Chapter 6 - Outdoor Recreation Trends and Issues

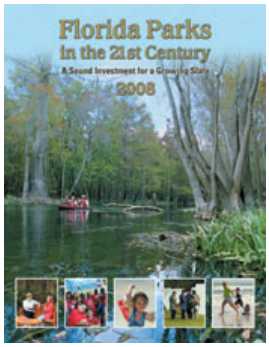
Understanding outdoor recreation issues and anticipating emerging trends is an important element of the state's outdoor recreation plan. Florida is among the largest and most dynamic state in the nation. Changes in the state's social, economic and environmental systems will affect many aspects of people's lives, including how they recreate. Although these considerations do not lend themselves readily to quantitative analysis, it is nonetheless important that they be fully recognized and understood in future decision-making.

Beginning in November 2006, a series of 14 public participation workshops were conducted in cities throughout the state. By the final workshop session in June 2007, a broad cross-section of state, local and federal land managers, recreation users, local officials, recreation professionals and private citizens had contributed their views on the important outdoor recreation issues, problems and trends that face Florida. These comments and ideas were then compiled into several broad topics which are discussed further in this chapter. A list of the workshop locations and dates and a compilation of the comments received from the participants are contained in Appendix G.

Funding for Outdoor Recreation

By far, the issue that was expressed most often by participants at the public workshops was funding for outdoor recreation. Park and recreation agencies at every level of government are facing severe budget limitations. Funding for operating and maintaining parks, constructing and repairing park facilities, and providing visitor programs and other services was reported to be at critically low levels throughout the state. Recreation providers are finding it more and more difficult to maintain their existing levels of service, let alone provide the additional facilities and services that are needed to keep pace with the state's increasing population.

The need for additional recreation funding is particularly great for local governments. Revenue shortfalls have necessitated budget reductions in many cities and counties, and park and recreation programs are often among the first services to be reduced. *Florida Parks in the 21st Century 2008*, a report released by the Florida Recreation and Park Association, The Trust for Public Land, the Florida League of Cities and the Florida Association of Counties, documents a combined need of $10.5 billion to meet the needs identified in recreation and open space elements of local government comprehensive plans, based on current levels of service. The figure represents funds needed for acquiring new and expanded parks, renovating and restoring existing parks and constructing new park facilities.



State-level recreation providers are also facing funding reductions brought about by the declining economies of Florida and the nation. Revenue shortfalls and legislative caps on trust fund appropriations have reduced the level of funds available for operations and maintenance, facility repairs and construction, and visitor services at a time when

public demand and park visitation are reaching record levels. The Division of Recreation and Parks (DRP) reported needs for land acquisition, repairs and renovations, and new facilities of $173 million, $102 million and $339 million, respectively, in 2007. The Florida Division of Forestry (DOF) reported land acquisition, repair and renovation, and new facility needs of $15.3 million, $1.4 million and $2.7 million, respectively, during the same year. Other agencies are facing similar situations. While budget reductions are necessary as economic belt-tightening measures, they nonetheless limit the ability of state-level recreation providers to maintain services for their current visitors and to meet the needs that will be created by new visitors in the future.

Realistically, this situation is not expected to change in the near future. The issue then becomes how to use existing funds with maximum efficiency to ensure that the highest needs and priorities are being met.

Planning for Florida's Future

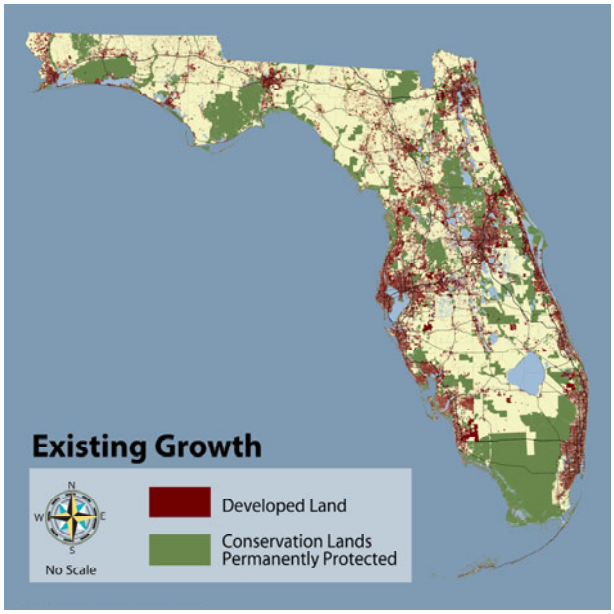
Florida's growing population will need additional space for outdoor recreation and the associated infrastructure if the quality of life benefits that recreation provides today are to continue in the future. Whether an adequate supply of land is available will depend largely upon how the state manages its growth and urban development. If current development trends continue, millions of acres of land in Florida will be consumed by urban sprawl. Without forward-thinking growth plans and well-defined requirements for new parks and open space, Florida's communities may be left without sufficient lands for parks, trails and open space.

