

MEMORANDUM

TO: Commissioners
FROM: Nick Wiley, Executive Director
DATE: June 1, 2013
SUBJECT: June 2013 Executive Director's Report

Awards and Accomplishments

FWC Staff Honored for Outstanding Work in Fish and Wildlife Conservation-

Two employees in FWC's Habitat and Species Conservation (HSC) Division and one employee in the Office of the Executive Director have received recognition for their exemplary conservation efforts.

Don Fox was named the 2013 Wildlife Conservationist of the Year by the Florida Wildlife Federation for his 30-year stewardship of Lake Okeechobee in south Florida. Fox, who is in charge of FWC's Okeechobee field station, works in HSC's Aquatic Habitat Conservation and Restoration Section. Fox's successful advocacy of appropriate cycles of high and low water levels at Lake Okeechobee has restored its world-renowned bass fishery and brought back endangered snail kites to the lake.

Justin Ellenberger was selected as this year's FWC recipient of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Resource Manager of the Year award for his 11 years of work, mostly as lead biologist, at the Guana River WMA in northeast Florida. Ellenberger, who works in HSC's Wildlife and Habitat Management Section, received his award at a recent meeting of the Governor and Cabinet. Ellenberger worked with stakeholders and communities to restore and manage habitats to maintain or increase populations of imperiled species, nongame wading birds and game animals. He also enhanced nature-based recreation on the WMA where people can view wildlife, fish, hunt, kayak, hike and ride horses.

Rae Waddell was chosen by the Florida Wildlife Federation as the recipient of its Conservation Communicator of the Year Award for 2013. Rae is the Director of the Florida Youth Conservation Centers Network and is being honored for her success in leading the effort to reconnect Florida's children with traditional outdoor activities and create the next generation that cares about our fish and wildlife resources. Rae has been with FWC for over twenty years and has worked tirelessly to provide Youth with the education and guidance they need to get safely engaged in the great outdoors and safely share experiences that inspire lifelong support for fish and wildlife conservation.

FWC Officers Participate in Memorial Events -- FWC officers around the state participated in events for Florida's Law Enforcement Officers Memorial, National Peace Officers Memorial Day and National Police Week. These ceremonies honor those law enforcement officers who have lost their lives in the line of duty for the safety and protection of others. Members of the FWC Honor Guard attended the 32nd Annual National Peace Officers Memorial Services in Washington DC the week of May 12-15, 2013. The Honor Guard members participated in several ceremonies there, including standing watch over the survivors' wreath that is brought from the U.S. Capitol to the Law Enforcement Memorial wall. They also participated in a funeral detail for former FWC Commissioner Sonny Burnett, providing door guards, casket guards and presenting an American flag.

Emerging Issues

Abandoned Tackle Concerns -- The impact of lost and abandoned tackle, including discarded soft baits, is becoming of increasing concern in some sectors. Maine's Joint Standing Committee on Inland Fisheries and Wildlife passed a resolution this year requesting the Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife to study whether or not soft baits negatively affect fish health and populations. KeepAmericaFishing™, which is affiliated with the American Sportfishing Association, sent a petition to stop the ban on soft baits, with over 16,000 signatures from anglers across the country.

Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management staff have been working with and supporting the ReBaits program that was started by Florida B.A.S.S. Federation Conservation Director Eamon Bolton. It launched at the Bassmaster Open tournament on the Harris Chain in 2012. The program promotes keeping all litter out of our lakes and rivers and recycling used soft plastic baits.

In the News

Lake Istokpoga Fishing Tournament -- *The Outdoor Channel* aired seven episodes of the latest Major League Fishing tournament on Lake Istokpoga in Highlands County. This lake has become known as a trophy bass destination in part due to the numbers of big bass entered into the TrophyCatchsm program. The show includes features about the lake and extensive angler commentary while they are fishing in a highly-competitive format. This format includes conservation elements such as immediate release and strict rules on fish handling and boater safety. Numerous references to FWC's habitat enhancement, aquatic vegetation management, and fisheries management efforts have been made. Many of the world's best anglers have commented that the quality of the aquatic habitat was best they had ever seen. Quality lake habitat is due to the collaborative efforts HSC, FFM and the Florida Wildlife Research Institute in partnership with South

Florida Water Management District, Highlands County, Florida Audubon, and other partners with the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee.

