park Fit" events account for nearly 10% of all scheduled programs. The Fitness Trainers in Parks program brings professional instructors into parks to teach yoga, CrossFit, running, tai chi and more. The program benefits park visitors and local businesses while providing a pass-through fee to the parks during non-peak times.

Future program goals include having health insurance companies rebate annual passes as gym memberships and to update existing fitness infrastructure. Currently in development is a print and social media campaign for visitors, government agencies and NGOs to view parks as a vital contributor to whole body health, including mental health. Serenity gardens and a children's television program to teach recreation skills are the campaign's current focus. Additional examples of ongoing state-level, health-related initiatives in conjunction with the FDOH include Healthiest Weight Florida, Healthy Campfire Cooking, Go From Couch to 5K!, Small Steps to Living Healthy and Sun's Up, Cover Up, all of which should continue to be promoted.

## Nature Therapy

Parks and other natural areas are restorative environments, and decades of research confirm that parks, forests, gardens and other green spaces are essential to our health and wellbeing. Even short walks in natural settings support improved mood, vigor, cognition and positive emotions. Park visitation can therefore be thought of as a type of “nature therapy” or “ecotherapy.” Time spent in parks and other communal green spaces also confers social benefits, strengthening interpersonal relationships and support networks. In their messaging, recreation suppliers should place stronger emphasis on the therapeutic effects of recreating outdoors.

Spotlight Box: **Nature Therapy: Shinrin-Yoku** (include a pine forest photo)

Ample scientific evidence demonstrates that exposure to nature has both physical and mental health benefits. A type of nature therapy known as shinrin-yoku (literally translated as “forest bathing” or “immersing in the forest atmosphere”) which originated in Japan, continues to attract followers around the world as people look for techniques to combat daily stress and to reconnect with the natural world.

To help foster shinrin-yoku, Japan has set aside dozens of forest areas as designated health treatment locations, where practitioners take frequent “walks in the woods,” engaging their senses and immersing themselves, in nature.

How does it work? Trees and plants give off compounds called phytonicides that when inhaled, can provide therapeutic benefits such as lower blood pressure, stronger immune system and protection against anxiety, depression and attention disorders.

A 2015 study in the *Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences* found that people who walked for 90 minutes in a natural setting, either a forest or a nature park, had lower anxiety and lower activity in the part of the brain linked to depression.<sup>3</sup> Another study found that walking through a cedar forest for 40 minutes could lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol more than by simply walking indoors.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> G. N. Bratman et al. 2015. *Nature experience reduces rumination and subgenual prefrontal cortex activation*. *Proceedings of the Natural Academy of Sciences*, 112: 8567-8572.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Miyazaki and Y. Motohashi. 1995. *Forest environment and physical response*. In: Y. Agishi and Y. Ohtsuka, editors. *Recent progress in medical balneology and climatology*. Hokkaido: Hokkaido University. Pp. 67-77.

In a landmark 2017 study called *The Nature of Americans*, research indicated that both children and adults are still highly interested in nature and the outdoors, but they are increasingly less connected to the natural world and are finding less time

to spend outside. Increased family-centric programming opportunities offered by local recreation providers could help, as could parents scheduling more free time for kids to explore nature in their backyards, neighborhoods and local parks.

Combatting “nature-deficit disorder,” a term coined by Richard Louv in his 2005 book *Last Child in the Woods*, must involve getting adults as well as children to set aside time for being outside more often. Initiatives that encourage kids to get outdoors such as Every Kid in a Park (to get fourth-graders and their families to experience national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges and more, free of charge), the U.S. Forest Service’s Discover the Forest campaign and the Get Outdoors Florida! programming should be continued.

### **Whole-Health Benefits**

More must also be done to ensure that the public recognizes and receives the whole-health benefits that outdoor recreation offers. Beyond the prevention of chronic diseases, additional benefits of outdoor activities and time spent in nature include relief from modern stress, increased workplace productivity and improved mental health. These issues can be addressed in part by strengthening ties between recreation planners and suppliers, public health departments and health care providers, who all share the responsibility for promoting parks and green space as crucial to our collective wellbeing.

*“Connection to nature is not a dispensable amenity but, rather, is essential to the health, economic prosperity, quality of life and social well-being of all Americans.” – The Nature of Americans National Report: Disconnection and Recommendations for Reconnection, 2017.*

Although using different approaches, outdoor recreation and public health professionals work towards a similar outcome: active and healthy communities. The FDEP will continue to work with the FDOH to implement recreation-related objectives in the 2017-2021 State Health Improvement Plan (SHIP). Other recreation providers in Florida are also encouraged to help implement the SHIP and to partner with local governments to more user-oriented recreation opportunities.

The Florida Recreation and Park Association (FRPA) and the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (DOACS) recently teamed up with other agencies and organizations (Florida Departments of Education, Environmental Protection, Children and Families, Elder Affairs and Health, Agency for Health Care Administration, United Health Care Community Plan and Florida Healthy Kids Corporation) to improve health and wellbeing through recreation and nutrition. Called “Florida’s Roadmap to Living Healthy,” this initiative uses an interactive, online map to visualize data, which can help government agencies, nonprofits and other organizations identify gaps in services. This roadmap includes data on:

- Park and recreation locations
- Florida’s food deserts (areas with few grocery stores)
- Nutrition, healthy eating and much more

The map overlays data on the available resources, which enables both the public and decision-makers to see where resources are and where they are needed. Similar efforts to delineate where “park deserts” (areas with low park availability) occur would prove highly beneficial to recreation planners in the future to address social equity issues (see below).

The following strategies will help enhance health and wellbeing of Floridians by raising public awareness of and support for outdoor recreation.

Goal 1-1: Increase the promotion of active and healthy lifestyles in the outdoors.

Strategies:

1) Recreation providers should work with appropriate agencies and organizations to deliver effective programming that boosts physical activity, promotes family-centric health and wellness and exposes youth to nature.

2) Recreation providers should partner with county health departments and local health care providers to promote active, healthy lifestyles through community-level health improvement initiatives.

3) FDEP should assist Florida’s Department of Health (DOH) in implementing recreation-related objectives in the State Health Improvement Plan.

4) Recreation providers should seek partnerships with private sector companies that share the common vision of creating healthy, active and walkable communities.

5) Recreation providers should collaborate to brand, market and deliver unified messaging that promotes the whole-health benefits of outdoor recreation, including improved mental health and workplace productivity.

Photo caption – “Walking is an easy way to start and maintain a physically active lifestyle, and walkable communities make it easier for people of all ages and abilities to be active.” – Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

## **Social Equity**

The National Recreation and Park Association defines social equity as “ensuring that all people have access to the benefits of local parks and recreation.” As inner-city neighborhoods and rural areas typically lack the high-quality recreation opportunities and park acreage found in more affluent areas, these underserved communities would greatly benefit from concerted efforts to fund more local parks and green space as well as more walking paths, trails and pedestrian friendly-streets to provide safe access to and from neighborhoods.