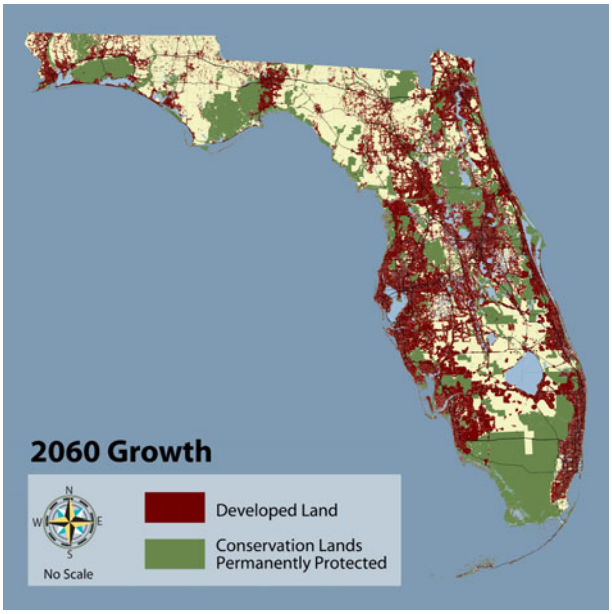
The study, *An Alternative Future,* prepared by the University of Pennsylvania, compares what Florida may look like in 2060 if current population growth and land development patterns continue unchanged with what it might look like under a different scenario. The study was based on an analysis of future population distribution prepared in 2006 by the University of Florida, *Florida 2060.* It predicts that if current trends continue unchanged, some 2.5 million acres of high priority conservation lands will be lost to urban development. The projected total cost of urbanization along these lines would be some $695 billion. Under the alternative scenario, however, only 37,000 acres of high priority lands would be lost and 8.5 million acres would be preserved. The cost of urbanization in the alternative scenario would be $174 billion, $526 billion less than under the current trend.

Daytona Beach, Volusia County

The alternative growth model is based on seven principles: protect Florida's essential lands; invest in balanced transportation systems; plan for climate change; do not waste land; design with nature; encourage compact development; and rebuild to create great places. Among its many findings, the study recommends that future urban planning and design should focus on infill development and redevelopment, linking building

Figure 6.1
Florida's Population





in rural areas to conservation and investing in the necessary public facilities - particularly public transit - to create healthy, high quality communities. The study concludes that Florida can achieve a better future, which saves the essential character of the landscape and creates more compact and livable communities, at less cost than simply allowing current trends to take their course.

The future of outdoor recreation in Florida is linked inseparably with the state's policies for managing growth and accommodating the population increases that are sure to come. The decisions that are made by state and local governments in the coming years will determine whether future generations of residents and visitors will enjoy the same level of outdoor recreation opportunities and the quality of life that exist today. These two thought-provoking studies provide a vision of a more sustainable Florida in which public parks and conservation lands play a central role.

Energy Costs

The long-term outcome of today's rising energy costs is not certain, but its short-term effects on outdoor recreation in Florida are clear. Spiraling costs for the basic necessities to operate parks - water and electrical service, maintenance and upkeep, waste management - have further depleted already limited budgets for managing parks and recreation areas throughout the state. Living costs have increased to the point that in some parts of Florida, park agencies have lost personnel who could no longer afford the high price of local housing or the added cost of their long commutes to work. Like energy consumers all across the state, recreation providers are rethinking their current operations and future plans to adjust to the rapidly rising costs by implementing energy conservation measures in their operations.

