

# Devil's Garden

Critical Natural Lands

Collier and Hendry Counties

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2002
<i>Project Acres</i>	83,035
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	53,313
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	29,722
<i>2025 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$130,463,024

## 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 (*Puma concolor coryi*). Numerous records of panthers and other rare and threatened species have been noted on site. The project borders the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest (OSSF) 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 OSSF and is roughly 18 miles long (east-west) and 6 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 (OSWMA). Two smaller parcels (3,328 acres and 1,127 acres) border the southwestern boundary of OSSF.

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.

Florida Natural Areas Inventory (FNAI) Element Occurrence Summary

<b><u>FNAI Elements</u></b>	<b><u>Score</u></b>
Florida panther	G5T1/S1
Eastern indigo snake	G2G3/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 (ARC) added the Devil's Garden project to Group A of the 2003 Florida Forever Priority List. This fee simple project, sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and the Florida Forest Service (FFS), 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, ARC 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 fee simple from Alico, Inc. The acquisition contained 10,702.03 acres and was purchased at a cost of \$28,500,000. These parcels will be managed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) as part of OSWMA.

## **2021**

In 2021, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) acquired 7,355.86 acres fee simple from Alico, Inc. It will be managed by FWC as part of OSWMA.

## **2023**

DEP acquired, in fee, a total of 17,159 acres in Hendry County from Alico, Inc. FWC will manage the property as part of OSWMA.

## **2024**

In November 2024, ARC approved the addition of one parcel totaling approximately 41.73 acres in Hendry County.

### 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)

FWC is the recommended lead manager for most of the area (approximately 71,608 acres). FFS will manage the two westernmost parcels (approximately 10,900 acres) adjoining OSSF.





## Management Prospectus

### **Qualifications for State Designation**

Due to the diversity, and connectivity to OSSF, the two westernmost parcels 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 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. This 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 this 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 this 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 additional FTE positions to manage the project area. Certain activities may be privatized, reducing the number of FTE positions required. Funding for natural-resource management and public use administration would come from the Land Acquisition Trust Fund (LATF).

### **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 this 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 this 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**

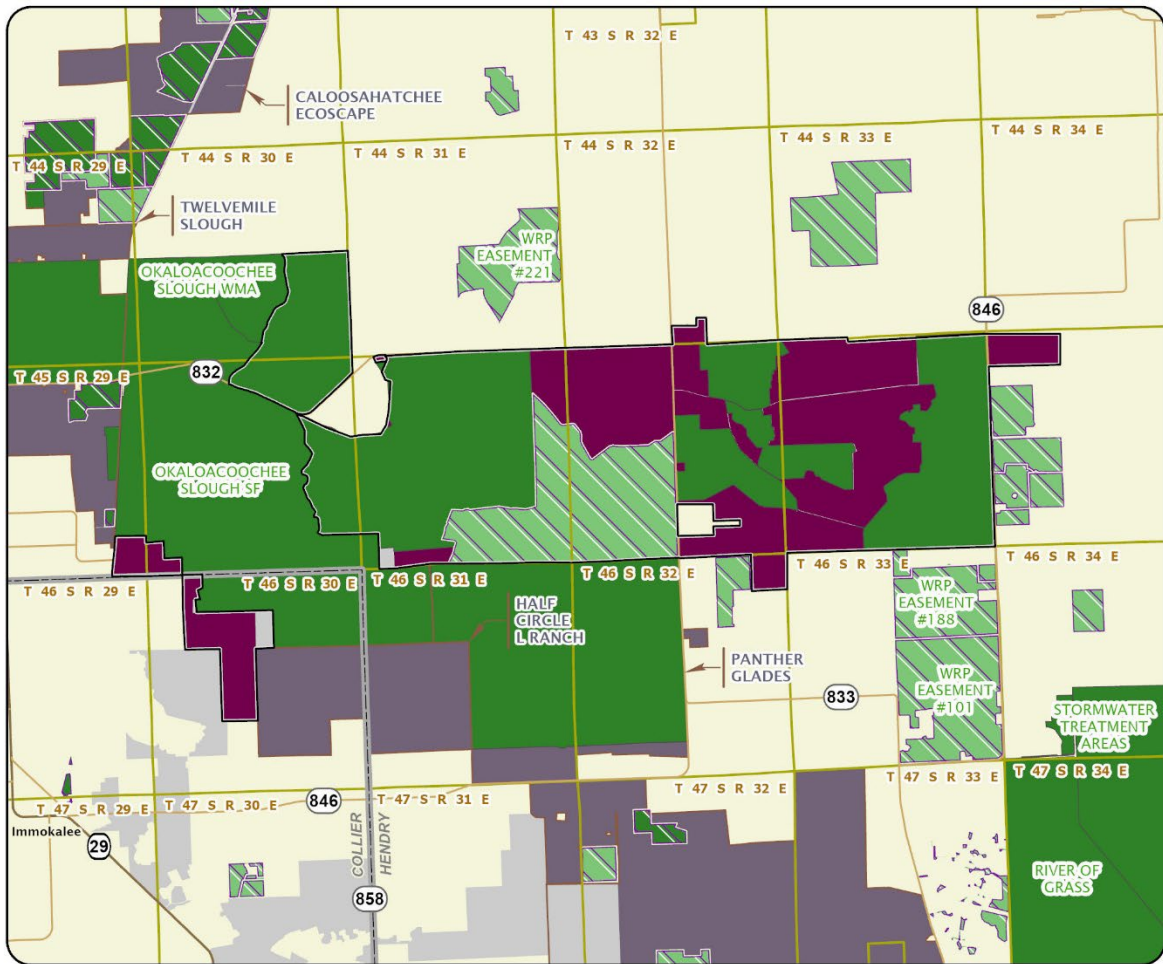
FWC and FFS will cooperate with other federal, state and local government agencies, including the South Florida Water Management District.

Management Cost Summary

<u>FWC</u>	<u>Startup</u>	<u>Recurring</u>
Source of Funds	LATF	not provided
Salary (six FTE)	\$216,639	not provided
OPS	not provided	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