Similarly, more funding for user-oriented programs and facilities, as well as programs for underserved youth should be allocated by local governments, which would go a long way to redressing the imbalance regarding social equity in low-income areas. Making recreation programs more welcoming and inclusive for all Floridians should also be a priority for Florida's recreation providers.

Photo caption: Additional emphasis needs to be placed on improving social equity and providing more connections to local trails and parks, as low-income neighborhoods and rural areas often lack adequate parks, green space and safe places to walk.

Funding, however, remains a perpetual challenge for public recreation providers, who increasingly must leverage resources and creatively tap into non-traditional sources to construct new facilities as well as maintain existing ones. Maintenance backlogs, inadequate staffing and even partial shuttering of facilities are familiar issues to many park and recreation professionals. Alternative funding options may include any of the following:

- Charge or raise user fees
- Partnerships with government agencies
- CSOs/Friends groups
- Grants
- Volunteers
- Donations (private individuals, foundations and corporations)
- Fundraising with other organizations

The following recommendations are proposed to improve health and recreation opportunities in underserved areas.

Goal 1-2: Increase the number the recreation facilities, programs and opportunities in urban areas and rural communities.

Strategies:

1) Local governments should seek funding to maintain and provide additional user-oriented facilities and programs in underserved communities.

2) Recreation providers and user groups should initiate collaborative efforts to reach underserved youth with programming that emphasizes a holistic, whole-health approach.

3) Together with the private sector, recreation providers should create initiatives that develop outdoor skills and instill confidence in the out-of-doors for youth, minorities and seniors.

## **Planning and Public Health**

City planners have multiple avenues for improving public health. The City of Tampa recently partnered with real estate developers to become the first U.S. city to design a district with public health as the driving principle. Every aspect of the 40-acre waterfront area — its buildings, walkability, low-pollen trees and more — will help its inhabitants live healthier lives. Designing communities to be healthy — walkable and connected — also helps cities to stay competitive and attract new businesses and residents.

*“Walking for better health may seem simplistic, but sometimes the most important things we can do are also the easiest and the most obvious. It’s time to step it up, America! The journey to better health begins with a single step.”* Vivek H. Murthy, former Surgeon General, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

Another method that planners can use to improve health and wellbeing and to help urban communities encourage participation in outdoor recreation activities is to blend the built and natural environments. This principle of “biomimicry” or “biophilic design” allows buildings, streets and parks to be constructed to perform the same functions as natural ecosystems. By integrating functions such as wildlife habitat, flood mitigation and carbon sequestration, this can, in effect, lead to better-connected systems of parks and open spaces, more pleasant communities (with improved tree canopy cover, reduced air pollution and lower heat island effects in summer, for example) and happier and healthier citizens.

## **Outdoor Skills**

Developing outdoor skills is also important in engaging and encouraging Florida’s increasingly diverse population to be active outside, and programs that teach youth, minorities and seniors proficiency in a wide variety of activities should be expanded. Programs that train mentors how to teach these skills are also needed. Skill development can lead to better health and self-esteem, as well as lifelong participation in those activities. The FWC’s Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network (see also priority area 4) and the Becoming an Outdoors-Woman (BOW) workshops are great examples of programs that instruct those who may not have had the opportunity to participate in certain outdoor pursuits growing up such as camping, hunting, fishing and wildlife viewing. Providing additional opportunities for seniors to stay active by participating in low-impact activities is similarly encouraged (see below).

### Spotlight Box: **Emerging Activities: Pickleball**

While you may not have heard of pickleball, this game with the funny name is one of the fastest growing sports in the U.S. According to the Sports & Fitness Industry Association's (SFIA) 2016 Participant Report, there are more than 2.5 million pickleball participants in the nation, and more than 15,000 indoor and outdoor courts.

Suitable for all ages (even centenarians!) and easy to learn, pickleball contains elements of tennis, ping-pong and badminton. The game is played on a court around one-third the size of a badminton court, using a modified tennis-style net, large paddles and a lightweight plastic ball. Like tennis, it can be played either as singles or doubles. No nearby court to play on? No problem – with a hard, flat surface, a roll of tape and a net, you can make your own court in half an hour.

While incredibly popular with seniors, the sport is picking up younger enthusiasts as well. It's a great form of exercise, and easier on the body than traditional racquet sports. Many players find it surprisingly addictive, and enjoy the strategy and finesse.

### **Priority Area 2: Public Access, Accessibility and Connectivity**

*Summary: Florida's outdoor recreation system will benefit from continued coordination efforts to improve access and inclusion, and to ensure communities are connected to parks and trails.*

Floridians are fortunate to have abundant public lands and waters, along with thousands of parks in which to recreate. Most public lands have some type of access, but in some cases, recreational access is limited. When budgets are tight, land management agencies often choose to focus their resources on improving existing access points, amenities and infrastructure rather than investing in new facilities. With the U.S. economy expected to show continued recovery and growth in 2018, increased funding should be allocated for the expansion of new access points, community parks and infrastructure.

Agencies and other public recreation providers can sometimes improve access to their lands and waters by teaming up with outfitters, guide companies and other organizations to deliver supplemental services such as guided tours. Where appropriate, this option is worth exploring, as it can reduce costs or potentially provide a source of revenue.

Offering inclusive and welcoming facilities and programs for all individuals is another way to improve public access to conservation and recreation lands. Staff training may be required in some cases to create the needed programs and amenities. Ensuring that a diversity of users is actively recreating in our parks, forests and management areas begins with positive messaging and marketing that makes public lands feel like a safe environment for everyone to visit and enjoy.

## **Inclusiveness and Accessibility**

Equitable access also dictates removing obstacles to participation, especially physical barriers. Recreation providers have made great strides to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), but equality of access to public lands, programs and facilities remains a challenge.

Social barriers also need to be addressed. For example, gender-specific programs and sports teams can limit involvement by transgender individuals. Expanding programmatic offerings, and improving facilities by adding gender neutral restrooms, changing rooms and locker rooms, can make these members of the community feel more welcome. Agencies and recreation departments should assess their facilities to determine whether privacy is available to all users and make the needed changes. Lastly, it is important that efforts to create equitable access to programs and facilities are communicated to staff and the public.

The following recommendations will help ensure equitable public recreational access in Florida.

Goal 2-1: Promote the diversity of recreation participants through the development of inclusive and welcoming programs and facilities.

Strategies:

- 1) Outdoor recreation providers should develop and strengthen partnerships with organizations such as the Agency for Persons with Disabilities to educate themselves and the public, and to provide recreation activities and programs for people of all ages and abilities.
- 2) State land management agencies should partner with organizations such as the Florida Disabled Outdoors Association to establish specific programs for people with disabilities, and make these programs widely available throughout the state.
- 3) Organizations should seek ways to provide and market diversity and inclusion training for outdoor recreation professionals.
- 4) Citizens and recreation providers should work to strengthen federal, state and local initiatives that support the creation, enhancement and expansion of urban parks and open spaces.