Few states' economies are as dependent on tourism as Florida's. Rising energy costs

have profound implications for the state's most important industry. According to VISIT FLORIDA, fewer tourists traveled to Florida in 2007 than in 2006, the first annual decline since 2001. Florida attracted 82.4 million visitors in 2007, down 1.5 million or 1.8 percent from 2006. Many tourists shifted from driving to flying and the number of tourists arriving by car decreased 5.5 percent, while the percentage flying rose by two percent. Increases in airline ticket prices brought on by higher fuel prices make it unclear whether that trend will continue.

One response to higher fuel prices has been that more residents are planning to be tourists in their own state by staying closer to home and taking fewer and shorter trips, often to public parks and recreation areas. Outdoor recreation providers in Florida are increasing their marketing and outreach efforts to attract state residents and international travelers. To encourage more Florida residents to visit state parks, DRP has promoted "One Tank Adventures" that feature affordable family trips located within a 100-mile radius of anywhere in the state. Along similar lines, VISIT FLORIDA's "Been There, Haven't Done That" promotion features 105 in-state destinations that emphasize nature-based and heritage-based tourism.

Recreational Access to Florida's Waters

Florida ranked first in the nation for recreational boat registrations in 2005, according to the National Marine Manufacturers Association, with 973,859 boats registered across the state. This represented a 2.9 percent increase in registrations from the previous year. Also in 2005, the Marine Industries Association of Florida reported that the state's marine industry generated a total

Old Fort Boat Ramp, Wakulla County

economic output of $18.4 billion and provided more than 220,700 jobs. Maintaining an economically viable and diverse waterfront environment and providing adequate public boating access to Florida's waters are vitally important to the state's economy and the quality of life of its residents and visitors.

Despite the popularity and economic importance of recreational boating, public access to the state's coastline and waterways has been steadily declining. Every part of Florida has seen traditional waterfront land uses and public water access replaced by coastal land development. The "mom-and-pop" marinas and fishing camps of Florida's past have all but disappeared from the scene, often being replaced by residential developments that provide water access only for their members and guests. One of the most voiced concerns at the public workshops was that all of Florida's recreation suppliers should give a much higher priority to providing additional public recreational boating access facilities.

In 2005, two items of legislation were enacted to help improve recreational boating

access in Florida. House Bill 989 amended Section 373.118, Florida Statutes, to establish a general regulatory permit for authorizing the construction and operation of public marinas, mooring fields and boat ramps by local governments. House Bill 955 addressed the supply side of water access by requiring DRP to evaluate the use of state parks for recreational boating and identify opportunities to increase boating access in state parks. The report, which was prepared in coordination with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWCC), found substantial opportunities for increasing recreational boating access in the state park system. A total of 73 parks were determined to have potential for providing new or expanded boating access facilities. These improvements have a total estimated construction cost of more than $20 million.

In 2008, the Florida Legislature significantly enhanced the Working Waterfronts Program by including funding for this purpose in the reauthorized *Florida Forever* program. The newly-named Stan Mayfield Working Waterfronts Program will receive an allocation of $7.5 million annually from *Florida Forever* funds to provide grants for acquiring land and constructing capital projects that contribute toward preserving working waterfronts. The grants will be administered through the Florida Communities Trust (FCT).

Tourism

The rise in nature-based and cultural heritage tourism is of particular importance to outdoor recreation planning. Florida's rich history and outstanding natural resources have always been among the factors that make it a prime destination for domestic and international travelers. Rural regions and communities with attractive cultural and historic resources are benefiting from the development and expansion of cultural heritage tourism markets. Smaller towns and communities are among the fastest growing tourist destinations in the state. This type of tourism is an attractive economic development option for many rural communities because it preserves their character, promotes community investment and generates local employment opportunities. Many communities in Florida have based their tourism marketing plans on these activities and are actively promoting their historic assets to attract the heritage tourist seeking historical and cultural learning experiences.

Nature-based tourism in Florida is another rapidly growing activity. Fishing, hunting, paddling, boating and nature viewing are but a few of the common examples of the activities that are promoted through this type of tourism. In 2006, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that 4.9 million Florida residents and visitors participated in wildlife watching alone, a 20 percent increase since 2001. According to FWCC these participants, together with fishermen, hunters and boaters, spent nearly $6.8 billion on retail purchases, producing a total economic impact of $3.2 billion and generating more than 34,000 jobs.

