

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners  
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director  
DATE: March 12, 2012  
SUBJECT: May 2012 **Executive Director's Report**

**Awards and Accomplishments**

**Law Enforcement Reaccreditation** --The FWC was initially accredited in 2009 by the Commission for Law Enforcement Accreditation (CFA). **Since then, the FWC's** Division of Law Enforcement has been working toward reaccreditation. To achieve this, the agency had to comply with approximately 213 standards.

On December 13-15, 2011, CFA assessors visited FWC offices to examine all **aspects of the FWC's policies and procedures, management, operations and support** services. The CFA assessment team, composed of law enforcement practitioners from other accredited Florida law enforcement agencies, reviewed written materials, interviewed individuals and visited offices and other places where compliance could be observed.

On February 23, the Division of Law Enforcement was officially recognized for achieving reaccredited status. This voluntary process is a highly prized recognition of law enforcement professional excellence. Becoming reaccredited is a great honor. The FWC staff exhibit a professional demeanor and excellent business practices each and every day. This recognition validates the hard work they put into serving the residents and visitors of Florida and the critical role they play in the **conservation of Florida's precious** fish and wildlife resources. The FWC sincerely supports the accreditation process. It has been an effective way to ensure that we are operating efficiently and providing the best service we possibly can.

**In the News**

**Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition** -- The Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition, a 1,000-mile, 100-day trek from the Florida Everglades north to Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia, kicked off January 17, as a public awareness effort by photographer Carlton Ward, bear biologist Joe Guthrie, videographer Elam Stolzfus and conservationist Mallory Lykes Dimmitt. This team's **journey** highlighted the

importance of connectivity of both **public and private lands to support the state's** wildlife, particularly the Florida panther and black bear.

Both traditional media and social media by the Expedition and FWC frequently **reported on the Expedition's encounters with wildlife, habitat and people who** support the corridor. Joining the Expedition February 1 at her ranch was FWC Commissioner Liesa Priddy, who talked of the culture of Florida cattle ranchers conserving wildlife and habitat. FWC panther biologist Darrell Land also joined the Expedition that day to discuss panther management and conservation. Commissioner Ron Bergeron, at a separate event on February 4, shared his **knowledge of Everglade's history, wildlife and hunting traditions.**

FWC staff also has participated in the Expedition. Southwest Region Director Chris Wynn spent several days hiking and camping with the team. HSC Deputy Director Thomas Eason joined the Expedition at Archbold Biological Station on February 21 **to talk about FWC's Cooperative Conservation Blueprint and the draft Florida** black bear management plan and to participate in a panel discussion.

On Saturday, March 10, at Forever Florida in St. Cloud, the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network hosted a youth event to celebrate the 54th day of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition. The Expedition arrived at Forever Florida in the late afternoon and received a rowdy welcome from 30 children and 15 parents who were anxiously awaiting personal lessons on wildlife photography and videography. Carlton Ward and Elam Stoltzfus held the attention of the kids for over two hours as they explained how to use light and lens, along with many other techniques, to capture wildlife in still shots and on video. Joe Guthrie and Mallory Dimmitt joined the discussion to share stories of their encounters with wildlife along the trail and to encourage youth to get outdoors and experience those types of adventures own their own. The next day, Sunday, March 11, the Expedition crew followed a youth participating in the Youth Spring Turkey Hunt Weekend and spent the morning filming the hunt. Dane Huffman, son of former FWC Commission Chairman Herky Huffman, hosted the hunt in honor of his father who was an ardent supporter of youth hunting.

On April 9, a number of FWC staff met the Expedition team as it reached Camp Blanding Military Reservation. On hand from the FWC were Executive Director Nick Wiley, Walt McGown and Brian Scheik of the FWC's bear research team, Jim Garrison and Allan Hallman from the Camp Blanding WMA field office, and regional public information coordinator Karen Parker. Representing the Florida National Guard were Land Component Commander Brig. Gen. Richard Gallant; MSgt. Thomas Kielbasa, public affairs officer; and Paul Catlett, environmental supervisor.

One of the main topics of discussion was the importance of military bases to wildlife habitat corridors and connections. Conversation included the increasing population of bears on the post, the importance of buffer zones between the post and nearby civilian homes, and the amount of military training in the area.

After nearly 100 days and 1,000 miles, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Expedition team celebrated the end of its journey on Earth Day in Stephen C. Foster State Park, in the 402,000-acre Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge.