### Spotlight Box: **Inclusive Facilities and Programs**

Hillsborough County's All People's Life Center (APLC) opened in 2007 and is one of the county's showcase facilities. This recreation center offers indoor and outdoor activities and serves people of all ages and abilities. Every detail of the facility exceeds ADA standards for accessibility; the center has no participation barriers for people with disabilities. The APLC is home to the county's Therapeutic Recreation program and Paralympic Sports Tampa Bay (PSTB), which provides year-round sports and recreation programs for children and adults with physical disabilities. The APLC also has the only county-run Special Olympics teams and is one of several Camp Sparks locations in the area. Camp Sparks is an after school and summer camp program for children with physical and mental disabilities.

Another facility that emphasizes inclusion is the William J. (Billy Joe) Rish Recreational Park near Port St. Joe. Operated by Florida's Agency for Persons with Disabilities (APD), this 100-acre facility on the Gulf of Mexico offers individuals with disabilities a safe beach experience that is completely accessible. The park has two miles of boardwalks and ramps leading to and from the beach, plus cabins and family cottages for rent. Other amenities include an Olympic-size swimming pool, beach piers and an event hall. Future plans call for nature trails and camping facilities.

Florida's public lands belong to everyone, and should be accessible to all. Agencies and other recreation providers should continue to make the necessary changes to upgrade their facilities to accommodate visitors with special needs. Universally-designed sites and facilities provide equal opportunity not only for persons with disabilities, but also for parents with strollers and people with injuries. Where needed, funding and/or professional guidance should be sought or made available to assist providers with the design of universally-accessible facilities and amenities.

The following recommendations will help ensure universal accessibility on Florida's public lands.

Goal 2-2: Improve universal accessibility on all public lands.

Strategies:

- 1) To the extent possible, agencies and recreation providers should eliminate architectural and cultural barriers in existing facilities under their management, as well as incorporate universal design concepts when planning new facilities and amenities.
- 2) Agencies and recreation departments should identify funding sources and professional guidance to help outdoor recreation providers design universally-accessible facilities and amenities.

## Public Access

While some areas with sensitive natural or cultural resources are off-limits to visitors, most of Florida's public lands are open to some type of recreational use. Agencies and recreation departments should determine through internal review and through public opinion where deficiencies in access exist, and work towards improving existing access points or establishing new ones where appropriate. Creative funding methods are sometimes called for with these types of capital improvements, as well as for maintaining existing facilities, especially when budgets are tight.

Finding places to recreate, however, should be easy in today's digital world. The FDEP's Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI) and its companion applications (apps) known as *Outdoor Florida* do their part by helping people locate destinations that match their activities of interest. The FORI has both a searchable database and an interactive map depicting more than 13,000 locations with public and private recreation facilities and opportunities. Improvements to make FORI and *Outdoor Florida* more user-friendly are ongoing, and FDEP will continue to make annual appeals to recreation providers to update information in the database.

Locating parks and other destinations that offer wheelchair-friendly amenities and other accommodations for persons with disabilities is not always an easy task. Fortunately, the Florida Disabled Outdoors Association (FDOA) maintains a searchable Recreation Resource Database of accessible, inclusive destinations, along with programs, services, events and products, which is a good resource for trip-planning. Recreation providers should continue to help the FDOA update this database as new opportunities become available, and they should also clearly indicate via their own websites, apps and other media which amenities, facilities and programs are accessible to those with disabilities.

The following recommendations are proposed to help ensure that appropriate conservation lands and waters are open and accessible for public use and are widely promoted.

Goal 2-3: Ensure that appropriate conservation lands and waters are open and accessible for public use and are widely promoted.

Strategies:

- 1) State agencies and local governments should identify lands and waters under their jurisdiction where inadequate recreational access exists or where existing access can be improved, and give priority to making the needed improvements.
- 2) Recreation providers should partner to advertise which facilities, amenities and programs are universally accessible to help consumers plan their trips.
- 3) Agencies and recreation departments should seek, coordinate and leverage funding for capital improvements to increase public access, as well as to maintain existing facilities.

Agencies and other organizations involved with outdoor recreation can certainly benefit from better coordination of efforts. Improving communication and coordination with city planners, transportation departments and land managers will lead to better-connected opportunities and will reduce unnecessary duplication of efforts. At the community scale, improved coordination results in better distribution and connections between parks, green spaces and neighborhoods.

In 2015 and 2016, FDEP held a series of public workshops around the state to promote the SCORP and to facilitate information exchange amongst recreation providers and outdoor professionals. The FDEP plans to continue these workshops following the completion of the 2018 SCORP. The FDEP will also continue to maintain and strengthen connections among recreation professionals by holding quarterly SCORP workgroup meetings and by seeking out new partners to help implement the 2018 plan.

### **Technology and Information**

Advances in technology continue to impact our daily lives in profound ways, and technology now influences many aspects of how we recreate in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The average participant today uses some type of electronic device when recreating, from wearable devices that track fitness goals to handheld units and smartphones that help us navigate wilderness trails. Recreation providers must continue to find ways to use this technology to complement, but not replace, outdoor recreation experiences.

Mobile-friendly websites and smartphone applications place a wealth of information at our fingertips, enabling recreation providers to convey a wide variety of maps, educational information and other content to participants. Providers are encouraged to develop maps and apps that promote their parks, facilities and activities and to make their content as mobile-friendly as possible.

VISIT FLORIDA (VF), the state's tourism marketing corporation and official source for travel planning promotes tourism to the Sunshine State through a variety of means, including public relations and visitor services programs. As their main goal is to "maximize the economic impact of travel and tourism to Florida," recreation suppliers should work with VF on issues of mutual interest, including promotion of travel to emerging Florida destinations.

The following recommendations are proposed to help ensure that Florida's recreation providers are better connected to promote their lands, programs and recreation opportunities.

Goal 2-4: Coordinate providers, agencies and organizations to better connect and promote lands and opportunities.

Strategies:

- 1) Recreation agencies and providers should periodically update information about their facilities and lands in FDEP's Florida Outdoor Recreation Inventory (FORI).
- 2) FDEP should continue to hold public events designed to encourage the exchange of information between recreation providers and user groups, including the promotion of SCORP and the FORI.
- 3) FDEP should continue to strengthen coordination amongst agencies and recreation providers in conjunction with SCORP planning and implementation. This will keep open lines of communication on statewide recreation issues and trends and methods of addressing them.
- 4) Recreation providers should develop web and mobile-friendly applications, interactive maps and guides and other technological aids to facilitate and encourage outdoor recreation participation.
- 5) Recreation providers should collaborate with VISIT FLORIDA to cross-promote mutual goals.