Florida's state park system plays an important role in encouraging nature-based tourism. According to the *2006 Florida State Park Visitor Survey,* an average of 74 percent of state park visitors traveled more than 50 miles to reach their park destination. These non-local park visitors had a direct economic impact of more than $936 million on local economies throughout the state. Over $65 million were contributed to state general revenues in the form of state sales taxes. In addition, more than 18,700 jobs were created as a result of the parks' attendance and operations.

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail

There are many examples in Florida of successful efforts to promote nature-based and heritage tourism. One example of a program that combines both types is the Suwannee River Wilderness Trail, a partnership between the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Suwannee River Water Management District (SRWMD), and the communities, businesses and citizens of the Suwannee River region. The 170-mile trail extends from White Springs to the town of Suwannee on the Gulf of Mexico, creating connections between public conservation lands, riverfront communities and the many private businesses that support and enhance recreation on the river. It also connects visitors to the unique history and culture of the region and the many small towns throughout the entire basin. The program is an excellent example of how public agencies and private businesses can work together to encourage outdoor recreation, foster stewardship of the region's outstanding natural and cultural resources, provide economic development opportunities and promote heritage and nature-based tourism.

Reconnecting Children and Youth to the Outdoors

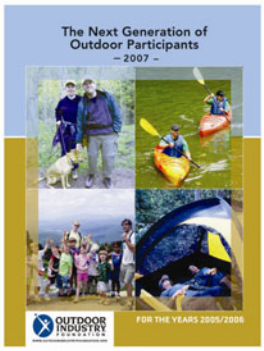
It is generally accepted today that sedentary lifestyles among all age groups can create a host of health-related problems, but especially among children. Several social and environmental factors are often blamed for the lack of physical activity among children, among them playing video games and using home computers, watching television, de-emphasizing physical education and outdoor activities in the public schools, and parental fears about safety and crime. There appears to be a general lack of awareness in many communities about the importance of outdoor exercise and physical activity on the mental and physical well-being and social integration of growing children and adolescents. Re-energizing school-based physical education programs and expanding free-play recess as part of the school day are being considered in many of Florida's public school systems.

Since the publication of the book by Richard Louv, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder* in 2005, the connection between children and the outdoors has received national attention. Louv decries the lack of opportunities for children to be free to play outdoors in natural settings because it is how children develop a connection with nature and the environment

Lake Eaton, Marion County

enabling them to learn about the natural world. He also notes that although there has been a marked increase in the number of youth involved in organized sports, opportunities to participate in sports leagues are often limited to superior young athletes or to children whose families can afford to play in sports leagues.

Public outdoor recreation providers, sports enthusiasts and the outdoor equipment industry should mobilize to provide structured and unstructured outdoor experiences, identify barriers to participation and develop adult mentoring programs, all with a view to "get kids outdoors" or "leave no child inside." In a report produced by the Outdoor Industry Foundation in 2007, *The Next Generation of Outdoor Participants,* encouraging youth participation in "gateway" outdoor activities such as camping, bicycling, fishing, hiking and running, introduces them to an active lifestyle that can lead to participation in other outdoor activities. In addition, the report notes that participants in "urban associated" outdoor activities such as skateboarding and jogging are more likely to take part in "traditional" outdoor activities. The report suggests that encouraging any outdoor recreation activity can lead to future growth across all activities.



Technology and Outdoor Recreation

As in every facet of modern life, technology is changing the way Floridians recreate. It is the norm today for park visitors to carry their electronic devices with them, even when "roughing it" in the most remote wilderness areas. The Internet Web sites maintained by virtually every outdoor recreation supplier can provide all the information needed to plan a day's outing to a local park or a two-week trek through the Everglades wilderness. Technology has even given rise to completely new recreation activities that had not existed before the new technology was introduced. All outdoor recreation providers in Florida will face the challenge of responding to constantly evolving technologies and the changes they create in the public's recreation desires and expectations.

As noted, many outdoor recreation providers are seeking ways to increase youth participation in recreation activities and bring them back to the outdoors. This often requires that the activities they offer be challenging, fun and incorporate technology. Geocaching is one example of a new, emerging activity that combines technology and outdoor experiences in a way that is appealing to many users, especially to youth. It is a combination of orienteering and scavenger hunting using a Global Positioning System (GPS) unit. It involves hiding items, usually containers holding various "treasures," and posting the geographic coordinates for each

cache on a designated Web site. Cache hunters choose which cache they want to locate and once it is found (or not found) they relate their experiences to others on the site. FWCC and DRP have developed guidelines for geocaching on the public conservation lands they manage. In this manner, recreation suppliers can work with the public to encourage new recreation activities that can be provided without user conflicts, damage to resources or endangering the safety of participants.