Panther rescued -- FWC and partners rescued an approximately 9-month-old female Florida panther in the Golden Gate Estates area of Collier County on May 13. A homeowner called FWC when he noticed the injured panther earlier that morning as he was leaving for work. When he returned home and saw the panther a second time, he notified law enforcement. FWC panther biologists and law-enforcement officers, deputies with the Collier County Sheriff's Office and staff from the Golden Gate Animal Clinic responded to the area where the panther was last seen. They located the panther in thick brush and sedated it. After an on-scene assessment of the panther's condition, FWC biologists transported the panther to the Animal Specialty Hospital of Florida. Veterinarians at the hospital determined that the panther had a compound fracture in her rear right leg, rib fractures and bruising around the lung, all of which were likely caused by a vehicle collision. That evening they performed surgery, using a steel plate to mend the bone together. With the help of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the panther was taken to the White Oak Conservation Center in Yulee, where she will receive care until she has fully healed from her injuries and is ready for release. With only 100 to 160 adults and subadults remaining in south Florida, every panther plays an important role in the population.

Everglades Restoration -- On May 28, Governor Rick Scott signed into law HB 7065, which provides \$32 million, annually, in state funding for the Governor's \$880 million long-term Everglades restoration plan. The \$32 million is an historic step forward in restoring America's Everglades by improving water quality and water flow. The Governor signed the bill as part of a ceremony at the Florida Atlantic University Pine Jog Environmental Education Center in West Palm Beach. FWC Commissioner Ron Bergeron, FWC staff and other partner agencies were present for the signing.

Missing family rescued -- On Friday, April 5, the FWC and partner agencies, found a family of five that had been missing in the Everglades since the afternoon of Thursday April 4. The family went for a ride in an airboat at 11 a.m. on Thursday and when they did not return later that afternoon, concerned family members contacted law enforcement. On Friday the FWC searched for the family with the help of several partner agencies, including Miami-Dade Fire Rescue, Miami-Dade Police Department, Miccosukee Police Department and Broward County Sheriff's Office. The agencies used several airboats as well as aerial support to help with the search. Early that afternoon, a Miami-Dade Fire Rescue helicopter spotted the family in thick brush in the Everglades and Francis S. Taylor Wildlife Management Area, which is located in Miami-Dade, Broward and Palm Beach counties. Because of the heavy vegetation, the rescue effort was difficult and had to be conducted carefully. Ultimately, FWC officers along with Miami-Dade Fire Rescue were able to

free the boat and escort the family safely back to shore. The rescue effort received national attention, including the Associated Press, CNN, NBC and ABC National News as well as outlets throughout Florida.

Updates

Apalachicola Oyster Status -- As projected, preliminary landings data continue to show dramatic decline in harvest. FWC staff prepared a draft report to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric (NOAA) Fisheries Service in support of Governor Scott's request for a commercial oyster fishery failure. The draft report concludes that the fishery failure was caused by significant decreases in freshwater flow into estuaries as the result of low river flow and extended drought. Lack of freshwater input results in increased oyster predators and diseases and decreased oyster nutrition. When the report is final, NOAA Fisheries Service will provide a scientific review and make a recommendation to the Secretary of the Department of Commerce. The Division of Marine Fisheries Management recommends exploring adaptive management regulatory options for oysters. As a proactive measure to help conserve oyster resources, the FWC shortened the summer harvest season from seven days a week to five days a week. The FWC, along with the oyster industry concluded this measure would help balance availability of harvestable oysters with efforts to restore oyster populations. This season started June 1 and will run through Aug. 31. The harvest will be closed on Fridays and Saturdays.

