

Devil's Garden

Critical Natural Lands

Collier and Hendry Counties

| | |
|---|---------------|
| <i>Year Added to Priority List</i> | 2002 |
| <i>Project Acres</i> | 82,995 |
| <i>Acquired Acres</i> | 54,429 |
| <i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i> | \$126,250,500 |
| <i>Remaining Project Acres</i> | 28,566 |
| <i>2023 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i> | \$126,410,842 |

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Devil's Garden project will help to protect Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community and landscape levels and fill a gap in a critical landscape corridor for the federally endangered Florida panther. Numerous records of panthers and other rare and threatened species have been noted on site. The project borders the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest on the west and Dinner Island Wildlife Management Area to the south, providing crucial connectivity between existing conservation lands and increasing the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.

General Description

The Devil's Garden project is in Hendry and Collier counties. The project's major parcel (71,608 acres) adjoins the eastern boundary of Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest and is roughly 18 miles long (east-west) and six miles wide (north-south). An additional parcel (6,445 acres) is adjacent to the northeastern boundary of the state forest and Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area. Two smaller parcels (3,328 acres and 1,127 acres) border the southwestern boundary of the state forest.

Devil's Garden is a huge tract of ranch land that has been heavily impacted by pasture conversion and other agricultural activities. Non-forested wetlands, including basin marsh, depression marsh, swale and wet prairie, make up the dominant natural communities still present on the property. Mesic and wet flatwoods have been mostly cleared and converted to pasturelands. Prairie hammocks were scattered throughout the property and formed irregularly shaped forests, usually with basin and depression wetlands. In a helicopter survey, a few small patches (approximately 15 acres) of dome swamp fringing swale systems could be seen in the project's southwestern parcels. These parcels have few remaining upland natural communities except for narrow fringes adjacent to wetlands and some remnant hammock.



FNAI Element Occurrence Summary

| <u>FNAI Elements</u> | <u>Score</u> |
|-----------------------------|---------------------|
| Florida panther | G5T1/S1 |
| Eastern indigo snake | G3/S2? |
| Gopher tortoise | G3/S3 |
| Swallow-tailed kite | G5/S2 |
| Florida black bear | G5T4/S4 |
| Wood stork | G4/S2 |
| Crested caracara | G5/S2 |
| Little blue heron | G5/S4 |
| White ibis | G5/S4 |

Public Use

The property can accommodate resource-based recreation, including camping, picnicking, hiking, nature study, wildlife observation, bicycling, horseback riding and environmental education. Depending on management emphasis, the land could provide significant hunting opportunities. Careful planning is required to coordinate hunting and wildlife observation.

Acquisition Planning

2002

On December 5, 2002, the Acquisition and Restoration Council added the Devil’s Garden project to Group A of the Florida Forever 2003 Priority List. The fee-simple project, sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and the Florida Forest Service, consisted of approximately 82,508 acres with a single owner, Alico Inc., and a taxable value of \$9,483,649.

2007

On December 14, 2007, the Acquisition and Restoration Council voted to move Devil’s Garden to Group B of the 2008 Florida Forever Priority List.

2011

On December 9, 2011, Devil’s Garden was classified as a Critical Natural Lands project.

2013

On June 17, 2013, the U.S. Department of Agriculture established a 11,591.18-acre conservation easement as part of its Natural Resources Conservation Service Wetlands Reserve Program.

2020

In September 2020, Phase 1B (consisting of the project’s central and western parcels) was acquired from Alico, Inc. The fee simple acquisition contained 10,702.03 acres and was purchased for \$28,500,000. The parcels will be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as part of Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area.

2021

In 2021, DEP acquired 7,355.86 acres fee simple from Alico, Inc. It will be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission as part of Okaloacoochee Slough Wildlife Management Area.

2023

In 2023, DEP acquired, in fee, a total of 17,159 acres in Hendry County from Alico, Inc.





Coordination

The Nature Conservancy is the intermediary and is working to find a purchaser for the eastern portion of the tract (farmland).