**Southeast Deer Study Group** -- FWC hosted the 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the Southeast Deer Study Group in Sandestin, Florida February 26-28. Hosted on a rotating basis by each **southeastern state wildlife agency's deer management** section, the conference provides deer biologists, managers and researchers a venue for presenting their most recent findings on deer biology and management. The theme for this year's meeting was: "Shifting Paradigms: Are Predators Changing the Dynamics of Managing Deer in the Southeast?" The meeting had over 320 attendees from around the country, and provided a great learning opportunity about deer biology and management especially in regards to predators' role in the management of the deer in the Southeast.

**Law Enforcement seizure of two tigers and a leopard** -- On February 27, FWC investigators and officers served a search warrant in Loxahatchee, Palm Beach County, where they seized two tigers and one leopard from a facility maintained that was in violation of both federal and state laws. The FWC removed the animals to protect public safety and to place them in a licensed, healthy and safe facility.

**The warrant authorized the seizure of the animals based on the facility's repeated** failure to correct violations, including multiple bites and escapes, fencing and caging deficiencies, possession of Class I wildlife without proof of consistent and sustained commercial activity, possession of Class I wildlife without a U.S. Department of Agriculture permit and feeding animals an improper diet.

The facility owners **have a right to appeal the agency's actions if they believe the** actions were unjust.

**Outdoor Recreation in Florida: Survey for the State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan (SCORP) --**

The recent SCORP provides information from Floridians and tourists about their participation in outdoor recreation in Florida. The survey was conducted by Responsive Management, Inc. for the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the agency charged with preparing the SCORP every five years. Jerrie Lindsey, FWC Director of Public Access and Wildlife Viewing Services Office, serves on the SCORP Advisory Council.

Top Motivations for outdoor recreation include: Spending time with family and friends (96 percent overall; 85 percent saying very important); and Being close to nature (83 percent overall; 45 percent saying very important).

Participation frequency among Floridians in past 12 months included: More Floridians (49%) engaged in wildlife viewing (traveling at least one mile away from home to view wildlife) than any other activity except going to the beach; Saltwater Fishing was the 6th most popular activity with 38% of Floridians participating, 28% of Floridians participated in Freshwater Fishing, making Fishing 3rd most frequent outdoor recreation activity. Eleven percent of Floridians reported participating in Sport Shooting and in Hunting and participation in Canoeing and Kayaking grew by 12% far more than any other type of recreation since the last study.

The study reconfirms the importance of recreation to tourism in Florida, with 98 percent of Florida's tourists stating they believe that outdoor recreation is important to them. An estimated 82.3 million visitors made their way to Florida in 2010, resulting in \$62.7 billion in total tourist spending and the creation of 947,700 jobs (VISIT FLORIDA, 2010).

View the Florida SCORP reports at:

Summary: [http://www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/files/scorp/scorp\\_summary.pdf](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/files/scorp/scorp_summary.pdf)

Full Report: [http://www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/files/scorp/scorp\\_survey.pdf](http://www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/files/scorp/scorp_survey.pdf)

**Law Enforcement Operation --** On February 29, the FWC's Covert Investigations

Section and Northeast Region completed a 15- month investigation, charging 56 suspects with 34 felonies and 280 misdemeanors. The "Operation Smorgasbord" investigation began in November when FWC Officer Justin Allen announced that he was resigning from the FWC; however, he was actually assuming a false identity and establishing himself among the local communities of Putnam, St. Johns, Alachua and Marion counties. Within several months, FWC decided to merge a parallel investigation from Volusia County that had a covert operative by the name of Officer James "Van" Barrow.

These two undercover officers networked with subjects throughout northeast Florida. **One of the covert unit's unique missions is to protect Florida's natural** resources from illegal commercialization. Allen and Barrow identified people who were illegally harvesting, buying and selling protected species, and gathered information and evidence for the investigation. The undercover officers bought and sold products like deer meat, redfish, gopher tortoises, soft shell turtles, shrimp, bear parts and bream to individuals and businesses. Many interactions were recorded on video.

Illegal product that filters into the private sector undercuts legal legitimate businesses. Legal businesses are required to work under strict health code regulations, quality control standards, handling requirements and also must report harvest information. Commercial fishermen and private game farms are directly affected by these illegal activities. Through working with the state attorneys to prosecute these violators, the FWC sent a message to the state that it supports the law-abiding, honest commercial and recreational fishers, recreational hunters and business owners by helping to restore balance in the competition for the resource.