While not possible everywhere, an interconnected system of parks and open space is preferable to isolated parks in terms of preserving biodiversity and essential ecological functions. For example, large animals like the Florida panther and Florida black bear have large territories and must travel great distances to survive.

*"No single park, no matter how large and how well designed, would provide citizens with the beneficial influences of nature; instead parks need to be linked to one another and to surrounding residential neighborhoods." — Frederick Law Olmsted*

As most Floridians now live in urban areas, accessing and experiencing the outdoors depends upon the availability of nearby opportunities. Urban parks provide space for active pursuits as well as quiet areas where patrons can seek much-needed respite and solitude. For many, urban recreation also helps forge their earliest connections with natural landscapes – they are stepping stones into the great outdoors. As local governments are the main suppliers of urban recreation opportunities, they would benefit from additional resources to help them maintain existing facilities and programs and to create new ones. Programs such as the Florida Recreation Development and Assistance Program (FRDAP) and the LWCF



grant program should be continued, and should receive additional support from Congress and the state legislature. In addition, state and federal resources should be expanded to provide greater support for local land acquisition and conservation planning efforts as well.

### Florida Greenways and Trails System Plan

A well-planned trail system connects public lands, enhances recreation experiences, and provides alternative transportation between and within communities. It also advances a state's economy, tourism, health, conservation and quality of life. DRP's Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) does all of the above and more by developing its statewide vision for Florida's trail network.

*Two-thirds of Americans would like more transportation options so they have the freedom to choose how to get to their destinations (Transportation for America, 2010).*

With more than 10,000 miles of land and water trails, Florida is a premier destination to explore by foot, bicycle, horse and kayak. In 2008, the Sunshine State was awarded Best Trails State in America, and there continues to be significant progress to improve trail networks to connect cities and regions (see Chapter 3). One of OGT's new efforts to connect people with local parks and trails is a technical assistance program called Parks and Community Trails (PACT). The PACT program will help rural and small communities build new trails linking the FGTS Opportunity and Priority Corridors with local and state parks. Mapping is underway to identify these potential connections. The OGT should continue to work with non-profit organizations and all levels of government to direct resources and secure funding to develop these new trail connections.

A walkable community is one where it is "safe and easy to walk and where pedestrian activity is encouraged." Thirty-seven states, including Florida, emphasize walking in their State Highway Safety Plans; Florida also emphasizes bicycling in the 2016 safety plan. The goal of Florida's Pedestrian and Bicycle Safety Program (PBSP) is to reduce crash-related fatalities and injuries by promoting safe and effective conditions for walkers and cyclists. As Florida has one of the highest fatality rates for cyclists and pedestrians (see below), everyone from planners to retailers to user groups have roles to play to help promote safe cycling and walking opportunities.

### Infographic: **Walking and Bicycling in Florida**

Florida is one of 36 states with Vision Zero policies, which sets a target of zero traffic fatalities or serious injuries on roadways.

Florida is one of 19 states with smart growth policies that encourage both bicycle and pedestrian options.

Florida is one of 30 states that have adopted Complete Streets policies.

Florida ranks first in State Highway Safety Funding (4.3% allocated to bike/ped projects).

Florida ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> in percent of federal transportation dollars applied to bike/ped projects [3.5% (national average is 2.1%) for 2009-2012; average of \$81,035,604 annually]

Florida ranks 19<sup>th</sup> in per capita spending on bicycle/pedestrian projects.

Florida's share of commuters who walk or bike to work – 2.2% (rank: 42<sup>nd</sup>).

U.S. share of commuters who walk or bike to work – 3.4%.

Florida ranks 17<sup>th</sup> for bicycling to work (0.6% of population).

Florida ranks 47<sup>th</sup> for walking to work (1.6% of population).

Florida is the least safe state for walking (39 deaths per 10,000 daily commuting pedestrians).

Florida ranks 44<sup>th</sup> in bicycle safety for commuters (21.1 cyclist fatalities per 10,000 bicycling commuters).

In Florida, 24% of traffic fatalities are bike/ped related.

In Florida, 4.3% of all traffic fatalities are bicyclists (highest in U.S.).

Jacksonville has the highest bicyclist/pedestrian fatality rate of any major US city (50.8 fatalities per 10,000 commuters).

*Source: Alliance for Biking and Walking*

According to the Alliance for Biking and Walking, states with higher levels of bicycling and walking to work also see lower levels of diabetes, obesity and high blood pressure. Both Jacksonville and Miami have published goals to increase walking, biking and physical activity, and to decrease pedestrian and bike fatalities. Other cities, both large and small, should set similar goals.

The construction of "complete streets" is another way that transportation and city planners can help provide safe access for Florida's bicyclists, pedestrians (including children, the elderly and people with mobility impairments), public transit users and motorists. Bicycle and pedestrian advocates, along with planners and accessibility supporters have adopted the term "complete streets" because it indicates that a street is not fully complete unless it accommodates and provides safe access for all users. Complete streets policies, which ensure that sidewalks, bicycle lanes, traffic calming and safe crossings are included in all road projects, should be adopted by additional Florida cities.

In October 2017, 134 mayors from around the U.S., together with the Trust for Public Land, National Recreation and Park Association and the Urban Land Institute, launched an advocacy campaign with the goal that all Americans should live within a 10-minute walk (0.5 miles) of a high-quality park or green space. Participating Florida cities already include Boca Raton, Clearwater, Davie, Doral, Fort Myers,

Gainesville, Lakeland, Miami Gardens, Orlando, Pembroke Pines and Tallahassee. Additional cities should join in this ambitious effort where possible.

The following recommendations are proposed to better promote local parks and trails, along with improving safe connections to neighborhoods and communities.

Goal 2-5: Promote local parks and trails, and neighborhood connectivity.

Strategies:

- 1) Local governments should identify gaps in outdoor opportunities, including equal access to parks, then work to improve access and increase the number of parks, greenways and land and water trails in urban areas and other underserved communities.
- 2) State and federal resources should be expanded to provide greater support for local land acquisition and conservation planning efforts.
- 3) Local planning and recreation departments, along with the Florida Department of Transportation, should continue to incorporate walking, biking and complete street projects into transportation plans, with a focus on connecting neighborhoods and communities to parks and open spaces.
- 4) The Florida Department of Transportation, along with local planning and recreation departments, should continue to develop initiatives and educational campaigns to promote the safety of Florida's pedestrians and cyclists.

### **Priority Area 3: Economic Opportunities and Ecotourism**

*Summary: Outdoor recreation and ecotourism have a major impact on Florida's economy, which in turn, helps benefit conservation of the state's natural and historical resources.*

#### **The Economic Impact of Outdoor Recreation and Ecotourism**

Outdoor recreation is an integral part of everyday life for millions of Floridians and visitors. Given its widespread appeal, which stems from the fact that there is a tremendous variety of activities to participate in, outdoor recreation is big business for the Sunshine State. Directly and indirectly, outdoor recreation stimulates the economy through the purchase of equipment, access and user fees, accommodations and numerous other travel-related expenses.

