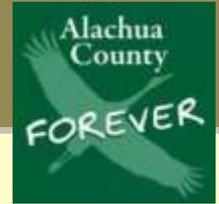




TOUCHSTONES

NOTES FROM THE ALACHUA COUNTY FOREVER LAND CONSERVATION PROGRAM

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Touchstones

By Ramesh Buch, Program Supervisor

Most people have heard the expression “touchstone”. Did you know a touchstone was a bit of hard, dark, finely-grained rock carried by miners, merchants and bankers? When they wanted to test the purity of a gold nugget, they would rub it on the touchstone and compare it to known standards. When gold became valued as currency, the touchstone was used to test the integrity of gold coins. The 2000 referendum that authorized the Alachua County Forever Program is our touchstone. We believe it is the mandate given us by the voters and therefore our mission. Over the last 11 years, when we were presented with an issue, we rubbed it – metaphorically speaking – on the referendum: *“acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands to protect water resources, wildlife habitats and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation”*.

Whether we are considering which property to purchase, how to best accommodate multiple user groups, decide on appropriate timber harvesting, hunting, or grazing strategies, we look back at the referendum and ask ourselves, “is this what the voters intended?” I feel then “Touchstones” is a fitting name for our newsletter. In it, I hope to share with you our thoughts, successes, and challenges. I hope you will let us know if we have not maintained your trust... like the touchstone.

We are entertaining other names for this newsletter. Please send us your suggestions and the winning entry gets a prize and a free lifetime subscription.

Welcome, and thanks for following along.



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Moorhen (*Gallinula chloropus*) at Barr Hammock Preserve.
Photo by Mac Stone

ACF Dashboard

Acquisition List protected:	19,984
With Direct ACF funding:	16,458
Remaining on List:	29,823
Under contract:	709
Value of land protected:	\$ 91,785,410
County share:	\$ 34,082,743
Partner share:	\$ 57,702,667
Managed by County:	9,545
Managed by Partners:	10,439
To Be Opened to the public:	15,507
As of Mar 22, 2012	

This is an electronic newsletter distributed to anyone interested in following the Alachua County Forever Program. To be added to the distribution list, please click [here](#).

“What is the extinction of the Condor, to a child who has never known a wren?” - Robert Michael Pyle.

To acquire, improve and manage environmentally significant lands

Protecting Lake Forest Creek

By Ramesh Buch



Lake Forest Creek CE

This quarter, ACF purchased two conservation easements to protect the Lake Forest Creek ecosystem. Lake Forest Creek drains eastern Gainesville into Newnan's Lake, which is a valuable fishing and aquatic amenity to local residents. The Kincade & Tabone, and the Smith Conservation Easements are located about 1 mile east of SE 43rd Street between East University Avenue and SE 8th Avenue, generally northeast of Eastside High School.

Both properties are composed of sandhill, mesic flatwoods, baygall, depression marsh, blackwater stream, and basin swamp. The wetland communities are in good to excellent condition. The large basin swamp that lies on the northern section of the properties extends to the north and west. The northern portion of this wetland is owned by the State of Florida and drains to Newnan's Lake. In the other direction, other branches of Lake Forest Creek connect to the City of Gainesville's Morningside Nature Center via other State holdings.

One of the Easement grantors also donated a conservation easement on an adjacent 10 acres. These were the 39th and 40th acquisitions by the ACF Program and the 12th and 13th using the Wild Spaces and Public Places Surtax, approved by the voters in 2008 to extend the ACF Program.



ACF has now purchased 9 Conservation Easements totaling 1,140 acres and range in size from the 283-acre Camp Kulaqua property on the Santa Fe River to the 30-acre Lake Forest Smith tract.

Conservation easements are negotiated to meet the County's water quality and habitat protection goals. Public access is at the discretion of the landowner. The landowner continues to manage the property. County staff visit annually and provide assistance and input where needed or requested.

Conservation easements, as partial interests in land, are cheaper to purchase, allow the land to stay on the tax rolls, and remain on the land forever, even as the owners change.

Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve Community Clean-up

By Kevin Ratkus, Environmental Specialist

While ACF land managers were treating invasive plants on Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve they found something unexpected deep in the forest along the edge of Turkey Creek: dump truck loads of nursery debris, illegally dumped in the late 1970's. This kind of dumping tends to attract more illegal dumping and can contaminate surface waters and drinking water supplies. ACF staff took photos and a GPS point so they could find it again in the 380-acre Preserve. Back in the office, we devised a plan to remove this debris. We hired a contractor to open up an old road to gain access to the dump, collected the trash and recycled the metal concrete.