GPS Device and Cache

Another example of how technology is influencing the outdoor recreation behavior of Floridians is the ability to reserve overnight lodging through Internet-based reservation systems. Several private corporations now provide online campsite reservation processing for many private, state and federal campgrounds in Florida. Online reservation systems can improve the quality of visitor services by providing a single point of contact and a convenient way for campers to make a guaranteed reservation for a specific campsite. They also relieve the campground provider of staffing costs and provide a consistent structure for managing reservations, which is an important consideration when the provider operates many campgrounds. Campground providers have also benefited from an increase in campsite occupancy, particularly at lesser known campgrounds. Continual innovation and adaptation of these technologies can improve the outdoor recreation services that are offered to the public and the quality of their recreation experiences.

The technology of virtual tours is being used by many commercial providers to encourage public interest and provide information about their sites. Virtual tours are a simulation of actual locations, usually composed of panoramic images embedded with other media elements such as music, narration and text. Video-based virtual tours utilize a video camera that pans and "walks through" the property to give a first-person point-of-view perspective of the area. Today, virtual tours can be found for golf courses, marinas and skate parks, among other types of areas. Public land managers and conservation organizations are also taking advantage of this technology to educate and inform the public. For example, South Florida Information Access (part of the U.S. Geological Survey) provides virtual tours of Big Cypress National Preserve, Everglades National Park, Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, Jonathan Dickinson State Park and other public conservation lands. In the future, more outdoor recreation suppliers will explore the options available for providing virtual tours to spark public interest and encourage participation in the recreation opportunities they provide.

Special Planning Considerations

In addition to the foregoing issues and trends, a number of other topics were dis-

Withlacoochee State Forest, Citrus County

cussed during the public workshops. While these topics could not be incorporated within the other categories discussed in this chapter, they are nonetheless significant to statewide outdoor recreation planning. A separate discussion for off-highway vehicles trails, equestrian trails and hunting follows.

Off-Highway Vehicle Trails

Driving off-highway vehicles (OHVs) has become recognized as a legitimate outdoor recreation activity and participation is growing, particularly among family groups. According to figures reported by the Motorcycle Industry Council, Florida ranked second in the nation in new off-highway motorcycle sales in 2006, with nearly 14,000 units being sold (an increase of 54 percent since 2001). Florida ranked third in all-terrain vehicle sales for the same year, with just less than 46,500 units sold. This was an increase of 49 percent since 2001.

There was a perception among many workshop participants that not enough is being done to provide suitable areas for riding OHVs in Florida. OHV riders have few facilities designated specifically for their activity. This is unfortunate because it forces them to use areas where they inevitably come into conflict with other outdoor recreation activities or where their use results in damage to the natural environment.

Some progress has been made in acquiring and developing areas for motorized trails since the enactment of the T. Mark Schmidt

Off-Highway Vehicle Safety and Recreation Act (Section 261.20, Florida Statutes) in 2002. The Act declared that managed areas and facilities for OHV riding on state lands are compatible with the state's overall recreation plan and goals for multiple-use management. Funding from the Off-Highway Vehicle Titling Program, combined with federal funds from the motorized trail portion of the Recreational Trail Program and funds from DOF, have been used to acquire lands for trails and to assist federal and state agencies in designing and building off-highway vehicle facilities.

DOF, working with other land mangers, the OHV industry and OHV riding groups, has worked to identify appropriate locations for off-highway vehicle riding on state land. Two newly designated areas include Tate's Hell State Forest in Franklin County with 154 miles of road access for OHV use and Mallory Swamp, managed by SRWMD in Lafayette County, has opened more than 38 miles of designated OHV trails. A new OHV site is under development in Baker County on the 1,600-acre St. Mary's Shoal Park acquired through a grant from FCT. DOF is working with several other communities to further expand the availability of areas for OHV riding.

While progress has been made, much is needed to provide adequate OHV trail opportunities across the state. More lands need to be designated for OHV riding and additional facilities provided to adequately meet public demand.