**Lake Iamonia Clean-Up --** Officer Bucky Higman and freshwater fisheries biologist Katie Woodside recently collaborated to work with the Leon County Parks and Recreation supervisor and 20 FSU students to remove more than 2,500 pounds of litter from Lake Iamonia. Lake Iamonia (5,700 acres) near Tallahassee is a popular fishing and duck hunting lake, which is nearly dry due to the recent **drought. As a "perched" lake, sitting atop the porous limestone of the Floridan** aquifer, it is subject to losing water down natural sinkholes. While the lake is down, the FWC is working with contractors to remove approximately 24 acres of decaying organic material down to the mineralized soil. When normal rainfall returns, the lake will reflood and the clean lake bottom will help natural aquatic plants thrive as well as serving as ideal spawning and feeding habitat for fish.

### **Emerging Issues**

**License System Conversion --** The conversion of the recreational hunting and fishing licensing system from the Total Licensing System (TLS) to the Recreational License Issuance Services (RLIS) is scheduled to take place October 1, 2012. The contract for TLS expires on September 30, 2012.

To ensure a smooth transition to RLIS, staff must adjust the normal schedule for processing permits for limited-entry hunts, such as quota hunts, recreational use

areas, and special-opportunity hunts. These adjustments will mean that no application or issuance related to limited entry permits will occur during October in order to minimize the risk associated with this major system conversion. Some of the dates will be earlier than usual and some later than usual.

One significant change for the public will be guest permits for quota hunts will not be issued during October. For hunts occurring in October, permit holders would have to obtain guest permits by September 30. These adjustments would be only for 2012 during the system transition. Staff has developed a communication plan using multiple types of media and outreach to ensure that the public is aware of these changes. One part of this plan includes a staff report on this action at the June 2012 Commission meeting.

## **Updates**

**Tussock Removal --** Stabilized water levels, invasive aquatic vegetation and shoreline urbanization have contributed to an increase in tussocks (floating mats of aquatic plants and attached organic material) and organic sediment deposition within many lakes around the state. These tussock formations and sediment deposits reduce dissolved oxygen levels, increase turbidity, impede growth and expansion of desirable native plants, reduce spawning and recruitment of native fish species, and reduce recreational use and opportunities on the lake. The FWC, in coordination with local governments and the water management districts, recognize the continuing loss of valuable fish and wildlife habitat and its effect on these lake ecosystems.

To address these habitat changes, the Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Enhancement Sub-Section (AHRE) has developed and implemented several littoral enhancement projects in which tussock removal is a key management component. Over the past three months, AHRE biologists have used aquatic harvesters and other aquatic-plant removal equipment to manage problematic aquatic plants along the shorelines of several lakes through Florida including:

Lake Josephine (Highlands County) – follow-up management to 2006 aquatic enhancement drawdown project; managed tussocks along the shoreline within two **of the lake's three basins; primary species removed included paragrass, American cupscale, burhead sedge and primrose willow.**

Lake Istokpoga (Highlands County) – **"maintenance" tussock management of the Big Island and Bumblebee Island marshes;** through March 3, have enhanced 25 of

the targeted 50 acres of littoral habitat; primary species removed are primrose willow, burhead sedge, cattail and spatterdock; cost upon completion.

**International Offshore Drilling Response Plan (Cuba Drilling) --** FWC recently met with the U.S. Coast (USCG) and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to discuss expansion of oil drilling in Cuba and to integrate joint disaster response planning efforts. Because of the proximity of the drilling area to the fast moving current of the Florida Straits, most effort would be focused on offshore skimming and collection.

**Florida Panhandle Oil spill planning --** The Geographic Response Plan (GRP) revision workshops for the Florida Panhandle are scheduled during March 19-30 throughout the coastal counties (in cooperation with DEP, Division of Emergency Management, the USCG, and other federal partners). The Sensitivity of Coastal Habitats and Wildlife to Spilled Oil atlas data for this region has been completed and is undergoing QA/QC. These data are at a much higher resolution than has ever been completed before and are expected to be a great asset to preparedness and response in this region. **The GRP's are the primary tool for guiding response actions** in the event of the spill.

