

Executive Summary

The primary support and focus for wildlife conservation and management within the United States historically has come from state hunting and fishing interests and Federal Assistance programs for game species under the Pittman–Robertson, Dingle–Johnson, and Wallop–Breau Acts. Additionally, the Endangered Species Act has provided support to recover federally threatened and endangered species. Although these programs have been successful, the majority of wildlife species have unmet conservation needs and many are at risk of becoming imperiled. Waiting until a species is on the verge of extinction and then trying to recover it is costly and results in the inevitable loss of some species. To encourage a new conservation paradigm and work towards managing species before they become imperiled, the U. S. Congress created the State Wildlife Grants Program. This program is dedicated to a holistic approach that includes all species, but is centered on conservation of species that have not fallen under historical efforts. As a requirement of participating in the State Wildlife Grants Program, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has joined the other 55 states, territories, and district by committing to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (Strategy) for the state.

To meet the intent of the State Wildlife Grants Program, the FWC has created Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative (Initiative). The goal of the Initiative is to develop a strategic vision for conserving all of Florida’s wildlife. The three main objectives of the Initiative are: (1) to create partnerships for wildlife conservation across the State of Florida; (2) to support partnership building and use of the Strategy by making funding available through Florida’s State Wildlife Grants Program; and (3) to develop and implement Florida’s Strategy. Thousands of experts and stakeholders have participated and provided input to meet these objectives. These partners, including representatives from other state and federal agencies, organizations, businesses, and individuals, have been integral throughout the Strategy development process.

As discussions and work have progressed on planning, development, and implementation of Florida’s Wildlife Legacy Initiative, several major premises have been employed and incorporated throughout the Strategy:

- The goal of Florida’s Strategy is to build a blueprint and action plan for conserving the vast array of wildlife that makes Florida such a unique place to live and visit. This blueprint should be compatible with human needs and not preclude recreational or other use of wildlife resources and landscapes.
- Florida already has developed and implemented significant wildlife resource management tools and programs. The Strategy has been designed to build upon these efforts in a cumulative manner, identify gaps and further needs, and create a comprehensive vision for coordinating efforts across the state.

- Florida's Strategy uses a habitat category approach to arrange wildlife species and habitats, and the conservation threats and actions needed to conserve them, into meaningful and manageable categories. By taking actions that sustain the health and integrity of the habitat categories, the broad array of wildlife that lives within each will be conserved and maintained.
- The Strategy encompasses the entire state and therefore is too broad for any one individual, group, or agency to develop and implement. Coordination and cooperation among federal and state agencies, local governments, Native American tribes, non-governmental organizations, private entities, and individuals is essential.
- A non-regulatory approach is paramount to create partnerships for implementation of actions needed to conserve wildlife. The Strategy focuses on voluntary and cooperative efforts providing a starting point to develop non-regulatory mechanisms. The Strategy is not regulatory in nature and is not intended to be used in a regulatory manner.
- Meeting the needs of wildlife will mean a healthier environment for future generations of Floridians. Florida faces a huge challenge to meet the needs of an expanding human population while conserving wildlife resources.
- Education has played a vital role in conservation of Florida's wildlife and other natural resources. Support for conservation education is needed to promote awareness, responsible action and behavior.
- The Strategy should clearly meet or exceed the eight elements required under the State Wildlife Grants Program and federal guidance.

The Strategy is organized in chapters, which follow a progression of thought and content development. The Introduction, Approach, and State of the State form the beginning section of the Strategy. The Introduction briefly outlines what the effort is and provides context for how it has been undertaken in Florida. The Approach summarizes the processes that were carried out in order to develop the Strategy, including organizational structure and methods specific to each Strategy requirement. The State of the State provides a discussion of Florida's natural resources, including economics, wildlife species, and conservation resources.

Florida's Strategic Vision forms the central section of the Strategy and synthesizes a strategic view for wildlife conservation at the statewide-level. Priority conservation issues are addressed in this chapter, including species, habitats, threats, actions, data gaps, monitoring tools, and conservation challenges. Species form the basis for Florida's entire endeavor and focus should continually be placed back upon them as the Strategy is implemented and reviewed. Several habitats have been highlighted for their importance and generally were associated with coastal, wetland, upland pine, reef, and submerged aquatic vegetation areas. Major statewide threats identified include: habitat loss and fragmentation, degradation of water resources, incompatible fire management, invasive plants and animals, and management of the physical environment (e.g., dams, shoreline hardening, dredging, etc.). Major statewide actions developed to abate these threats include: development of incentive-based programs for conservation, acquisition of important lands

and waters, coordination of conservation efforts, public education, and development of a cooperative conservation effort. Priority data gaps to be filled focus on improved habitat mapping capability, filling species information needs, improving understanding and methodology for marine systems, and initiation of more efforts related to genetic diversity issues. Monitoring and adaptive management are focused on species, habitat, threat, and overall Strategy levels and will be critical to documenting success and refining efforts. Lastly, key conservation challenges such as partnership development, information management, and public awareness must be met and overcome for efforts to be successful.

The chapters on Species of Greatest Conservation Need (SGCN), Habitats, and Multiple Habitat Threats and Conservation Actions form the final and most extensive section of the Strategy. The SGCN chapter identifies 974 species of interest and lists their status and trends. The Habitats chapter describes 45 terrestrial, freshwater, and marine habitat categories that comprise the state of Florida. These habitat category descriptions include information on their status and trends, associated SGCN, related threats, and conservation measures needed. Additionally, the chapter Multiple Habitat Threats and Conservation Actions lists threats that apply to greater than five habitats and the suite of actions to abate each threat. Last, the Strategy contains Acknowledgements, References/Literature Cited, a Glossary of Acronyms, a Glossary of Terms, and four Appendices.

Florida's Strategy is a strategic vision of the integrated conservation efforts needed to sustain the broad array of wildlife in the state. More detailed operation-level plans will be needed to complete many of the actions identified in the Strategy. Such plans should be developed by the appropriate entities whose interest, authority, or responsibility encompass each action. Although the Strategy is not intended to be a work or management plan for the FWC or any other organization, support provided by the State Wildlife Grants Program will enable coordination and implementation of many projects through Florida's Wildlife Legacy Initiative. The Strategy is a work in progress that will continually be updated, revised, and improved based on the input and deliberations of all those interested in wildlife conservation. Working together, Floridians can shape a future that is filled with the wonderful wildlife resources that define this great state and provide for the enjoyment, recreation, sustenance, and livelihood of its citizens and visitors.