

Conservation report 1-10 from Grant Campbell, SFAS

Endangered and Threatened Species

2009 was a record year for the killing of endangered panthers and manatees. The Center for Biological Diversity's legal team has jumped in to stop the slaughter, but they need our help to win.

24 Florida panthers were killed in 2009 by shooters and a record 17 vehicle-related deaths, almost seven times higher than the average mortality of the 1980s and more than four times the average of the 1990s. Only 100 are left in the wild, yet the administration has refused to rule on petitions to establish a 3-million-acre panther reserve. Last week legal papers were filed to force the issue.

A federal study published recently revealed that manatees are dying at a rate seven times higher than they can sustain, yet the Obama administration has resisted expanding manatee preserves as requested by the Center.

Amazing as it sounds the Obama administration wants to expand the use of a destructive and cruel way of fishing that will cause more sea turtle deaths. If you haven't already signed please do so to let the government know how important it is to assure no more long line fishing is allowed. Please take a minute to do it now. Thanks!

http://salsa.democracyinaction.org/o/2167/p/dia/action/public/?action_KEY=1966

If legislation currently under consideration is passed, 2010 will be a record killing year for sea turtles. The Obama administration has tripled the number of sea turtles that can be caught by industrial fleets off Hawaii and increased the catch in the Gulf of Mexico by 700 percent. Simultaneous suits have been filed in Hawaii and Florida to stop it.

Six sea turtle conservation groups have sued the feds over the new rules that could allow certain commercial fishermen to injure or kill an average 233 loggerheads each year in pursuit of their desired catch.

That allowance is more than seven times as much bycatch as the National Marine Fisheries Service previously allowed for bottom long-liners in the Gulf of Mexico off Florida, before it issued its new rule in October.



Granting new urgency to the Center for Biological Diversity's campaign to end freshwater turtle harvesting, this month animal-

welfare workers seized more than 20,000 exotic animals from a Texas pet wholesaler because of inhumane conditions. Five thousand of them were imperiled turtles, including 200 that were dead or dying.

U.S. Global Exotics of Texas is a major exporter of wild-caught turtles, including internationally protected endangered turtles. It's behind the removal of all Cagle's map turtles from the Guadalupe River, prompting Texas to protect the species. The company also sells imperiled spotted turtles -- 10 of which were confiscated, near death, during the December raid.

The Cagle's map turtle is now a candidate for federal protection and Texas ended commercial turtle harvesting in public waters. Unfortunately, Texas still allows unlimited harvesting of seven species from private waters -- so in 2008, the Center petitioned 12 states to save turtles from harvesting, and Florida, previously one of the worst states for native turtles, now has one of the country's strongest turtle-conservation measures.

Seawalls at Flamingo -- Everglades National Park

The National Park Service (NPS) is beginning an environmental assessment of options for repairing deteriorating seawalls at the Flamingo Developed Area of Everglades National Park. NPS is seeking input from interested parties during scoping to identify the issues, impact topics and scope of the alternatives to be analyzed in the EA.

The purpose of the project is to rehabilitate the seawalls and associated facilities at the Flamingo Developed Area. This project is needed in order to avoid structural failure of seawalls, to address public safety issues and evaluate potential effects of seawall rehabilitation on park resources, operations, visitor use and facilities.

The Flamingo seawalls and associated facilities were built in 1954 and have deteriorated over the years due to spalling and corrosion, settling, boat impacts and hurricanes. Visible sections of existing seawall caps and pilings are cracking and spalling due to rusting and expanding reinforcing steel, in some cases causing potential tripping hazards for visitors and staff. Pavement cracking and settling along the perimeter of some seawalls also indicates possible failure of the tie rod systems. Failure of a single tie rod could have a rippling effect that leads to failure of a large portion of the seawall system. The entire Visitor Center seawall is so deteriorated that it requires abandonment, and a new seawall constructed water-side. Catastrophic failure could cause the seawalls to fall into the water exposing buildings and other facilities to storm damage. Failed seawalls could also result in partial or complete closure of the boat basins and boat ramps and prevent public access to Whitewater or Florida Bays.