**Deepwater Horizon --** Two years after the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster in the Gulf, and one year after state and federal Trustees and BP inked an unprecedented \$1 billion agreement for early restoration, the first wave of restoration projects are ready to begin. On April 18, 2012, the Trustees announced approval of the Phase I Early Restoration Plan, which presents eight projects in four Gulf states intended to expedite restoration while the full assessment and restoration planning process continues. The two Florida projects, the Florida Boat Ramp Enhancement and Construction Project and the Florida (Pensacola Beach) Dune Restoration Project, will help to restore recreational and ecological losses caused by the oil spill and subsequent response. The boat ramp project will take place at four sites in Escambia County and will provide access for recreational aquatic activities including boating and fishing. The dune restoration project will revegetate beach habitat harmed by spill response.

FWC is one of two natural resource agencies (along with the Department of Environmental Protection) representing Florida as a trustee for the Deepwater Horizon Natural Resources Damage Assessment (NRDA) process governed by the

Oil Pollution Act of 1990. FWC staff from FWRI, HSC, DLE, and OED participated in public meetings held to receive comment on the draft Phase I plan. The next phase of early restoration is currently being planned by the Trustees.

**Cowbone Marsh** -- In 1999 the State of Florida, Lykes Brothers and two non-profit organizations entered into a settlement agreement after a jury trial that determined that Fisheating Creek in Glades County was a navigable water body and thus sovereignty submerged lands. Under the terms of the agreement the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission ("FWC") agreed to maintain the historic channel.

While trying to open a navigable channel through Cowbone Marsh, part of the Fisheating Creek WMA, problems occurred that required corrective actions.

**Activities conducted with an "Agitator", a machine that chops up floating vegetation mats,** caused bottom sediments to erode and wash downstream toward Lake Okeechobee, resulting in a channel that federal and state permitting agencies felt could result in over draining the marsh and allow increased nutrient loading to Lake Okeechobee. FWC staff is working with Federal agencies, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and South Florida Water Management District to correct those issues. Plans are currently being finalized that will allow FWC to fill the channel with clean sand. Corrective actions will not be initiated until late next winter/early spring to allow time for issuance of required permits and so that work in the marsh can be conducted during the dry season. In the mean time, six temporary check dams have been put in place to hold water back in the marsh and are functioning adequately. However, Earthjustice, representing the Save Our Creeks, Inc. has filed two legal actions against FWC in an attempt to stop those corrective actions.

## **Events**

**Exotic Pet Amnesty Day** -- The FWC and Zoo Miami once again held an Exotic Pet Amnesty Day. On Saturday, March 10 pet owners had an opportunity to surrender their nonnative pets free of charge, with no penalties. More than 50 pets were surrendered to the FWC and all healthy animals were taken home by qualified adopters. The surrendered animals included pythons, parrots, sugar gliders, turtles, bearded dragons and monitor lizards. Amnesty Day was also an excellent outreach tool as many local and national media affiliates including the Today Show and Animal Planet attend the event.

**Florida Sportsman's Conservation Association Outdoor Youth Day** -- On February 4, the Florida Sportsman's Conservation Association held their Annual Outdoor Youth Day at the Everglades Youth Camp in the Corbett Wildlife Management Area. Approximately 1,500 children attended the event. Activities included airboat rides, fishing, swamp buggy rides, canoeing, hiking, archery and more. FWC law enforcement provided K-9 demonstrations and FWC personnel provided additional assistance. Regional Directors Chuck Collins and Chris Wynn spoke with a local outdoor writer about Florida Youth Conservation Centers and the importance of getting our youth outdoors.

**World Thinking Day Event** -- The FWC partnered with the Girl Scouts in Palm Beach again this year to host a World Thinking Day Event. On Sunday, February 26, more than 250 Girl Scouts and their families gathered at the FWC regional office in West Palm Beach to give thanks for the international Girl Guiding and Girl Scouting movement and turn their thoughts to the environment. The theme for World Thinking Day 2012 was "We can save our planet." At the West Palm Beach event, girls ranging from kindergarten to high school level explored learning stations that represented 13 different countries. At the final station, a Peace Corp volunteer spoke to the girls about the country where she served and how the natural environment impacts the people who live there.

