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Palmetto



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Policy and plants:

How chapters are making a difference

As part of our mission, the Florida Native Plant Society promotes land conservation to protect and manage native plant habitat. Today, public lands harbor most of the natural areas we know and love, and these were largely acquired through state-funded land conservation programs such as Florida Forever (for more on this program, see the article on page 14). Although there has been a recent uptick in funding for Florida Forever and similar programs, the trend since 2008 has been a steady decline. As advocates for native plants and habitats, our call for funding land conservation programs is critical, now more than ever, given the current political challenges.

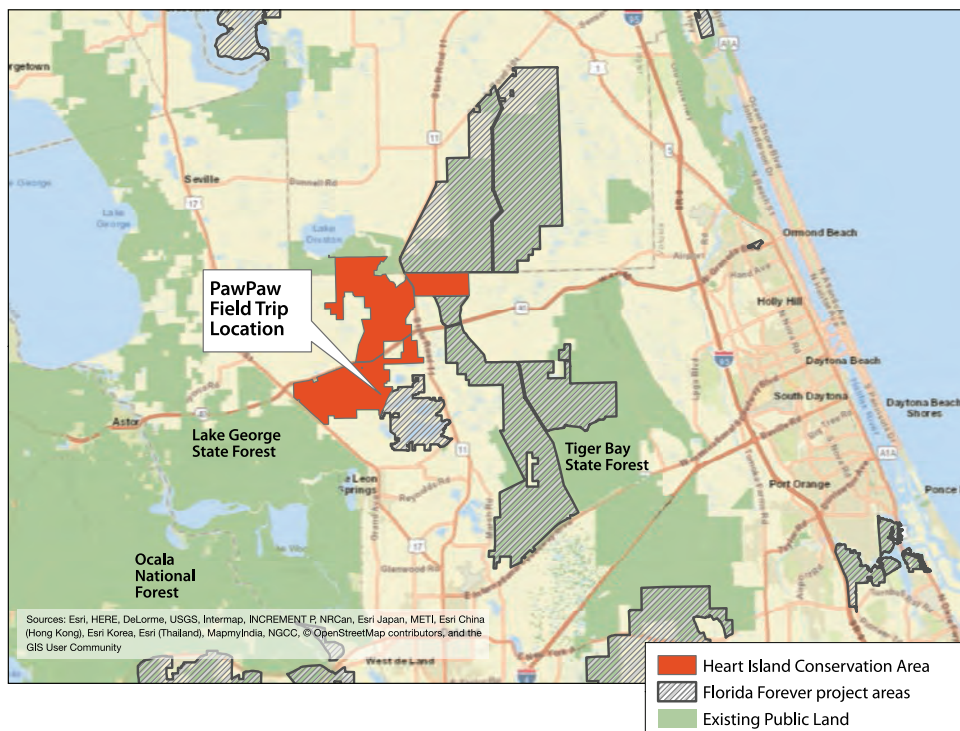
Last year the FNPS Policy Committee, headed by Eugene Kelly, issued a challenge to chapters. The “Take Your Lawmaker on a Field Trip” challenge invited chapters to organize educational field trips for local and state legislators to highlight the importance of land conservation for native plants and native plant habitats. Importantly, the challenge encourages FNPS members to engage directly with their state and local lawmakers, and show elected officials that we support increased land conservation and more funding for land protection through Florida Forever.

The challenge was heard and embraced by three FNPS chapters: the Pawpaw Chapter of Volusia and Flagler counties, the Palm Beach Chapter, and Central Florida’s Tarflower Chapter. Each chapter planned field trips to public lands which were acquired through Florida conservation lands programs and are currently managed for natural landscapes.

The chapters reached out to state legislative delegations and local lawmakers to invite them to enjoy a fun day with their native plant loving constituents and see the benefits of conservation programs. Perhaps most importantly, lawmakers learned how much their constituents care about the management and conservation of Florida’s natural habitats.

Sonya Guidry, representative of the Pawpaw Chapter and recent honoree of the FNPS Mentor Award, organized a field trip to Heart Island Conservation Area in Volusia County. This conservation area was cooperatively acquired through Florida Forever and the county-level conservation program Volusia Forever. Twenty-six people braved chilly temperatures to attend the January 4 field trip. In addition to Pawpaw members, attendees came from Stetson University and local environmental organizations such as the Audubon Society and Sierra Club. State House Representative Patrick Henry (District 26) and staff member Gina Wells joined the field trip to learn more about conservation and the interests of their constituents.

The field trip showcased the former citrus lands on Heart Island that are being restored to longleaf pine sandhill habitat. Heart Island was acquired as part of a larger Florida Forever conservation project to protect and restore remaining longleaf pine forests in North and Central Florida. Today, Heart Island features trails for hiking and horseback riding, as well as outdoor laboratories for education and ecological research.



Above: Cynthia Bennington, Professor of Biology at Stetson University in DeLand, led the group, which included State House Representative Patrick Henry (District 26), through longleaf pine restoration areas.

Left: Location map showing Heart Island Conservation Area, adjoining Florida Forever project areas and existing public land.

Left: Sonya Guidry, representative of the Pawpaw Chapter with a longleaf pine at Heart Island Conservation Area.