Equestrian Trails

Florida is a major horse-owning state, ranking third in the nation behind Texas and California according to a study conducted by Clemson University in 2007. The equestrian industry is highly diverse and supports a wide variety of activities. It combines the largely rural activities of breeding, raising and training horses with the more urban activities of horse shows, polo, rodeos and other equine events. According to the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, the industry's economic impact on the gross state product is $6.5 billion.

As noted at the public workshop sessions, equestrian groups are strong advocates for increasing access and facilities for equestrian activities on public lands. These facilities include designated horse trails, camping facilities and carriage trails. In many areas of the state, lands which have been available in the past for horseback riding are dwindling as commercial timberlands and other large ownerships are being converted to development. This makes it difficult for equestrian riders to pursue their interests and increases the demand for additional equestrian facilities on public conservation lands all across Florida.

Equestrians point to horse tourism as an example of a niche outdoor recreation activity that could generate significant economic benefits, especially for rural communities where a majority of the public lands with horse trails are located. Many workshop participants recounted their experiences of having to leave Florida to find places to ride in other states where fully developed and equipped equestrian facilities are in greater supply. Horse camping is another popular activity and is done by both individuals and groups of riders. There are specialized facility requirements for horse camping and well-designed areas are popular where riders have access to designated trails.

R.O. Ranch, Lafayette County

The recreation participation surveys conducted by the University of Florida for this plan found that tourist participation in horseback riding remained unchanged from previous surveys (0.4 percent of tourists), but that resident participation increased from 2.9 percent to 9.1 percent. In response to increased demand, efforts to expand equestrian facilities are underway in several areas. One of the state's newest equestrian facilities is R.O. Ranch, managed by the SRWMD in Lafayette County. Another new area, Colt Creek State Park in Polk County, includes plans for a full service equestrian camping facility and riding trails as part of the recreation opportunities to be provided at this 5,000-acre property. Nine other state parks have been identified for new or expanded equestrian facilities, representing an estimated cost of $3.3 million.

Equestrian participants at the workshops also suggested that a statewide assessment be conducted to determine the environmental effects of horseback riding on public lands, addressing factors such as water quality degradation, spread of exotic plants, erosion and other potential impacts. They also recommended that research be conducted to learn more about out-of-state visitors who travel to Florida for equestrian recreation.

Bayard Wildlife Management Area, Clay County

Hunting

Hunting has always been a vital part of outdoor recreation in Florida. Hunting carries with it an ethic of valuing wildlife for the sustenance of life and preserving lifestyles and traditions that are inseparable from Florida's history and culture. As such, hunting must be given full consideration in the state's outdoor recreation program.

Hunters in Florida have access to 5.6 million acres of land managed for wildlife on some 151 wildlife management areas. However, the future of hunting in Florida, and in the nation as well, faces challenges on many fronts. Lands that are suitable for fostering healthy wildlife populations are being developed for other purposes at a rapid rate. Private lands that have traditionally been available to the public for hunting continue to be withdrawn from public use and converted to private leases or similar arrangements. Hunter participation rates are static or declining as seen in the number of hunting licenses sold each year and in national sales data for hunting equipment.

At the state level, the Florida Legislature took steps in 2006 to preserve hunting lands and ensure that hunting opportunities are available in the future by enacting a "no net loss" statute (Section 372.3001, Florida Statutes). Under the statute's provisions, land

land management decisions made by FWCC, including decisions that are made by private landowners to close hunting land that is managed by FWCC, must not result in any net loss of acreage that is available for hunting on FWCC-managed lands. Where hunting closures occur, FWCC must find replacement land for hunting to compensate for the closures. All state land managing agencies are directed to cooperate with FWCC to allow hunting on their lands if FWCC determines them to be suitable for hunting. Lands in the state park system may not be considered for replacement hunting land.

Building a secure future for hunting has become a national priority for sportsmen's organizations, public land managers and the outdoor equipment industry. In Florida, FWCC has developed a diverse range of programs aimed at providing safety training, hunter education and skills-building for gun hunters, bow hunters, youth and women. Some of FWCC's programs, such as the Archery in the Schools Program, incorporate formal curricula that have been developed in conjunction with the Florida Department of Education. Other programs are aimed at developing formal mentoring and organized volunteer programs. Activities like these will be vital for ensuring that the tradition of hunting in Florida continues into the future.