Bay Scallops --The Fish and Wildlife Research Institute (FWRI) recently completed its 2012 annual Gulf coast report on bay scallops. The results of the summer abundance surveys suggested that the coast-wide bay scallop population was overall stable. However, some individual populations were considered vulnerable. A fall survey after the close of the harvest season was also conducted and abundance was then classified as vulnerable which may lead to declines for the 2013 spring stock.

FWRI biologists guide a variety of community-based organizations in restoration efforts. Scallop populations have increased in St. Andrew Bay, where restoration efforts have been conducted consistently since the region was closed to harvest, but the population has not risen to consistently stable levels. Community-based restoration efforts are expected to continue in 2013.

Managing our Nation's Fisheries III conference-- Division of Marine Fisheries Management staff attended the "Managing Our Nations Fisheries 3" conference in Washington, D.C. on May 7-9, 2013. Federal fishery management council members and staff, fishermen, National Marine Fisheries Service staff, environmentalists and many other stakeholders from around the country participated in this conference to discuss how the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act should be improved. This Act is the primary federal law that provides for

conservation and management of fishery resources managed by the federal fishery management Councils and the National Marine Fisheries Service. Congress is anticipated to reauthorize the Act by late 2014.

Streamlining Digital Communications with GovDelivery -- FWC is rolling out a new digital communication platform that provides targeted information to stakeholders when requested and over the communication channel they select. The GovDelivery platform does not replace current efforts in web portals broadcast and social media, but enhances the ability to communicate directly with FWC's audience and provide them with important information.

Stakeholders can sign up for the service at no charge and select the topics of greatest interest to them. After subscribing, they will automatically receive email or text alerts with agency news, meeting announcements, opportunities for public input, website updates, emergency alerts, etc. Subscribers can choose to receive immediate notifications or opt for a daily or weekly digest. They can change their preferences at any time and as often as they wish.

GovDelivery will help FWC in consolidate existing email lists and LISTSERV groups, making stakeholder communications more efficient and enabling to send highly targeted messages to specific audiences. FWC also will be able to identify how effective the messages are, by tracking email and text opening statistics and clicks on internal hyperlinks. Look for the red envelope on FWC communications as we enhance our outreach capabilities.

FWC Law Enforcement Class 21 -- FWC Class 21 reported to the North Florida Public Safety Institute on May 6. The 29 recruits will be in training at the academy until November 8, 2013. First, they will complete the state-mandated basic recruit curriculum that covers all general law enforcement training and certification. The final eight weeks will include FWC-specific training, such as vessel operations, man-tracking, wildlife identification, freshwater and marine fish identification and more. On July 8, 2013, FWC Class 22 will begin. This class will be comprised of sworn officers. After their eight weeks of training, they will graduate on August 30, 2013.

Record-setting Burmese python captured in Miami-Dade County -- Jason Leon of Miami recently caught and killed the longest Burmese python ever captured in Florida: 18 feet, 8 inches. The python was a 128-pound female, according to University of Florida scientists who examined the snake. The previous record length for a Burmese python captured in the wild in Florida was 17 feet, 7 inches. Leon reported his Burmese python capture to FWC's hotline for reporting exotic species, 888-IveGot1 (888-483-4861), enabling the agency and its partners to document information about the snake's location and biological characteristics.

The Burmese python is an invasive species that has negative impacts on the Everglades ecosystem and its native wildlife. The FWC actively coordinates with local, state and federal partners, including university researchers, native tribes and nongovernmental organizations, on the research, management and capture of pythons. An FWC press release on the record-setting Burmese python, thanked Leon, whose reporting of the capture advanced what is known about this invasive species that is having negative impacts on the Everglades ecosystem and native wildlife. The public was reminded to report sightings of exotic species to IveGot1.org or 888-IveGot1. Public interest in Burmese pythons in Florida remains high. More than 127,000 people viewed the MyFWC Facebook post on the big python; nearly 6 million people heard the story on Florida's TV stations; and Yahoo's news of the captured python reached 4 million people.