The participation of interested parties and individuals, local agencies, Federal and State agencies, and Native American Tribes is invited to provide comments and identify any issues. Written comments may be submitted on-line through the NPS Planning, Environment and Public Comment (PEPC) website <http://parkplanning.nps.gov>. Select "Everglades NP" from the drop down box, then "Flamingo Developed Area Seawall Rehabilitation EA", and "Open for Public Comment" box. A scoping brochure with photographs and additional information is attached and available on PEPC at this link: <http://parkplanning.nps.gov/document.cfm?parkId=374&projectId=17836&documentID=31064>

Port Manatee Terminal -- Florida's Gulf Coast

Martin Marietta and Port Manatee are partnering in \$42 million deal to take over the old Eastern Cement area and build an aggregate terminal at Port Manatee on Florida's Gulf Coast.

The company plans to build a 20-acre aggregate terminal at the port, linking Berth 5 to the new facility with a 4,900-foot high-speed conveyor system that is designed to move about 4,000 tons of aggregate rock per hour.

<http://www.thebradentontimes.com/index.php?cid=803305&src=news&refno=1170&category=Business%20%26%20Financial&curlid=2269>

South Florida Watering Rules Fight

Opponents of South Florida's new year-round watering rules are taking their fight to the Legislature, opting for legislative muscle over courtroom battles. Legal challenges expected from city, county and private utilities to new landscape irrigation limits approved in November never materialized.

With the appeal deadline now past, the South Florida Water Management District plans to make the switch in mid-January from drought-driven watering restrictions to new year-round standards. The Legislature, though, ultimately could decide whether the district's year-round rules, two years in the making, will remain in effect

A coalition of utilities has called on legislators to weigh in on whether the water management district exceeded its authority in imposing year-round, three-times-a-week watering limits.

An attorney for the Legislature's Joint Administrative Procedures Committee last week put the district on notice that an objection to the new watering rules is being considered.

Utilities have objected to permanent watering restrictions, questioning the

conservation benefits that come at the expense of water sales revenue and that can lead to increased water rates.

Picayune Strand Restoration Project -- Merritt Canal

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Jacksonville District hosted a groundbreaking ceremony for the Merritt Canal portion of the Picayune Strand Restoration Project on Thursday, Jan. 7, 2010. Project partners include the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the South Florida Water Management District, and the State of Florida.

The Merritt Canal component of the Picayune Strand Restoration Project adds to earlier efforts to reclaim this land from the ravages of human development. This project will restore water flow across the landscape, rehydrate drained wetlands, improve estuarine waters, and return habitat to threatened wildlife communities.

Public Hearings -- EPA's Proposed Numeric Nutrient Criteria

EPA would like to announce its plans to hold public hearings in Florida to provide an opportunity for the public to provide input and comments to EPA on its proposed numeric nutrient criteria for lakes and flowing waters in Florida.

February 18, 2010: 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. at the Holiday Inn Palm Beach Airport, 1301 Belvedere Road, West Palm Beach, FL 33405

Restoration versus Industrial Distribution Center -- Palm Beach County

“Remember Scripps” has become the rallying cry for environmental groups lining up to fight an industrial distribution center planned on sugar cane land in Palm Beach County.

The Port of Palm Beach voted Thursday to build a sprawling “inland port” on Florida Crystals’ land south of Lake Okeechobee despite concerns that industrial development could get in the way of Everglades restoration.

Supporters hail the proposed cargo shipping hub as an economic savior for lakeside communities plagued with unemployment. But environmentalists say the proposed location opens the door to mushrooming industrial development that would foil plans to restore water flows to the Everglades.

They are preparing a legal challenge, similar to the approach that torpedoed Palm Beach County’s ill-fated plans to build a “biotech village” anchored by The Scripps Research Institute on citrus groves west of Palm Beach Gardens.