Management Policy Statement

The primary goals of management for the Devil's Garden project are to increase protection of Florida's biodiversity at the species, natural community and landscape levels; protect, restore and maintain the quality and natural functions of the state's land, water and wetland systems; increase natural resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities; and increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.

Manager(s)

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission is the recommended lead manager for most of the area (approximately 71,608 acres). The Florida Forest Service will manage the two westernmost parcels (approximately 10,900 acres) adjoining the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest.

Management Prospectus

Qualifications for State Designation

Due to the diversity and connectivity to the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest, the two westernmost parcels (approximately 10,900 acres) qualify as state forests. The high wildlife resource values and the designation of primary or secondary panther habitat zones on the project qualify the eastern parcel (approximately 71,608 acres) as a wildlife management area.

Conditions Affecting Intensity of Management

Much of the project's drier natural community types have been disturbed, with many converted to some improved form of agriculture. This conversion usually involves some type of hydrologic alteration for water management. The property contains vast areas of wetlands with sensitive natural resources. Land management and public use will specifically be structured to improve and protect these areas.

Surrounding land uses are not expected to affect prescribed burning on the parcel. The level of management intensity and related management costs is expected to be initially high to obtain the necessary information and resources to restore and manage the system. Given the importance of the property to panther recovery, this link between habitat management and panther use will be critical to insuring the property is managed consistent with the primary purposes for acquisition.

The Devil's Garden project will require 14 FTE positions to manage the project area. Certain activities may be privatized, reducing the number of FTEs required. Funding for natural-resource management and public use administration would come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund.

Management Implementation, Public Access, Site Security and Protection of Infrastructure

During the first year after acquisition, emphasis will be placed on site security, posting boundaries, public access, fire management, resource inventory, exotic species control and removal of refuse. Conceptual management plans will be developed describing the management goals and specific objectives necessary to implement future resource management.





Public use will be limited to activities that will have little or no impact to these areas. Vehicular use by the public will be confined to designated roads. Unnecessary access points will be closed. Both agencies will cooperate with and seek the assistance of other state agencies, local government entities and interested parties as appropriate.

Long-range plans for the property will generally be directed toward the restoration of disturbed areas and maintenance of natural communities. Disturbed sites will be restored to conditions that would be expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems. Management activities will also emphasize enhancing abundance and spatial distribution of threatened and endangered species. Multiple-use principles will be practiced with resource management goals and acquisition purposes in mind. An all-season prescribed burning management plan will be developed and implemented to improve the habitat quality of native fire-dependent plant communities and wildlife habitats.

Revenue-generating Potential

Management will seek to improve revenue-generating potential by improving wildlife diversity and resource-based recreation. Anticipated revenues from wildlife conservation will come from sales of hunting licenses, wildlife management area permits and other special hunting permits. Additional revenues might be generated from ecotourism and wildlife viewing activities. Timber sales will be conducted as needed to improve or maintain desirable ecosystem conditions. These sales will primarily take place in pine stands and will provide a variable source of revenue dependent upon a variety of factors. Due to the existing condition of the timber resource on the property, revenue generating potential of the project is expected to be low. Some revenues might be generated from agricultural farming contracts in areas currently being farmed as row crops until such areas can be restored in the interest of wildlife conservation.

