

Our goal: protecting a continuous corridor of public and private conservation lands along the Peace River and its major tributaries.

The importance of protecting riparian buffers along the Peace River to maintain the ecological integrity of the river cannot be overstated. The river is a major influence on the health of Charlotte Harbor, one of Florida's most important estuaries, and it is an important source of potable water for the region.

Protection of an ecological corridor along the Peace River is important for myriad reasons including:

- Widening the “backbone” priority corridor identified in the Florida Ecological Greenways Network and the Integrated Habitat Network – this better serves the ecological and hydrological interests of the River ;
- Conservation/preservation leads to better control at sustaining/enhancing water quality and water quantity essential for the ecological integrity of Charlotte Harbor downstream and an important public water supply source;
- As the state plans for consequences of climate change and rising sea levels much attention needs to be given to the conservation of longitudinal linkages.
- The Peace River is one of the few options for connecting conservation lands in south Florida to the rest of the state.
- Most of all- a lack of conservation land in this critical area

Cumulative Impact Study

In 2003, the Florida Legislature directed the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) in consultation with the Southwest Florida Water Management District, to study the cumulative effects of major changes in “landform and hydrology” in the Peace River basin.

The Peace River Resource Management Plan, that was developed as an action in response to the Peace River Cumulative Impact Study, recommended certain actions in order to preserve and/or restore the remaining critical ecosystem. Specifically:

- To Develop an acquisition plan and funding strategy for the Peace River Basin through collaboration of local, state, and regional conservation land acquisition entities to assure a coordinated and equitable approach.

Integrated Habitat Network: The Peace River is also the primary corridor within the Department of Environmental Protection's (DEP) regional IHN project, which seeks to protect a riparian conservation network consisting of both existing and restored linear

riparian habitat. The IHN is essentially the preservation/reclamation strategy for the bone valley, which includes the mining district..

Why our area of focus was chosen:

- 100's of billions of dollars have been and are being invested in conservation of south Florida lands and waters.
- The Peace River is a significant contributor to Gulf coastal waters, the primary freshwater source of the Charlotte Harbor Estuary,
- The Peace River and its major tributaries are a Priority 3 within the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN- a scientifically vetted network of connections around the state; this area of focus takes into consideration the connectivity to surrounding conservation lands in the region).

Yet there is no comprehensive, coordinated effort to apply all regulatory, non-regulatory, and conservation options to ensuring the protection of this important resource.

There is a void in statewide conservation lands essentially corresponding to the Peace River basin.

What we have been doing:

- Landowner outreach: gauging interest, building relationships- we have been working with landowners in this area for several years;
- Exploring all options: acquisition, easements, grants federal, state, and local incentives;
- Working with involved agencies (SWFWMD, DEP, FWC)
- Beginning outreach to counties, RPC's, CHNEP- examining their priorities and goals;
- Looking for partnerships

Peace River Refuge Florida Forever Project

Wildlands Conservation has been working with landowners along the Peace River to assist them with the process of placing their lands into conservation. We now have approx 4440 acres total in our Florida Forever project (Peace River Refuge)- includes 19 miles of frontage along Peace River. We are working with other landowners in the region- to add them to our project.

All owners have agreed to sell conservation easements. This would enable to them to continue ranching and hunting leases- as well as other income generating activities that are compatible with conservation. Protection of these lands would bring tourism dollars to Desoto. There is a tremendous ecotourism potential with these properties (hiking, birdwatching, fishing tours, canoe tours, hunting).

Acquisition of these properties assures some much needed protection of this already compromised watershed and is consistent and compatible with ongoing land acquisition efforts by SWFWMD, Sarasota County, and Charlotte County. Slowly, these acquisitions are resulting in a network of preservation and corridors- the Peace River Refuge is a key parcel in this acquisition plan. This project is a optimally situated anchor point for a continuous greenway corridor of natural lands that extends from Charlotte Harbor to the Green Swamp.

This area has been identified by the County as priority for conservation, but Desoto County does not currently have an Environmental Lands Purchase Program. They have identified the Peace River corridor as their prime corridor (Greenway Master Plan) for protection of natural resources, habitat, and public recreational opportunities.

Next objectives

- Partnerships: Agencies, Conservation Groups, Private Interests, Counties
- Exploring existing conservation tools
- Landowner relations: Interests
- Public and private conservation mechanisms
- Work with the Conservation Blueprint Process (FWC)