**Angler Action press conference** -- The FWC joined the Snook and Gamefish Foundation for a press conference announcing plans for Angler Action Program development in 2012. The press conference was held at the West Marine booth at Miami International Boat Show on Thursday, February 16. The Angler Action Program aims to develop a long term angler-generated fishery data record. The goal is to assure the highest degree of trust and accuracy in data collected by anglers for the purposes of fishery research, assessment and management. The program has seen steady growth of participants as well as increased data applications since it began in 2010.

**2012 Florida State Fair** -- The 2012 FWC exhibit at the Florida State Fair in Tampa, hosted an estimated 300,000 visitors. Opening day ceremonies on February 9 featured special honored guests at FWC's exhibit in the Red Barn including Governor Rick Scott, and Commissioner of Agriculture Adam Putnam. The theme of FWC's 2012 exhibit centered on the agency's primary functions of research, management and law enforcement.

Inside the FWC exhibit at the Red Barn, live wildlife and fish, including a black bear and panther, welcomed visitors. Located throughout the exhibit were short video and text messages about wildlife research programs, outdoor recreation, the Florida **Youth Conservation Centers Network, "Wear It Florida" life jacket campaign, and** various large-scale conservation and restoration efforts that included our fresh and saltwater fish hatcheries.

Twenty scan codes placed throughout the display gave Smartphone users a direct link to the appropriate FWC web page that pertained to the featured display. Deer tracks painted on the floor of the exhibit created a pathway leading to answers of **the seven questions on this year's** FWC Wildlife Challenge Quiz. Approximately 2,000 people participated in the Wildlife Challenge this year.

## **Partnerships**

**Wildlife Rehabilitator Training** -- On February 17-18, FWC forensic biologist Hector Cruz-Lopez conducted a workshop to teach members of the Florida Wildlife Rehabilitators Association how to document unlawful treatment of wildlife. The workshop included an overview of crime scene and laboratory methods and procedures, as well as instruction on evidence management. There was also a visual demonstration of how to identify and document bullet and arrow injuries. Wildlife rehabilitators frequently work with animals that have been injured illegally. This workshop educated participants on how they can properly document the unlawful treatment of wildlife.

**Merritt's Mill Pond** -- Chris Paxton (Northwest Florida Regional Freshwater Fisheries Administrator) worked with Chuck Hatcher (Director of Jackson County Parks and Recreation) during a short-term drawdown of **Merritt's Mill Pond (202** acres) to enhance this important spring-fed fishery near Marianna. The public has responded with numerous letters of thanks, which is especially important since the decline in this fishery had been a sore spot for many local anglers. Among the accomplishments: two hard freezes knocked back undesirable aquatic plants that were exposed; Matt Phillips (FWC Invasive Plant Management Section) successfully treated plants in the spring boil; Katie Woodside and Nicole Kierl (Freshwater Fisheries Biologists) helped stock 5,000 triploid grass carp into the spring. The county trimmed 100 stumps in the channel to improve navigation, dug out and renovated the boat basin, and resurfaced the parking lot. Just days after we shut the gate, six inches of rain filled the Mill Pond two feet fuller than before the drawdown.

## **Recognitions**

**Good Samaritan** -- On Tuesday morning, April 24, senior fisheries technician Bill Arnold with the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management was on S. R. 267 in Gadsden County with a load of striped bass fingerlings when the dual wheels on his trailer broke loose. Bill deftly maneuvered the trailer to the shoulder of the highway but he had a big problem - the trailer and wheel assembly needed substantial repairs and parts, and FWC staff were waiting to stock the fish at Lake Talquin.

As Bill surveyed his predicament, a motorist pulled over and offered his assistance. The motorist made sure Bill was okay, but before leaving he called his business and soon two gentlemen showed up with a hydraulic jack and tools. They quickly got the damaged wheel assembly from under the trailer and headed off for repairs in Tallahassee. A couple hours later they returned and reattached the wheels. Despite **Arnold's protests that they give him the bill for the repairs, the gentlemen smiled** and sent him on his way.

The motorist who assisted Bill was none other than FWC Commissioner Chuck Roberts.

While helping Bill out of a tough situation was important, Commissioner Roberts was responsible for saving thousands of fish produced at the Blackwater Hatchery. Hatchery workers dedicate many hours during production and losing fish is not only a loss to staff, but also to the public who benefit from introduction of the **hatchlings. Commissioner Roberts' rescue of Bill and his precious cargo was the talk** of hatchery staff all over the state last week. Bill will never forget the Good Samaritan who came to his aid.