



Photo by Carlton Ward Jr.

## Executive Summary

The Cooperative Conservation Blueprint (Blueprint) is a multi-partner strategic conservation process developed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) and partners in 2006. The Blueprint is dedicated to the creation and use of voluntary and non-regulatory conservation incentives that can be applied to a comprehensive vision of wildlife habitat and connectivity priorities across Florida. The Blueprint Regional Pilot Project (Pilot) was instituted in 2010 to focus application of incentives-based conservation landscape planning in south central and southwest Florida. The homogeneity of the landscape, high level of on-going conservation activities in the region and large tracts of open and working lands made this geographic area particularly useful for on the ground application of the Blueprint process.

This document describes strategies for implementing landscape conservation that have evolved from the work performed during the Pilot. These strategies are:

- ❖ Promote landscape connectivity by identifying wildlife corridors, and by utilizing and building on conservation planning and the best available natural resource data;
- ❖ Focus on interagency coordination and buy-in to gain consensus on, and implement, conservation priorities;
- ❖ Pursue landowner involvement and enlist extensive stakeholder involvement throughout the process;
- ❖ Expand funding opportunities through the application and creation of new and existing voluntary conservation incentives; and
- ❖ Utilize the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) sponsored Peninsular Florida Landscape Conservation Cooperative (PFLCC) as a venue to continue Blueprint coordination and implementation.

The Pilot used the best possible data to provide science support for the process. Extensive research and data development through collaboration have provided the foundation for conservation planning and mapping of priority wildlife corridors, landscapes and natural communities in the region. An extensive network of collaborators was formed, including geographically based working committees, the Blueprint Landowner Assistance Group (AG) and multiple agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), all of which participated in Blueprint team activities. Throughout this process Blueprint staff engaged with a large and diverse array of stakeholders.

Current limitations on conservation funding for fee simple and easement acquisition at the state, federal and local levels have been a driver for pursuing alternative conservation funding. In response, the Pilot cultivated two new conservation incentive funding proposals in the development of the FWC Gopher Tortoise payment for ecosystem services (PES) program, and The Florida Watershed Fund. These proposals are currently being vetted by appropriate agencies, members of the private sector, landowners and others.

The network of project collaborators continues to have a great interest in the Blueprint work at both the Pilot and statewide level. Blueprint products are now being used by many natural resource managers as a tool for more effective and efficient conservation planning. Specifically, work continues with the Natural Resources Conservation Service, USFWS and others to integrate Blueprint Pilot findings into ongoing support for the efforts regarding the three refuge areas integral to the Greater Everglades Partnership Initiative. Furthermore, there is an opportunity for the Pilot and its partners to serve as a model for conservation planning (throughout the State of Florida) for the Peninsular Florida Landscape Conservation Cooperative. The Blueprint team has worked with the PFLCC since its inception, and several members continue to serve on the PFLCC steering committee.



## Proposed Blueprint Implementation Benchmarks

This map reflects the three Blueprint subcommittees' draft recommendations for wildlife corridors in the region. The primary focus was on regional connectivity and to recommend the most feasible routes between existing public and private conservation lands in southwest Florida. The subcommittees based their specific recommendations for wildlife corridors on the opportunities and obstacles for connectivity, as well as stakeholder considerations.



Approximate Acres Identified in Blueprint Subcommittee Corridors | 670,000

Year	2025	2035	2045
<b>Proposed Blueprint Goal Acres Conserved</b>	(25%) 165,000	(50%) 335,000	(75%) 500,000



Photo by Carlton Ward Jr.

