

Floridians take up conservation cause in many ways



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Floridians and visitors spend more than \$1 billion a year on expenses and equipment for the opportunity to see the wildlife in this wonderful state. More than 19,000 jobs depend on our taking care of the wildlife that is all around us every day.

We all have a stake in keeping our ecosystems healthy. Our economy, our lifestyle and even our self-concept as Floridians all revolve around our stewardship for the natural features that define the essence of our state.

Years ago, we commissioned a study to find out how Floridians feel about wildlife and how we might put their concerns to good use. It was no surprise when the study revealed we love our wildlife, especially our birds, and people told us they just needed somebody to tell them what they could do to support conservation. Basically, they said, "Give us some leadership to rally behind, and we will take up the cause."

Since then, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC)

has tried to do that. We interact with the public, probably as much or more than any other state agency. We listen, we advise and we work to motivate.

Some of the ways people help us in our conservation efforts involve contributing to the Wildlife Foundation of Florida or by purchasing specialty license plates that provide funding for fish and wildlife research and management. We are grateful for that support.

We would like to highlight some of the other ways to help that don't require a significant financial commitment. For instance, the FWC periodically organizes volunteers to clean up trash that less-civic minded people leave behind in our woods, waters and on our beaches. In a previous edition of this magazine, we featured the Ridge Rangers volunteers who spent more than 3,000 hours last year, cleaning up and restoring habitat in the Lake Wales Ridge area. We could use more people like them.

Other volunteers help our biologists keep an eye on nesting sea turtles and ensure hatchlings have a shot at survival, and other organizations work to promote public awareness about the plight of native species and work with government officials to address problems. Some of the most important accomplishments in environmental stewardship happen when people feel driven to look after the wildlife they see right outside their homes.

Floridians' special appreciation for nature and our history of protecting it for future generations are traditions that we must pass along to those who will inherit this great legacy. I think it is crucial that we involve children in our individual relationships with nature. We must instill a sense of stewardship in them during the years when they are assembling the information and values that will define them as adults. The future of conservation depends on that – and with it rides the future of many more of the components that make Florida special. **FW**



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