Once the bobcat had collected the majority of the heavy debris, it was time to find enthusiastic and hard working volunteers to finish the project. So, we requested assistance from the Trinity United Methodist Church of Gainesville's Green Team members. Coordinated by Carol Lewis, TUMC adopted Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve and offers critical volunteer assistance to help the ACF program open up the site to the public. Carol and ACF staff finalized the project details and on February 25th, 2012, twenty eager volunteers working diligently on their Saturday morning, helped finish the job. This group is comprised of members of the church, Eastside High School students & faculty, Preserve neighbors and Santa Fe College students.

By noon, they had dug out the last bit of debris from the sloped creek bank and surrounding area. The project recycled 30 cubic yards of metal and concrete slabs. Old electronics were taken to the Alachua County Hazardous Waste Collection Center for recycling and the remaining five cubic yards of plastic trash was disposed of properly. Now, the Preserve is cleaner and one step closer to opening.



Before



During



After

Volunteer Spotlight

By Sandra Vardaman, Senior Planner

Carol Lewis is this quarter's volunteer in the spotlight. Carol has coordinated volunteers from Trinity United Methodist Church for over 3 years. Carol and her intrepid volunteers have put in over 459 volunteer hours in 8 workdays at ACF's Wainberg, Paynes Prairie Additions and Turkey Creek Hammock Preserves and collected 205 cubic yards of trash and 63 tires. This volume of trash would cover a basketball court 3 feet high.

Carol is the glue that keeps them coming back for more. She is incredibly energetic, passionate, compassionate, positive, organized and believes in investing in the community and being a good steward of the environment. She works, has a family, is strongly involved with her church and ACF is not the only organization with which she volunteers. Every time we see her, she has just returned from some cool hike, canoe trip or camping trip. THANKS CAROL!



The Forestry Stand

By Earl Clark, Forester

No Kidding, You Are Doing What at Phifer?

If you see some temporary signs where the Phifer Preserve runs parallel to SR-20 informing drivers: "Logging Trucks Entering Highway" you aren't dreaming. ACF bid out a timber harvest on Phifer Preserve. This part of the Preserve contained young planted pines when it was purchased from Plum Creek several years ago. These are now at a merchantable age and are being thinned to improve the Preserve. The County adopted guidelines for timber harvesting in the Timber Business Plan and The Phifer Management Plan. The thinning is one of the first steps in the process of converting industrial timber lands into uneven-aged forests that mirror the composition of what once occupied these lands and begin to regain the biological and ecological diversity that is desirable.

I guess you could say that by making well-founded, thoughtful decisions based on facts we are certainly doing our job of managing and improving the land assets owned by the citizens of Alachua County. Just be careful of the log trucks you may see pulling onto the highway just east of the Cross Creek Road.



ACF and the Florida Trail Association Hike

By Susie Hetrick, Sr. Environmental Specialist

On Saturday, March 3, the Florida Trail Association inaugurated its new formal partnership with ACF by hosting a hike on the Watermelon Pond Preserve Gladman tract. Hikers congregated at the Watermelon Pond County Park, and struck out across the vast, grassy Watermelon Pond lake basin, a place packed with hydrological mystery and natural wonders. Even though its name denotes otherwise, Watermelon Pond is actually a lake – a sandhill upland lake – characterized by widely fluctuating water levels. During wet periods, the lake is a contiguous body of shallow water enveloping small deep pockets, and surrounded by a narrow fringe of wetlands. During dry periods, the lake shrinks to isolated ponds of standing water surrounded by wide bands of marsh and prairie plants.

A strong, warm breeze and the springtime angle of the sunlight made it an especially lovely morning to be outside. Because much of the lake basin is currently dry, hikers were able to walk through the wet prairie and basin marsh communities which fringe the receding ponds of the lake, getting a first-hand look at the unusual plants which thrive in these habitats. Wading birds were abundant on the edges of the ponds, and hikers were treated to spectacular views of foraging wood storks, great egrets, and great blue herons. A lesser yellowlegs and a pair of meadowlarks were also spotted along the way, as were kestrels, eastern bluebirds and a northern parula warbler. Halfway through the hike, the shady hammock island provided hikers with timely respite from the sun and wind, and a unique opportunity to discover the contrasts between the open habitats of the lake basin and the quiet hardwood forests that dot it. Magnificent American holly trees, spreading live oaks and twining vines with stems as broad as a man’s arm sheltered the hikers, allowing them to rest, regroup and prepare for the return hike across the lake basin, to a picnic lunch at the county park.