## Priority Strategic Opportunity Areas

Through the work of the Blueprint in the Pilot region, the following is an initial identification of potential strategic opportunity areas that stand out for near future conservation efforts. It is provided as both a starting point and example for future discussion, with the goal that such identification will continue during follow-up work through the Blueprint or related projects and programs. Provided in no particular order of priority:

- ❖ Proposed Everglades Headwaters Refuge site located across US 27 in southeastern Polk County
- ❖ Corridor crossings across the Caloosahatchee River and especially the Caloosahatchee Ecoscape Florida Forever Project
- ❖ Peace River-Green Swamp corridor connector and Interstate 4 crossing in northern Polk County
- ❖ US 27 corridor crossing between Smoak Ranch and Archbold Biological Station in southern Highlands County
- ❖ Ecological connectivity between Kissimmee Prairie State Preserve and Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area and the conservation lands along the upper St. Johns River in Osceola and Okeechobee counties
- ❖ Ranchlands within corridors between Babcock Ranch, Bright Hour conservation easement and the Fisheating Creek Wetland Reserve Program easements in Charlotte, Desoto, and Highlands counties
- ❖ Areas of parcel fragmentation in corridors between Babcock Ranch-Peace River-Myakka conservation lands primarily in Desoto County
- ❖ Various Florida Forever projects adjacent to Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest in Hendry and Collier counties
- ❖ Lands between Fisheating Creek Wetland Reserve Program easements and Highlands Hammock State Park in Highlands County

## Summary of Potential Blueprint Partnering and Project Opportunities

Strategy	Objective / Action	Key Partners
<b>Promote and Identify Connectivity</b>	Prioritize potential parcels for acquisition; optimize strategic landscape connectivity	USFWS, FDOT, FDEP, WMD
	Identify overlap of Blueprint and Florida Greenways and Trails System plan priorities	FDEP OGT
	Promote education and outreach in support of "functionally connected landscapes"	FDEP OGT , NGO's
	Create overlays comparing transportation and Blueprint priority areas	FDOT, RPCs
	Encourage application of Blueprint process to FCP areas throughout the state	FDOT, RPCs
	Continue to identify strategic areas based on threat of development	Local government, FDEP, RPCs, NGO's
	Focus on corridor "bottlenecks" critical to connectivity	Local government, FDEP
<b>Pursue Landowner and Stakeholder Involvement</b>	Vet/ refine Pilot corridors and identify potential near term strategic protection opportunities based on existing conservation programs and landowner interest	Landowners, NRCS, DACS, CTF, WMDs, FDEP, USFWS, FWC, NGO's
	Explore additional conservation incentives discussion and partner participation in workshop format	Landowners, CTF, DACS
<b>Build Interagency Coordination and Buy-In</b>	Integrate Blueprint priority area value into programmatic ranking	USDA, NRCS, WRP, FDEP
	Promote consistency of Regional CLIP and Pilot corridors with refuge planning	USFWS Refuge Proposals
	Collaborate to establish interagency consensus for conservation priorities and strategic acquisition goals	USFWS Refuge Proposals, WRP, FDEP, WMDs, USFWS PFLCC
	Advocate for protecting priorities through incentives-based program support	USFWS PFLCC
	Enhance coordination to address multi-agency / Blueprint conservation priority overlap for critical species support – i.e., Florida panther, Florida black bear, and FGSP	USFWS, FWC
	Ensure FDOT access to and use of Blueprint data/priority areas to avoid impacts	FDOT, CTF
<b>Expand Funding Opportunities</b>	Encourage multi-agency coordination of policies and procedures and feasibility of credit stacking for wetland/priority habitat conservation	WMDs, FDEP, USFWS, FWC, USACE, FDOT
	Modify mitigation bank location selection criteria to maximize multiple conservation benefits	WMDs, FDEP, USFWS, USACE
	Encourage FDOT to mitigate impacts by funding incentive-based conservation strategies	FDOT
	Ensure compatibility of mitigation banking and PES programs	SFWMD, NE-PES
	Identify, through collaboration with land management agencies, strategic candidate parcels for additional dispersed water storage areas	USFWS, FWC, WMDs, NRCS, NGOs
	Develop a Florida panther outreach program including possible PES program	USFWS, FWC, DACS
	Pursue implementation of alternative water quality and supply crediting methods to create and fund incentive-based conservation strategies	FDEP, DACS, NGOs, private sector
<b>Use PFLCC to Continue Blueprint Implementation</b>	Integrate Regional CLIP and Pilot corridors into PFLCC for research and planning	USFWS PFLCC