After years of ignoring environmentalists' arguments that the proposed Scripps site would bring too much development to rural areas, a legal challenge in 2006 persuaded Palm Beach County to move Scripps to Florida Atlantic University's Jupiter campus.

Now environmental groups warn that the thousands of jobs promised to struggling residents in Pahokee, Belle Glade and South Bay won't materialize any time soon if the inland port project becomes tied up in legal fights.

The land-locked Port of Palm Beach hopes to expand by teaming with Broward County's Port Everglades, and the Port of Miami to build an industrial distribution center that would link coastal ports to rail and truck routes across the country.

Florida Crystals' proposal to build the facility near the company's Okeelanta power plant west of U.S. 27 beat two competing sites near Clewiston and another near Port St. Lucie.

Environmental groups maintain that an inland port can work, as long as it doesn't get in the way of restoration. They contend the Florida Crystals location poses the most risk to hampering multi-billion-dollar restoration efforts.

Restoration plans call for using farmland in the vast Everglades Agricultural Area, south of Lake Okeechobee, to build a series of reservoirs and stormwater treatment areas to re-establish water flows from the lake to the Everglades.

Florida Crystals contends that current restoration plans put those reservoirs and treatment areas west of the company's Okeelanta plant and that the proposed inland port doesn't conflict with Everglades efforts.

But restoration plans aren't finalized and the potential environmental problems go beyond the exact location of the distribution center. There is already a legal challenge in the works to Palm Beach County's plan to change its development rules to allow the inland port on Florida Crystals' land. Environmental permits needed to build the facility can also expect a challenge that could delay construction.

"Everybody wants to do something for jobs, but it's not realistic here," said Richard Grosso, of the Everglades Law Center, who also helped wage the Scripps fight

South Florida's Wading Birds -- 2009 a Banner Year

This was a banner year for South Florida's wading birds. Scientists who conducted an annual survey around the Everglades region counted 77,000 wading birds nests in 2009, the most since the 1940s and 8,000 more than 2002,

the most recent banner year. Nest counts were more than three times higher than last year and 83 percent higher than the average of the past nine years.

The endangered wood stork built some 6,400 nests, 18 times as many as in 2008 and three times as many as they've averaged over the past decade.

The white ibis also was busy this year, building 400 percent more nests than 2008 and twice as many as their average for the decade.

Researchers counted most of the wading bird nests in a series of Water Conservation Areas that extend from west of Miami up to Lake Okeechobee. But 2009 also brought the largest nest count in Everglades National Park since 1941.

Nest production for the roseate spoonbill was lower than average. But even so, they hatched more than two chicks per nest, the fourth straight year the number has exceeded the normal one per nest average

Better water management practices have played a part in the recovery. When birds are taken into account, managers can avoid such harmful practices as dumping water into shallow foraging areas.

Rock Mine vs. Florida Panther

The Seminole Tribe has applied for a permit to expand a rock mine in a remote corner of northwest Broward County, in a proposal that could generate opposition from environmentalists concerned about the Florida panther.

The tribe has asked the Army Corps of Engineers for permission to destroy 198 acres of wetlands to mine limestone on its Big Cypress Reservation, a place of pastures, forests and wetlands where panthers hunt deer, hogs and other prey. The rock would be used mainly to rebuild a bridge, widen shoulders and make other safety improvements to Snake Road, a notoriously dangerous road that winds through the reservation. But the project could face a fight from conservationists concerned about the construction of housing developments, roads and other developments in the endangered cat's shrinking habitat.

The rock mine would be within the area used by panthers to hunt deer and other game, and it serves as a travel corridor connecting the panther habitat of Big Cypress National Preserve to the forested public game lands of western Broward and Palm Beach counties.

The Army Corps of Engineers plans to seek an opinion from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on the likely impact on the panther. But many environmentalists have little faith in the government's willingness to stop or restrict projects that could threaten the endangered cat.

