

Devil's Garden

Critical Natural Lands

Collier, Hendry

<i>Year Added to Priority List</i>	2002
<i>Project Acres</i>	82,995
<i>Acquired Acres</i>	33,751
<i>Cost of Acquired Acres</i>	\$63,395,000
<i>Remaining Project Acres</i>	49,244
<i>2020 Assessed Value of Remaining Acres</i>	\$185,724,938

Purpose for State Acquisition

The Devil's Garden project will increase protection of 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 plants and animals have been noted on site.

The project borders the Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest on the west and Dinner Island WMA 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 proposal is located in Hendry and Collier counties. The project's major parcel (71,608 acres) adjoins the eastern boundary of Okaloacoochee Slough State Forest and encompasses an area, 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 and lies across Keri Road from the northwest corner of the major parcel. 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 cattle ranching activities (conversion to pasture) and to a lesser extent by agriculture. Non-forested wetlands, including basin/depression marsh, swale, and wet prairie make up the dominant natural communities still present on the property. Mesic/wet flatwoods have been, to a large extent, cleared and converted to pasturelands. Prairie hammocks were scattered throughout the property and formed irregularly shaped forests, usually with basin/depression wetlands. In a helicopter survey, a few small (15 acres) patches of dome swamp fringing swale systems could be seen in the disjunct 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

FNAI Elements	Score
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, natural resource appreciation (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; and it may be possible to set areas aside where wildlife observation can be emphasized and encouraged.

Acquisition Planning

2002

On December 5, 2002, the Acquisition and Restoration Council (ARC) added the Devil's Garden project to Group A of the Florida Forever 2003 Priority List. This fee-simple project, sponsored by the Nature Conservancy (TNC) and FFS, consisted of approximately 82,508 acres with a single owner, Alico Inc., and a 2001 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.

2020

In September 2020, Phase 1B that includes the Central and West parcels was acquired fee simple from Alico, Inc. The acquisition contains 10,702.03 acres and was purchased at a cost of \$28,500,000.00. These parcels will be managed by FWC as part of Okaloacoochee Slough WMA.

2021

DEP acquired at total of 7,355.86 acres fee simple from Alico, Inc. to be managed by FWC as part of Okaloacoochee Slough WMA.



Coordination

TNC 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 land, water, and wetland systems of the state; increase natural resource-based public recreational and educational opportunities including but not limited to wildlife viewing, hunting, hiking and camping; and increase the amount of forestland available for sustainable management of natural resources.

Manager(s)

The Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) is the recommended lead manager for most of the area (approximately 71,608 acres). Florida Forest Service/FFS will manage the two westernmost parcels (approximately 10,900 acres) adjoining the Okaloacoochee 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. 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 proposal, when acquired by the state, will require 14 FTE positions to manage the project area. Certain activities may be privatized, which would reduce the number of FTEs required. Funding for natural-resource management and public use administration would come from the LATF. It is anticipated that revenue sources would include public use fees and timber harvests.



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. To the greatest extent practical, disturbed sites will be restored to conditions that would be expected to occur in naturally functioning ecosystems. Management activities will also stress enhancing abundance and spatial distribution of threatened and endangered species. Multiple-use principles will be practiced where compatible with resource management goals and acquisition purposes. 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.

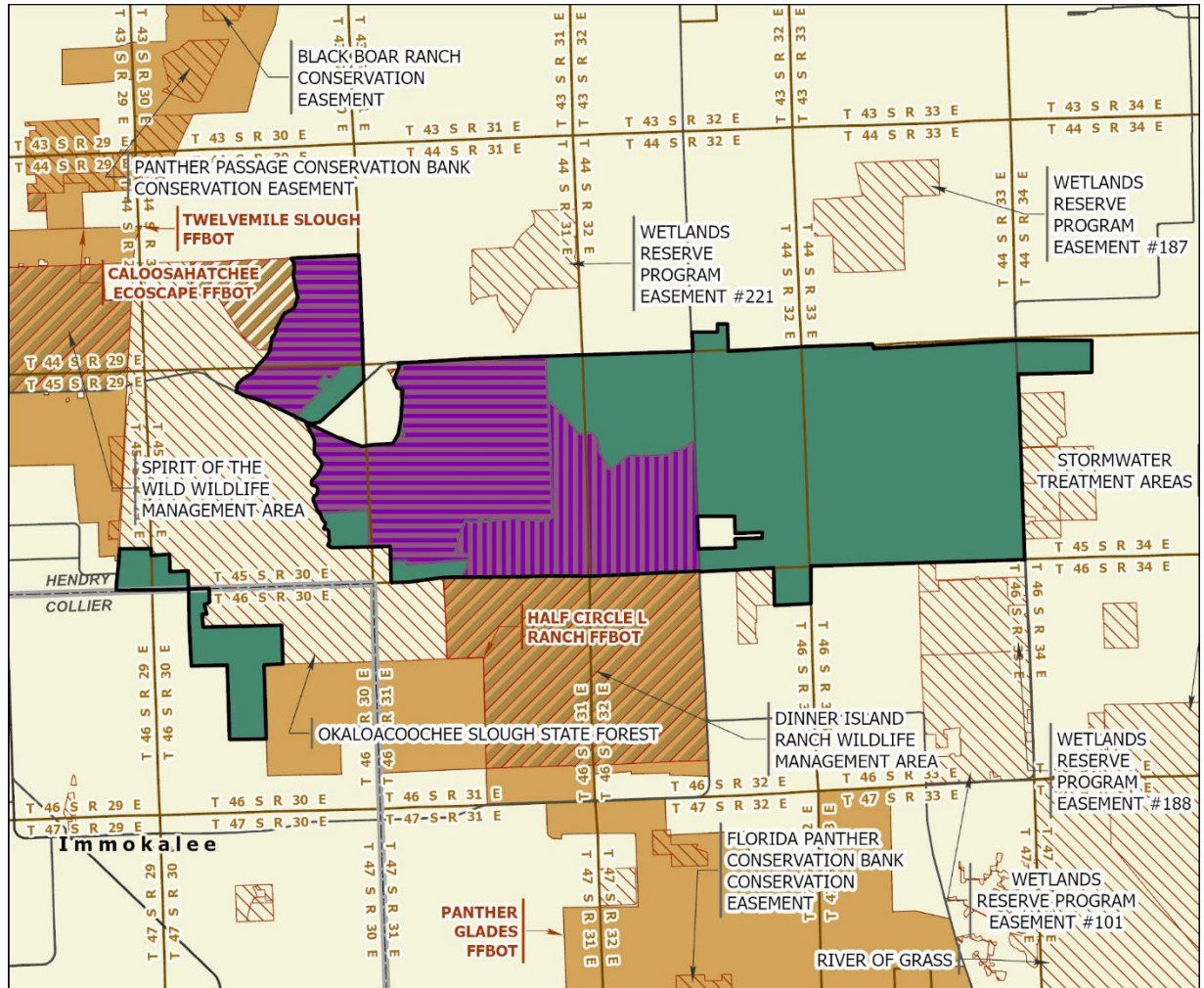
Cooperators in management activities

The FWC and FFS 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

Source: Management Prospectus as originally submitted



DEVIL'S GARDEN

COLLIER AND HENDRY COUNTIES

-  Florida Forever BOT Project Boundary
-  Acquired for Conservation (Fee Simple)
-  Acquired for Conservation (Less-Than-Fee)
-  Essential Parcel(s) Remaining
-  State Owned Conservation Lands
-  Other Conservation Lands
-  Other Florida Forever BOT Projects



FEBRUARY 2022

Map 1: FNAI, February 2022