#### **Tourism: An Economic Force**

Tourism remains Florida's number one industry, and in fact, the state has been a tourist destination for centuries. Beginning with the Spanish explorers' earliest descriptions of the lands and waters, flora and fauna, followed by those of

naturalists such as Mark Catesby, William Bartram and John James Audubon, visitors began flocking to Florida for its natural wonders and outdoor opportunities.

**Spotlight Box: Early Florida Tourism**

Florida's crystal-clear springs have long been popular as swimming and bathing locales, and many were commercialized and marketed as health destinations as early as 1831. Glass-bottom boat tours, another one of Florida's initial tourism enterprises, originated here and were operating at Silver Springs in the 1870s. Railroads brought tourists from New York and other northern states to vacation resorts in coastal cities like St. Augustine and West Palm Beach in the 1890s.

Automobile and RV camping in Florida took off with the construction of the Dixie Highway to Miami in 1915, prompting the formation of the "Tin Can Tourists of the World" (TCT) organization in 1919 at De Soto Park in Tampa. The TCT advocated for clean, safe campgrounds for its growing membership, and the influx of car tourists helped fuel development of better roads in Florida. This in turn gave rise to new roadside attractions and other service industries such as restaurant and visitor travel centers.

According to VIST FLORIDA, the Sunshine State's tourism rates have continued to climb since the recession of 2008-2009, with more than 112 million visitors in 2016. Outdoor recreation is a major component of the state's tourism market, and in 2016, recreation and/or leisure was the primary reason for 89 percent of domestic visits and 74 percent of international visits.

Further reinforcing the strong ties between recreation and tourism are the results from multiple economic impact studies. While relaxing and enjoying Florida's outstanding natural and cultural resources, visitors are also making sizable contributions to the state's economy. Direct tourism spending in Florida for 2015 was estimated at \$108.8 billion by VISIT FLORIDA.

According to a 2017 study by the Outdoor Industry Association, Florida ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> behind California in the amount of consumer spending on major resource-based outdoor recreation activities, which include camping, fishing, hunting, wildlife viewing, motorcycling, off-roading, trail sports, water sports and wheel sports (e.g. bicycling).

- \$58.6 billion in annual consumer spending
- 485,000 direct jobs
- \$17.9 billion in wages and salaries
- \$3.5 billion in state and local tax revenue

In 2016-2017, an even broader economic impact study was commissioned by FDEP as part of the 2013 SCORP's recommendations. This study looked at the economic impacts associated with 35 resource-based and user-oriented outdoor recreation activities in Florida. The results indicated these activities (the same ones included in the 2018 SCORP's participation study) generated an estimated \$145 billion in total economic output, with 1.2 million jobs supported. Statewide, regional, and county-level assessments for each recreation activity can be found in Appendix L. The full economic report is posted on FDEP's SCORP web page. The results of this and other economic impact studies regarding outdoor recreation will be presented to key decision makers, and will also be disseminated via websites, social media, conferences and special events.

**Spotlight Box: Outdoor Recreation in Florida: 2016-2017 Economic Impacts**

- \$145 billion in total economic output
- \$70 billion in visitor spending
- \$20 billion in output generated by resident spending
- 1.2 million jobs supported
- \$60 billion in spending occurred in parks and on other public lands
- \$10 billion in tax revenue

**Ecotourism**

Nature-based tourism and ecotourism, used interchangeably here, continue to be integral components of Florida's tourism industry. Some of the most popular activities that depend upon our natural resources and attractions include hunting, fishing, boating, paddling, hiking, camping, heritage tourism, nature study and wildlife viewing. Collectively, these activities have a huge impact, contributing billions to the state's economy.

- |                      |                |                      |               |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------------|---------------|
| • Boating            | \$10.4 billion | • Wildlife Viewing   | \$4.2 billion |
| • Saltwater Fishing  | \$7.6 billion  | • Nature Study       | \$4.0 billion |
| • Freshwater Fishing | \$1.7 billion  | • Paddling           | \$2.9 billion |
| • Hiking             | \$6.6 billion  | • Tent Camping       | \$2.2 billion |
| • Hunting            | \$1.6 billion  | • RV/Trailer Camping | \$2.0 billion |
| • Heritage Tourism   | \$4.5 billion  |                      |               |

*Sources: The Balmoral Group, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, National Marine Fisheries Service, National Marine Manufacturers Association and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.*

Florida's state park system continues to play an integral role in encouraging nature-based tourism as well. In 2016-2017, state park visitation rose to more than 32 million people, which generated more than \$3 billion in direct economic impact and supported 48,622 jobs.

Wildlife festivals are also an important part of the nature-based tourism equation. These festivals offer field trips and educational seminars, and disseminate information about viewing sites in the surrounding area. Numerous festivals are held around the state, which benefit local economies. For example, the Space Coast Birding and Wildlife Festival (Florida's largest event of this type, now in its 20<sup>th</sup> year) attracts attendees from around the world, and contributes nearly \$1 million annually to Brevard County alone. Existing and new wildlife festivals should continue to be widely promoted.

The FWC's Great Florida Birding and Wildlife Trail (GFBWT - see Chapter 3), a statewide ecotourism program, has numerous "clusters" of sites within each of its four regional guidebooks. Clusters encourage visitors to explore multiple locations while they are in the area, thereby extending their stay and their economic impact. The GFBWT's network of sites includes more than 500 locations, with at least one viewing site in nearly every county. In 2013, additional sites were added within each of Florida's Rural Areas of Opportunity (RAOs - see Chapter 2) specifically to promote travel to rural counties. Communities should take advantage of opportunities to market local GFBWT sites to attract additional visitors.

Spotlight Box: **Ecotourism**

"Ecotourism, technically speaking, is a specific type of nature-based tourism. According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), ecotourism is "environmentally responsible travel to natural areas to enjoy and appreciate nature." It is distinguished from other forms of tourism (including many forms of nature-based tourism) by its emphasis on conservation, sustainability, education, traveler responsibility and active community participation.

Ecotourism promotes low-impact visitor behavior, support for local conservation efforts and sensitivity towards and appreciation for biodiversity and local cultures. The Florida Society for Ethical Ecotourism (Florida SEE), a non-profit organization, certifies tour providers who adhere to specific guidelines and are "committed to using best practices for ecological sustainability, natural area management and quality ecotourism experiences." Tour operators should seek certification and work towards making their operations as sustainable as possible.

The Florida Forest Service's Trailwalker Program uses a reward-based system with multiple achievement levels encouraging hikers to visit 28 participating state forests and to hike as many miles as possible. The FDEP's Operation Recreation GeoTour and Kids GeoTour programs also uses rewards to encourage geocachers to visit state parks. More than 70 Florida state parks participate in these programs, and have at least one cache to find inside their park. Other agencies and providers should create reward-based systems as a means of promoting their lands and waters.