Several environmental groups this month filed 60-day notices of plans to sue the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for failing to designate critical habitat for the panther, a requirement under the Endangered Species Act. The proposed rock mine expansion would fall within the area for which they are seeking protection. The groups include the Sierra Club, Conservancy of Southwest Florida, Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility and The Center for Biological Diversity.

Although rock mining typically involves blasting, no explosives will be used for this one, according to the Corps of Engineers. Using a backhoe, the tribe's workers would mine in strips 20 feet deep, 200 feet wide and 2,195 feet long, leaving behind rock pit lakes. To mitigate the loss of wetlands, they have proposed making improvements to 736 acres of existing wetlands on the west side of the reservation, which the tribe says will enhance habitat for panthers and endangered wood storks.

Right Whale Monitoring Program

The endangered North Atlantic right whales have arrived at their winter calving grounds off the coasts of Florida and Georgia. That means a volunteer effort to monitor the whales has moved into high gear.

The Marine Resource Council's Northern Right Whale Monitoring Program is planning local training seminars throughout the area.

Whale spotters along the coast keep an eye out to relay critical whale-sighting information to scientists. Marine mammal scientists track new calves and alert ships to whale sightings to try to prevent collisions that prove deadly to the whales.

Such boat collisions are one of the leading causes of death among the whales, which scientists believe number fewer than 400. The whales were once hunted almost to extinction, before the International Whaling Commission banned the practice in 1949.

No whales have been seen yet off the Volusia or Flagler coast this winter, but whale experts say it's only a matter of time. A right whale was seen Friday in Juno Beach, off the South Florida coast. which means the whales are definitely in the area/

Kissimmee River Restoration

To reduce the risk of flooding and to convert thousands of acres of wetland to ranches, the Feds turned 103 miles of winding Kissimmee River into 57 miles of a string-straight canal 900 feet wide in places and up to 30 feet deep.

Yet almost as soon as that work was finished in the 1970s, a clamor began to restore the river, which flows south from Central Florida to Lake Okeechobee. Even then, ecologists knew it would be far easier to wreck nature than to heal it.

District officials, describing their project as the world's most ambitious river restoration, estimate it will cost Federal and Florida agencies \$1 billion by the time land purchases and construction work are done in the mid-2010s.

Backfilling the deep canal forces the Kissimmee's waters into the shallower river channel and spreads it across vast stretches of adjacent land.

One of those scientists is Biologist Lawrence Glenn, a fish biologist with the South Florida Water Management District and one of many overseers of the Kissimmee's restoration. His agency has calculated specific water needs for specific plants, animals and insects. "We've counted 320 fish and wildlife species that have come back since we reconnected the floodplain to the flow of water," he said.

While the deep canal and amputated segments of original river channel had been relative dead zones, the restored river channel flows with oxygen-rich waters that are reviving dozens of original species of insects, fish and birds.

As the river and the wetlands rehabilitate, the type of ecosystem that's expected to emerge is called broadleaf marsh. Dominant plants include pickerelweed, arrowhead and maidencane, all of which need to be more than wet — a healthy broadleaf marsh is flooded most days of the year.

Also coming this year is a transformation of nearly 1,400 acres of pasture, thanks to \$18 million worth of the recent heavy-equipment work, as marsh plants reclaim their natural place. "It's going to be great," Glenn said.

Manatees

Biologists with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission's (FWC) Fish and Wildlife Research Institute documented 429 manatee carcasses in state waters in 2009. A combination of factors contributed to the high total, as indicated by record high numbers in several of the categories of manatee deaths.

The high number of manatees affected by cold stress during the winter months of 2008-2009 can, in part, explain the higher-than-average number of manatee deaths last year. Biologists documented a record high of 56 cold stress-related deaths in 2009, which was more than double the five-year average. With the current cold spell, 2010 could end up at least as bad as 2009.