On the Hike at Watermelon Pond

Upcoming Events

More information on the ACF website

<p>Nature Tour of Barr Hammock Preserve Where: Barr Hammock Preserve Date: Saturday, April 7, 2012 Time: 9:00 am –1:00 pm Cost: \$25 payable to Florida Trail Association. Contact: Lauraine Lynch (352) 378-8823 lylynch@floridatrail.org</p>
<p>Great American Clean-up Event Where: Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve Date: Saturday April 21, 2012 Time: 9am – Noon Cost: Free Contact: Kevin Ratkus: 352-264-6800 or kratkus@alachuacounty.us</p>
<p>Nature Tour of Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve Where: Turkey Creek Hammock Preserve Date: Saturday, May 5, 2012 Time: 9:00 am –1:00 pm Cost: \$25 payable to Florida Trail Association. Contact: Lauraine Lynch (352) 378-8823 or lylynch@floridatrail.org</p>
<p>The 2nd National Trails Day Hike of the Mill Creek Preserve Where: Mill Creek Preserve Date: Saturday, June 2, 2012 Time: 9:00 am –1:00 pm Cost: \$25 payable to Florida Trail Association. Contact: Lauraine Lynch (352) 378-8823 or lylynch@floridatrail.org</p>



Bird watching at Watermelon Pond

View from the Fire Tower

By David Hoyt, Prescribed Fire Coordinator

What is the return on the investment that the County spends on prescribed fire and fire fuels management? A 2-acre wildfire the Florida Forest Service (used to be Fla. Div. of Forestry) responded to on March 12, 2012 cost \$2,900.00 to suppress – almost **\$1,500** per acre. Comparatively, between 1999 and 2009, Fire Management Teams completed fuel management projects on over 94,000 acres at a total cost of approximately \$4.2 million. About **\$44** per acre. These projects provided enhanced protection for almost 60,000 Florida homes and business structures valued at over \$13 billion or \$70 per structure protected.¹

Generally for each dollar spent in fuel management, \$2.14 in wildfire suppression and damages was saved. This ignores the associated costs of losses to human life, timber, wildlife, human health, pets, and possessions. Some authors estimate the final costs could be 50 times the final suppression costs when all the external costs are added.² This makes our investment in prescribed fire very wise indeed.



¹ FFS Publication, *Wildfire Risk Reduction in Florida*, pg.10, 11.

² Zybach, Dubrasich, Brenner, *Marker in Advances in Fire Practice*, Fall 2009.

By Ramesh Buch, Program Supervisor

I hear a lot of stuff. I also get asked a great many questions that make me stop and think we need to do a better job getting our story told. We are also faced with issues on which we could use your perspective.

On this page, I hope to provide you with the facts and history, and share some of our principles and philosophy on issues we are facing. I will answer some of the questions posed to us, correct some of the misinformation that I hear, and address criticisms and critiques.

I believe sharing information and transparency builds trust and accountability.

I believe politics is just a marketplace for debating, discarding or validating ideas.

I believe an informed public makes better decisions on those ideas.



Sunset at Lake Alto Preserve.
Photo by Larry Korhnak

Can Alachua County afford to remove millions of dollars worth of lands from the tax rolls?

By 2012, the Alachua County Forever bond referendum has protected over \$69 million in real estate with another \$22 million protected by our partners. Of that \$69 million, \$34 million was the County's share derived from the Alachua County Forever bond referendum in 2000 and the Wild Spaces & Public Places sales tax referendum in 2008. The taxable value of that land was just \$3.5 million since nearly all of it was taxed at the reduced Agricultural Rate.

The tax base in Alachua County in 2011 was \$12 billion. So Alachua County Forever purchases impacts 0.03% of the tax base. If all the land was taxed at its full value, the impact would be 0.5%. The decrease in County tax revenues from that acreage is \$84,000. The tax base in Alachua County in 2001 was \$6 billion, which means it has increased, on average, \$1.5 million per *day* historically to its present value. So if we bought all the property on Monday, by Wednesday it has been regenerated by the natural increase.

Some would argue that even this is too much to reduce our tax base by. Consider that many studies point to the proximity effect. That property adjacent and proximate to conservation property and open space are worth more than similar property not similarly situated. A 2004 study of Alachua County indicates that this effect adds \$150 million to the tax base and \$3.5 million in taxes each year. And these does not begin to consider nature's benefits that accrue to communities and wildlife from water quality, water storage, air quality, aesthetics, recreation, game species management, stress relief and other health benefits associated with land conservation.

Purchasing land for conservation reduces future development and economic opportunities.

It is true that land acquired for land conservation can no longer be developed in the traditional sense. Studies have shown that land which remains natural will use many fewer government services than land that is developed to the point that even with the relative loss of tax base, it is one of the cheapest land uses. Even land that has not been developed yet, but might be in the future, costs taxpayers money as governments must anticipate its infrastructure needs, planning the demand for utilities, roads, schools, and other public services.

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Lake Alto Preserve

Alachua County Commission

Paula M. DeLaney, Chair
Mike Byerly, Vice-Chair
Susan Baird
Winston Bradley
Lee Pinkoson

Administration

Richard Drummond, County Manager

Chris Bird,
Environmental Protection Dept. Director

We're on the Web!

Visit us at:

www.alachuacountyforever.us

ALACHUA COUNTY FOREVER MISSION

Approved in November 2000 by the voters, to acquire, improve and manage the county's environmentally sensitive lands to protect water resources, wildlife habitats and natural areas suitable for resource-based recreation.

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