Heritage tourism, which includes visiting historical, cultural and archaeological sites, is vitally important to the state as well, contributing more than \$4.5 billion to Florida's economy in 2016 (see Appendix L). This outdoor recreation activity is the sixth most popular among residents and visitors and the eighth highest in spending according to FDEP's recent economic impact study. The Division of Historical Resources (DHR) has 12 online, heritage trail guidebooks to help travelers locate historical and archaeological sites of interest. These include:

- Black Heritage Trail
- British Heritage Trail
- Civil War Heritage Trail
- Cuban Heritage Trail
- Florida Historic Golf Trail
- French Heritage Trail
- Jewish Heritage Trail
- Native American Heritage Trail
- Seminole Wars Heritage Trail
- Spanish Colonial Heritage Trail
- Women's Heritage Trail
- World War II Heritage Trail

The Florida Panhandle Shipwreck Trail is another tourism opportunity created by the DHR, the Florida Public Archaeology Network, waterfront communities and diving-related enterprises in Northwest Florida. SCUBA divers can obtain an official "passport" from dive shops, charter boat operations and other partners, motivating them to visit all 12 sites on this underwater trail. Other shipwreck trails for divers and snorkelers are located within the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Biscayne National Park. These and other heritage tourism trails should continue to be widely promoted and updated periodically, as needed.

City and county parks and other local attractions also drive tourism in Florida's communities. Parks provide sites for sports tournaments, special events and festivals, and larger parks that have museums, memorials, botanical gardens, zoos and historical/cultural sites can serve as attractions in their own right. Local governments should promote clusters of nearby parks and sites so that visitors will stay in an area longer and enjoy additional points of interest.

Land management agencies and other outdoor recreation providers should be cognizant of the important role they play in Florida's efforts to market recreation opportunities to domestic and international travelers. Increased collaboration with Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) and the hospitality industry is encouraged to better promote ecotourism and heritage tourism sites.

Where possible, agencies should prioritize funding towards Florida's rural areas to promote tourism opportunities and to help diversify their economies. The Suwannee River Basin Outdoor Recreation Compact (SWBORC) is a good example of collaboration in this regard. Using a model championed by the Florida League of Cities, SWBORC participants in Florida's North Central RAO worked with appropriate agencies such as FDEP's Office of Greenways and Trails to develop and implement a region-wide, recreation and tourism promotion and marketing program. The goal of this program is to enhance and improve the greenways, trails, and related infrastructure in their communities to attract economic development and tourism.

As funding is a never-ending challenge for public recreation providers, finding ways to do more with less is par for the course, so to speak. Park and recreation departments, agencies, and other providers should continue to cultivate innovative partnerships with businesses and organizations fund outdoor opportunities (see priority area one for additional suggestions).

Collaborating with the outdoor recreation industry, including manufacturers, retailers and tour providers is another means of promoting economic opportunities and ecotourism in Florida. The Florida Forest Service works with representatives of the OHV community to promote responsible riding on public and private lands. The FWC continues to partner with optics retailers to provide free “loaner” binoculars and scopes for daily use at selected wildlife viewing sites around the state. Public providers should cultivate similar partnerships to make loaner equipment available to the public at reduced cost or at no charge. This would allow people to test equipment before they buy, and helps introduce people to new activities.

#### **Florida Fast Fact**

Florida holds multiple “Capital of the World” titles linked to outdoor recreation, including Fishing, Golf and Theme Park. Ocala/Marion County is marketed as the Horse Capital of the World, and Key Largo is considered the Diving Capital of the World.

Local parks and trails have considerable economic value to homeowners and businesses as well. One study found that homes located in neighborhoods with above-average levels of walkability are worth \$4,000 - \$34,000 over houses in neighborhoods with just average levels of walkability.<sup>5</sup> The National Association of Homebuilders reports that trails are the most desired community amenity that homeowners seek when buying a home. Clearly, neighborhood trails are important, popular and are good investments.

<sup>5</sup> Cortright, Joe. 2009. How Walkability Raises Home Values in U.S. Cities. CEOs for Cities.

Lastly, given Florida’s substantial number of visitors and seasonal residents, recreation planners should take into account the tremendous demands placed on resources and facilities, particularly in heavily populated regions, where levels of service are typically lower. For an assessment of demand regarding each outdoor activity, please see the recreation demand index in Appendix K.

The following strategies will help recreation providers and stakeholders educate the public as to the benefits of outdoor recreation and ecotourism to Florida’s economy.



Goal 3-1: Promote the economic benefits of outdoor recreation and ecotourism in Florida.

Strategies:

- 1) State and local governments, tourism organizations, and recreation providers should promote the findings of economic impact studies that highlight the importance of outdoor recreation and tourism to Florida's economy.
- 2) State and federal conservation agencies should encourage greater collaboration and interaction with the outdoor recreation industry.
- 3) Agencies should prioritize planning, funding resources, and opportunities towards Rural Areas of Opportunity to enable diversification of their economies and to promote outdoor recreation on their public lands.
- 4) Agencies and recreation providers should increase marketing coordination, and should engage destination marketing organizations, regional planning councils, and the hospitality industry to stimulate job development in outdoor recreation and to foster unique Florida ecotourism and heritage tourism opportunities.
- 5) Agencies should partner with public and private entities to identify and develop funding sources for outdoor recreation opportunities.

#### **Priority Area 4: Resource Management and Stewardship**

*Summary: Sound resource management policies and continued stewardship of Florida's natural resources are required to maintain public and private lands for both conservation and recreation purposes.*

Florida is blessed with an abundance of natural, historical and cultural resources, which must be protected for future generations to enjoy. Indeed, the most basic elements in Florida's outdoor recreation system are public and private lands and waters upon which to recreate. Vast acreages of land and water are currently available, thanks to Florida's long history of government and private sector acquisition programs, along with good stewardship of our natural resources.

*"Florida's natural lands are the state's greatest economic asset." – 1000 Friends of Florida*

## **Acquisition, Conservation and Restoration**

Continued funding to acquire and manage land, and to secure conservation easements to preserve the state's natural and cultural heritage is crucial to Florida's future. One such effort is being undertaken by a non-profit organization known as the Florida Wildlife Corridor, which champions the public and partner support needed to permanently connect, protect and restore the Florida Wildlife Corridor – a statewide network of lands and waters that benefits wildlife and people. Providers, organizations and the public should support the Florida Wildlife Corridor's efforts, and similar efforts at the local level to protect open space should be promoted as well.