Cooperators in Management Activities

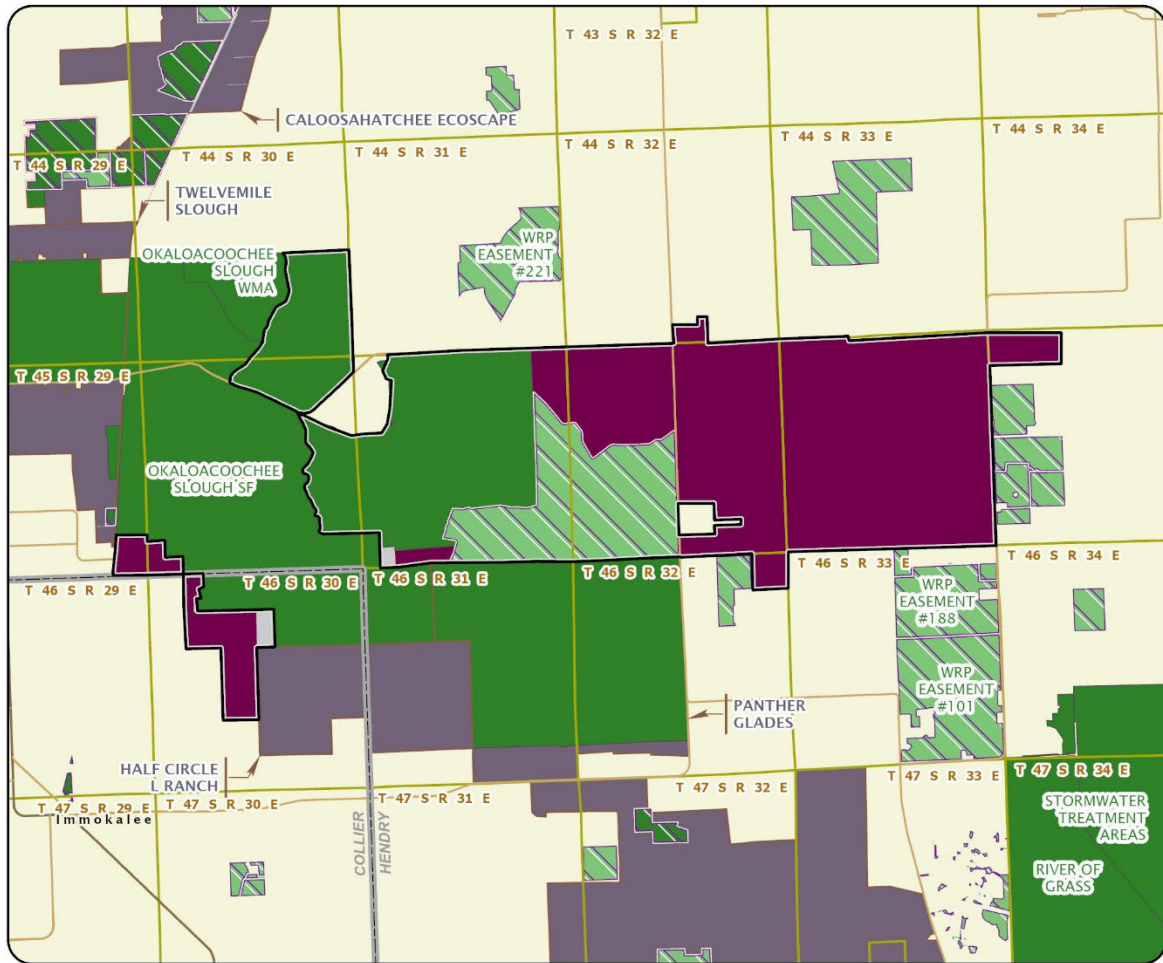
The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission and Florida Forest Service will cooperate with other federal, state and local government agencies, including the South Florida Water Management District, in managing the area.

Management Cost Summary

| <u>FWC</u> | <u>Startup</u> | <u>Recurring</u> |
|-----------------|----------------|------------------|
| Source of Funds | LATF | not provided |
| Salary (6 FTE) | \$216,639 | not provided |
| Expense | \$725,000 | not provided |
| OCO | \$418,200 | not provided |
| TOTAL | \$1,359,839 | not provided |

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted





DEVIL'S GARDEN

COLLIER AND HENDRY COUNTIES

- Florida Forever Project Boundary
- Essential Parcels Remaining
- Other Florida Forever Projects
- State Conservation Lands
- Other Conservation Lands
- Other Public Lands
- Less-Than-Fee Acquisition