Cynthia Bennington, Professor of Biology at Stetson University in DeLand, led the group through longleaf pine restoration areas and explained the importance of natural resource protection. Professor Bennington and her students are studying ecological restoration of longleaf pine sandhills, including the response of native plants to ecological timber management and prescribed fire. Doug Weaver, former Volusia Forever Land Acquisition Director, described the state and local partnership process that led to acquisition of the Heart Island property, and how public lands can be protected through a variety of conservation programs and tools.

Trip leaders pointed out that lands adjacent to Heart Island are part of an approved Florida Forever project area, meaning they can be purchased from willing sellers if the Florida Forever program is fully funded. In this way, the entire area may be conserved for the purposes intended – protection of natural resources and native longleaf pine habitats.

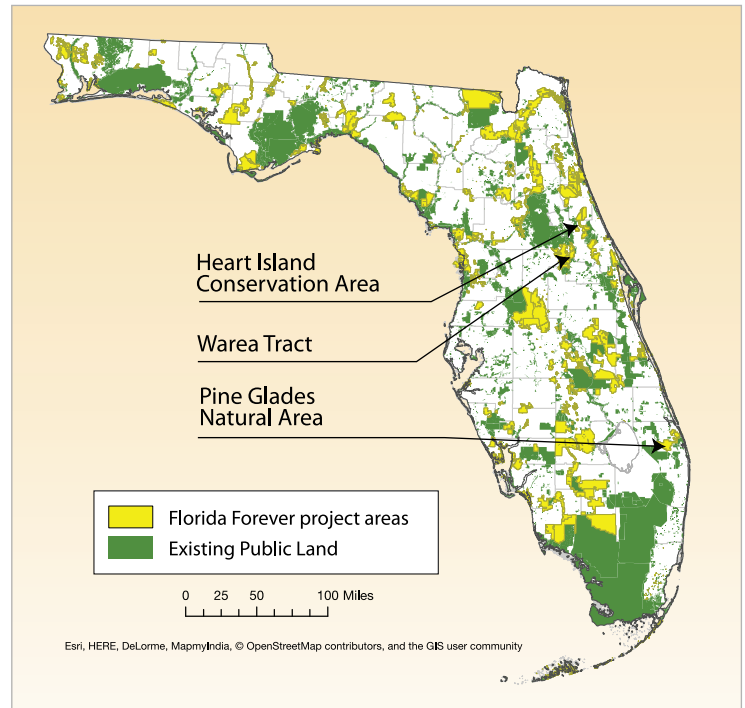
Representative Henry was impressed with the management of Heart Island and the support for the Florida Forever program shown by the group. He expressed his support for increased conservation funding in 2018 and beyond. As Sonya stated after the field trip, “The Pawpaw chapter appreciates Representative Henry and Ms. Wells’ participation in this event, and their interest in learning more about local conservation lands.”

In October of 2017, the Tarflower Chapter organized a field trip to the Warea Tract of Seminole State Forest, led by Mark Kateli and Pete Dunkelburg. The group searched for the endangered clasping warea (*Warea amplexifolia*) while they engaged with Eric Rollings, Supervisor of the Orange Soil and Water Conservation District. Mr. Rollings attended to show his support for increased funding of Florida Forever, the program responsible for acquisition of the Warea Tract. The Tract is now managed by the Florida Forest Service for numerous imperiled species, including the Florida Scrub Jay.

In December of last year, the Palm Beach Chapter held a field trip to Pine Glades Natural Area which was acquired in part through the Florida Forever program and is the Chapter’s “adopted” natural area in Palm Beach County. The Palm Beach Chapter invited their elected officials and State Representative Emily Slosberg (District 91) joined the trip along with her staff members Deniz Ozaltin and Erin Shields. Chapter members Laura Reynolds and Winnie Said led the field trip and gave an overview of the natural area and how it was protected through the Florida Forever program. Field trippers enjoyed the area by land and water, as the excursion included a kayak trip through beautiful interconnected marshes followed by a short walk through mesic pine flatwoods.

Representative Slosberg and her staff enjoyed the trip and the opportunity to ask questions and get informed answers. This trip was a great opportunity to engage with lawmakers and to help them make informed decisions that will benefit natural areas conservation in Florida.

Kudos to the chapters that stepped up last year for the “Take Your Lawmaker on a Field Trip” challenge. These field trips engaged several state and local lawmakers, and perhaps contributed to the partial funding of Florida Forever by the Legislature during the 2018 session. However, advocacy for conservation of Florida’s natural areas is an ongoing effort, and it is time again to engage our lawmakers in advance of the 2019 Legislative session. As Sonya Guidry said, “Florida Forever funding is an extremely important issue to the FNPS Pawpaw Chapter. The real native Florida cannot be reinvented after it is lost.”



Above left: State Representative Emily Slosberg (District 91), along with her staff members Deniz Ozaltin and Erin Shields at the Palm Beach Chapter field trip to Pine Glades Natural Area. **Above right:** More than twenty participants, including Eric Rollings, Supervisor of the Orange Soil and Water Conservation District, turned out for the Tarflower Chapter's trip to the Warea Tract at the Seminole State Forest.