### **Spotlight Box: Florida Wildlife Corridor**

In both 2012 and in 2015, Florida Wildlife Corridor staff trekked 1,000 miles across the state to demonstrate the need and opportunity to connect wild places. One of the organization's goals is to accelerate the rate of conservation in Florida by 10% annually to protect 300,000 acres within the Corridor network by the end of 2020. The Corridor includes 9.5 million acres that are already protected, and 6.3 million acres that presently do not have conservation status.

Insert Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition Map - must use this credit line with map: *Original painting by Mike Reagan; designed by Carlton Ward Jr., Tom Hctor, Richard Hilsenbeck, Mallory Lykes Dimmitt and Joe Guthrie.*

Opportunities to acquire and restore recreation and conservation land come in many forms. Abandoned golf courses, for example, have excellent potential for local governments and non-profit organizations to conserve wildlife habitat, protect water quality, restore ecological functions and to create new recreational facilities.

Spotlight Box: **Repurposed Land for Conservation and Recreation**

Between Sarasota and Fort Myers lies the Wildflower Preserve, an 80-acre former golf course owned by the Lemon Bay Conservancy (LBC). The LBC purchased the overgrown, abandoned course following the 2008 recession and proceeded to restore the upland habitats and wetlands, and to establish four loop trails. The LBC uses volunteers and community groups to manage the property; projects include invasive species control, water quality monitoring, wildlife research and creating a butterfly and wildflower meadow. Guided nature walks are offered seasonally and during special events.

Miami's Underline, a proposed 10-mile linear park, urban trail and art destination set to break ground in 2018, will transform underutilized land below Miami's Metrorail into a world-class trail. As with New York City's High Line and Atlanta's Beltline, the Underline reclaims abandoned infrastructure and "adapts it into much-needed park space for city dwellers" to exercise and recreate. Once completed, this project will "connect neighborhoods, improve pedestrian and bicyclist safety, create open space, restore natural habitats and create a mobility corridor that integrates transit, car, biking and walking. The Underline also uses green infrastructure to manage storm water, improves urban air quality, mitigates heat and promotes biodiversity." The Underline will connect to a future 250-mile trail network as well.

Nathan Benderson Park in Sarasota provides another example of repurposing land for recreation. Once a borrow pit used for road construction fill, the land now hosts a 600-acre park with year-round public access and a 400-acre lake. The park began hosting regatta competitions in 2009 and is now a world-class rowing, training and recreational facility complete with a 3.5-mile running/biking trail, paddling opportunities and picnic areas.

The following recommendations are proposed to ensure the conservation and protection of Florida's invaluable resources.

Goal 4-1: Encourage the conservation and protection of Florida's natural, historical and cultural resources.

Strategies:

1) State and local funding should be made available to maintain and acquire land or secure conservation easements to preserve the state's natural and cultural heritage, conduct environmental restoration, and to protect the state's water resources and supply.

2) Public schools in Florida, in partnership with the Department of Education, should continue to integrate environmental education throughout their curricula to increase awareness of the benefits of and threats to Florida's natural systems, and to foster the next generation of outdoor enthusiasts and outdoor recreation professionals.

3) Agencies and local governments should work to reduce the amount of nutrients and pollution that enters Florida's waters through programs that teach citizens about where pollutants come from, and what they personally can do to help.

4) Agencies and recreation providers should maximize the use of volunteers to energize their advocacy and stewardship programs, and should coordinate the distribution of information regarding volunteer opportunities to potential volunteer groups.

## **Environmental Education**

Environmental education increases public awareness and knowledge about important issues and emphasizes critical thinking skills so that participants may make informed decisions to solve challenging problems. All age groups may benefit, from young children to senior citizens, and lifelong learning is encouraged.

Topics associated with environmental education are quite broad and include such things as climate change, sea level rise, marine debris monitoring, combating invasive species, urban ecology, sustainability practices, and environmental justice issues. Many of these issues impact outdoor recreation as well.

While schools are the ideal place to focus environmental education efforts, not all school systems can devote adequate time and resources for environmental education (especially for field trips), given competing priorities and budget constraints. Therefore, school boards and recreation providers must devise additional methods to connect youth to the outdoors and encourage a sense of stewardship.

Current federal environmental education initiatives include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's *Let's Go Outside!* program, the U.S. Forest Service's Junior Forest

Ranger and Junior Explorer programs, the National Park Service's Junior Ranger and Young Scientist Programs, and the *Hands on the Land (HOL)* network, a "national network of field classrooms and agency resources" that connects students, teachers, parents and volunteers with public lands and waterways from Alaska to Florida. The *HOL* network is a collaboration of five federal agencies, the National Environmental Education Foundation, schools and private sector partners which use hands-on experiences to bring classroom learning to life. Additional funding should be made available to expand the number of schools enrolled in these programs.

State agency-sponsored environmental education initiatives include FDEP's Junior Ranger Program and Learning in Florida's Environment (LIFE) program, the FWC's Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network (FYCCN), the Get Outdoors Florida! coalition and 4-H programs. Various private and non-profit environmental education programs also exist around the state, such as the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center in Walton County, which serves 4<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> graders from a five-county area, and the Environmental Learning Center in Indian River County, which engages 1<sup>st</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> graders through school field trips. The League of Environmental Educators in Florida (LEEF) website offers resources for educators like Eco-Cognizant's *Schoolyard Nature Study* activity guide and the Florida Wildflower Foundation's *Wild About Wildflowers!* classroom guide.

Time away from school is similarly influential on a child's development, and programs which offer enriching outdoor activities to fill this time are beneficial. For example, the FWC's FYCCN offers summer camps throughout the state, each with numerous conservation-centered recreation activities to choose from. The Hillsborough County Parks and Recreation Department partners with the FYCCN to provide saltwater fishing camps for kids each summer. Other park and recreation departments should partner with the FWC to serve additional youth.

Building skills and relationships with nature through a convenient, close-to-home setting is a good approach to getting youth outdoors. It is important that environmental education efforts are not solely focused on youth, however, as family-centered programming will help foster a shared appreciation amongst generations for stewardship of our natural resources. The University of Florida's Florida Master Naturalist Program and the FWC's *Wings Over Florida* bird and butterfly identification program are but two examples that help fill this need; development of similar programs is encouraged.

## **Stewardship and Advocacy**

Taking part in recreation activities and enjoyment of natural resources is only one link in reconnecting people to the outdoors. A strong sense of stewardship, volunteerism and advocacy for both conservation and recreation opportunities brings the participant full circle as they not only enjoy our parks and wild places, but help protect them for future generations. Non-profit organizations, citizen support organizations and user groups are some of the strongest advocates for

recreation and conservation, and given sufficient tools and information, they can provide tremendous help in securing support and financial resources.

For example, the Timucuan Parks Foundation (TPF), a Jacksonville-based non-profit organization, works to preserve, promote and protect 23 federal, state and local parks in Duval County. The TPF accomplishes these tasks via fundraising, marketing and advocacy. Among the TPF's goals are fostering a stewardship ethic for the parks, supporting park partners (National Park Service, Florida Park Service and the City of Jacksonville's Department of Parks, Recreation and Community Services), and interpreting the region's unique story.