Partnerships

Public Access on Lake Juliana in Auburndale -- Staff involvement with the Polk County Lakes Access Advisory Committee led to establishment of public access on Lake Juliana in Auburndale. With expanding development around many of Polk County's lakes, gaining public access and improving limited parking at existing ramps are difficult. The establishment of the Lake Access Committee has been an effective way to prioritize needs and manage project costs and concerns from area residents. Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management staff work closely with local governments and FWC Law Enforcement's Boating and Waterways to evaluate projects for grant funding through the Florida Boating Improvement Program.

Chipola River designated as one of the nation's ten "Waters to Watch!" -- The National Fish Habitat Board designated the Chipola River in the Panhandle as one of the nation's ten "Waters to Watch!" Conservation work within the Chipola River Basin is a collaborative effort between FWC (Habitat and Species Conservation - Wildlife Legacy Initiative, Aquatic Habitat Restoration and Enhancement, Conservation Services; FFM; and FWRI), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Conservation Service, and Department of Environmental Protection, and other partners under the National Fish Habitat Plan's Southeast Aquatic Resources Partnership.

The annual [Waters to Watch list](#) is assembled by aquatic conservation experts and represents waters where conservation activities will lead to cleaner and healthier habitats for fish, wildlife and people.

Judges Farms Project -- Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management staff worked with cities of Kissimmee and St. Cloud, Osceola County, and the Toho Water Authority to acquire a 400 acre parcel that will be reclaimed to treat stormwater runoff, water storage, fish and wildlife habitat, and recreational enjoyment such as wildlife viewing and fishing. The Judges Farms project will reduce nutrient loads into Lake Tohopekaliga, a Fish Management Area known as a world-class fishery, popular duck hunting destination, and a critical refuge for the highly-endangered Everglades Snail Kite.

"Fish Orlando!" Smartphone App -- Tony Bickley, CEO of Team Dart, is an avid angler who travels from Great Britain annually to fish in Florida. He especially likes the lakes within the "Fish Orlando!" program. Tony was visiting Turkey Lake, a collaborative project with the City of Orlando and Bass Pro Shops that includes a boat rental program, the day Governor Scott helped the Division of Freshwater Fisheries Management stock fish and teach kids how to fish. Tony was so honored that he offered his company's web application development services free of charge. He recently made available a "Fish Orlando!" Smartphone app that allows anglers to see maps of the major program lakes, the rules and obtain fish identification and tips via any Android or Apple operating system. More information is available at the iTunes store or by searching "Fish Orlando!" in the App Store. Dart is also assisting with developing an application for the *TrophyCatch*sm program.

Events

FWC and partners stress safe boating in South Florida -- The week of May 20, the FWC and partner law enforcement agencies held three boating safety news conferences in South Florida to kick off the unofficial start of the summer boating season. The news conferences were held in Palm Beach, Miami/Dade and Collier Counties. Officers stressed the importance of boating safety including the use of life jackets, dive flags and overall safe boating practices. At all three events, there was a live demonstration of how a life jackets aid in saving lives. The events were well attended and achieved the FWC's ultimate goal of reaching the public with the safe boating message.

Pet Amnesty Day -- FWC held an Exotic Pet Amnesty Day at Zoo Miami on April 13. More than twenty animals were turned in including exotic snakes, turtles and a white chinchilla. The Exotic Pet Amnesty Program is an effort to reduce the number of nonnative species being released into the wild by pet owners who can no longer care for their pets or no longer wish to keep them. Citizens unable to attend an Exotic Pet Amnesty Day can also surrender pets through the 888-IVEGOT1 hotline. At these events, every attempt is made to place all healthy animals with qualified adopters. To date, more than 1,000 exotic pets have been placed in new homes as a result of the program.