Florida Fast Fact: Approximately 30 percent of Florida's land area is managed as conservation land.

Volunteer support is another critical resource for local recreation departments and state and federal agencies. Volunteer programs help improve natural areas while connecting people with the resources, and provide a significant financial boost to recreation programs as well.

For example, in Fiscal Year 2016-2017, volunteers for the Florida Forest Service contributed 145,372 hours in 2016-2017 towards the following categories: recreation/visitor services, emergency incident response, trail building and maintenance, facility maintenance and miscellaneous land activities. Public and private recreation suppliers should continue to provide rewarding and enjoyable experiences to recruit and retain dedicated volunteers, an invaluable asset when budgets are lean.

**Spotlight Box: Volunteers Make a Difference**

The 197 volunteers at Circle B Bar Preserve in Polk County contributed 12,760 hours in 2016 by removing exotic plants, staffing the information desk at the nature center, narrating tram tours, helping at educational events for local school children, growing and planting native vegetation for habitat restoration and by participating in wildlife monitoring efforts at the preserve and other sites within the county's 26,000-acre network of environmental preserves.

## **Resource Management**

Managing natural and cultural resources requires considerable staff time and funding for both public and private providers of outdoor recreation. Prescribed burning, exotic plant removal, wildlife monitoring, trail building and trail maintenance, to name but a few examples, are major responsibilities for Florida's land-managing agencies, recreation departments and conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy.

Land management agencies should continue to set aggressive targets for invasive species removal, prescribed fire management, hydrological restoration and other resource improvement activities. In 2015-16, Florida State Parks broke the record for the total number of prescribed fires in a single year and in 2016-2017, Florida State Parks set new records for acres of invasive plants treated and the most acres burned in one prescribed fire.

Florida's cultural and historical resources span more than 14,000 years, and once lost, are difficult (if not impossible) to replace. State agencies and other organizations should continue to work with the Division of Historical Resources to ensure that their cultural and historical resources are safely protected to the degree possible; these resources must also be carefully inventoried and properly recorded in the Florida Master Site File as well.

Goal 4-2: Support natural, historical and cultural resource management to ensure high quality outdoor recreation experiences for Florida's residents and visitors.

Strategies:

- 1) Agencies and recreation providers should increase the amount of conservation land acreage where invasive species removal, prescribed fire management and hydrological restoration occurs.
- 2) Public agencies and private organizations should continue restoration and rehabilitation efforts for all water bodies, while also highlighting the importance of clean water to outdoor recreation and tourism in Florida.
- 3) Agencies and planning organizations in coastal areas should take steps to determine how dynamic coastal conditions will affect their natural, historic and cultural resources and plan accordingly.

## **Aquatic Resources**

Much of Florida's recreation revolves around water, and preserving this essential resource is crucial to the state's recreation system, not to mention our personal health and the sustainability of our communities. Maintaining freshwater and saltwater resources in a swimmable, fishable condition requires a complex, science-based system of regulatory and enforcement programs, as well as citizen efforts and personal responsibility, to ensure their protection and quality.

Florida's springs, lakes, rivers and lagoons are immensely popular resources, yet they continue to be threatened by nutrient pollution from excess fertilizer use, septic systems and storm water runoff. Community-based programs which combine education and stewardship opportunities along with regulation and enforcement are necessary to ensure Florida's waters remain healthy and available for public

enjoyment. The City of Tallahassee's Think About Personal Pollution (TAPP) campaign is a good example that provides numerous ways for residents to protect water quality, starting with their own yards.

#### **Spotlight Box: Aquatic Restoration**

Although Florida's hydrology was substantially altered in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries by dredging, canal building and development of wetlands, ongoing restoration projects are repairing some of the damage. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Project (CERP, see Chapter 3), the world's largest environmental restoration project, aims to restore this "river of grass" and return the flow of water to Florida Bay. Improved water quality for Lake Okeechobee and the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Rivers are also part of CERP. The Kissimmee River Restoration Project, the largest of its type attempted to date, will restore more than 40 square miles of the river's floodplain ecosystem, nearly 20,000 acres of wetlands, and 44 miles of historic river channel by 2020. Once completed, these efforts will substantially improve outdoor recreation opportunities including fishing, boating and wildlife viewing in south Florida.

Access to Florida's waters faces increased pressure from shoreline development as both our population and visitation continues to grow. A combined effort by federal, state and local governments is necessary to secure adequate funding for land acquisition, which in turn provides much of the needed recreational access to waters. While the regional analysis of demand and need in this plan is not intended to identify local needs, it is evident that additional infrastructure such as boat ramps, canoe launches, docks, catwalks and piers, as well as support facilities such as parking areas and restrooms, will be required to keep pace with the expected increase in visitation.

#### **Coastal Planning and Sea Level Rise**

Coastal conditions are ever-changing in Florida. Barrier islands, for example, continually gain and lose sand along their beaches, and over time, an island's size and shape will shift. There is increasing evidence, however, that the state's coastal communities will see more change in the future. Monitoring gauges stationed around Florida's coasts are documenting slowly rising ocean levels, more than one-third inch annually. Some coastal cities such as Miami are already experiencing flooding impacts unrelated to storm events. Each community and recreation provider needs to perform its own vulnerability assessment, and then develop and implement policies that will best prepare and protect their resources and facilities.

Photo caption: As concerns mount regarding sea level rise, it is important for coastal communities to draft appropriate measures to protect their natural, historic and cultural resources.



## **Conclusion**

As with previous SCORPs, Florida has set ambitious goals for its 2018-2023 plan. Building upon its long history of outdoor recreation planning, this SCORP will enable recreation providers to build a more robust, balanced and equitable outdoor recreation system for the Sunshine State.

To help implement the plan, FDEP's Office of Park Planning will reach out to recreation providers at all levels, and will create a new web page dedicated to showcasing how SCORP's recommendations are being addressed. Many challenges remain, and more work needs to be done to tackle the recreation-related issues identified in the 2018 plan, including improving park equity and access for all; securing funding for programs, maintenance and acquisition needs; and safeguarding our natural, cultural and historic resources for future generations.

Outdoor recreation in Florida deserves to be recognized for its contributions to our quality of life and for the substantial economic engine that it is. Florida's recreation providers continue to demonstrate that quality parks, trails and green space are necessities rather than luxuries. The ideal outdoor recreation system that Florida envisions, however, cannot be achieved until everyone has access to a wide variety of outdoor opportunities close to home. Florida's outdoor recreation professionals stand ready to meet this challenge and to help implement the 2018 SCORP.

Photo caption: "Leave all the afternoon for exercise and recreation, which are as necessary as reading. I will rather say more necessary because health is worth more than learning." - Thomas Jefferson