

A Brief History of Conservation in Florida

The Wildlife Foundation of Florida, Inc. (WFF), a not-for-profit organization, was created specifically to assist the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) in its conservation efforts. The WFF does this through fund-raising for—and increasing awareness of—the FWC and the needs of Florida’s wildlife and natural habitats.

The FWC was created in 1998 when the state legislature wisely decided that it would be best to consolidate the efforts of various state agencies under one umbrella. That new entity would have expanded authority along with its expanded responsibility.

The FWC manages all Florida’s wildlife, fish and natural habitats, and conducts important research on every aspect of our outdoor world. The individuals who work for the FWC are all committed to conservation and many perform their tasks well beyond the “call of duty.” In fact, the FWC created the Louise Ireland Humphrey Award in order to honor employees for outstanding individual performance.

Individuals have played an important role in conservation all the way back to the 1800’s. Ordinary people from all walks of life, with widely diverse backgrounds and spheres of interest, contributed to a gradual change in America’s attitude toward natural resources, a change that would evolve into what we now refer to as the “Conservation Movement.” What these individuals shared—what made them all so heroic in the battle to preserve our

wildlife, natural habitats and ecosystem—is that they cared enough to sound an alarm, even if it clashed with current belief.

In the first half of the 19th century, "current belief" regarding man's impact on nature was that it was at most minimal. If there was any impact at all it was probably positive. After all, at that time Americans were busily involved in clearing the land to create fields for farms that would feed the towns springing up all over the continent. They were therefore putting the land to good, productive use.

The beauty found in nature was for the most part simply not a part of the American consciousness. In fact, John James Audubon, the famous artist whose paintings of birds would ultimately earn him a place of prominence in our country's history, as well as in both the Conservation and Ecology Halls of Fame, was forced to go abroad in the 1820's in order to support his art because there was no market for it in the U.S.

Another future inductee into the Conservation Hall of Fame was George Perkins Marsh, a farmer and Congressman from Vermont. Marsh first voiced opposition to the theory that man was good for nature in 1847 in a speech to the Agricultural Society of Rutland County, Vermont. Marsh pointed out that deforestation had a very negative impact on land and urged that forests be carefully managed with an eye toward conservation. His speech had very little impact at the time, but Marsh would remain dedicated to the notion that conservation must be undertaken—and he would make his voice heard again.

A couple of years later another plea for conservation appeared in a highly unusual publication, a two-volume book entitled "Report of the Commissioner of Patents, for the Year 1849." It was written by the United States Commissioner of Patents, Thomas Ewbank, who warned of very dire consequences if certain practices were not stopped.

Regarding natural resources, he said:

"The waste of valuable timber in the United States, to say nothing of firewood, will hardly begin to be appreciated until our population reaches fifty millions. Then the folly and shortsightedness of this age will meet with a degree of censure and reproach not pleasant to contemplate."

Ewbank also addressed the issue of over hunting of the American Bison:

"The vast multitudes of bisons slain yearly, the ceaseless war carried on against them, if continued, threatens their extermination and must hereafter cause deep regret."

This warning, which was ignored, proved prophetic and within 40 years the bison was nearly extinct.

The federal government was not concerned with conservation, either. In 1849 the United States created the Department of the Interior, but its purpose was not conservation or the protection of natural resources, it was land management. Its primary duties were to administer Indian Affairs, and to oversee the administration of all of the land owned by the United States. That included establishing clear boundaries and creating maps to delineate those boundaries. As fate would have it though, in executing those duties the

DOI inadvertently provided a whole arsenal of ammunition for fledgling conservation movements.

Artists went along on surveying trips to record the wilderness of the West. They sent their drawings back east to be published in newspapers and periodicals and the magnificence of the landscape and wonders like the Grand Canyon awakened a sense of awe and pride in the American public.

At the same time that Americans were falling in love with the rugged beauty of their country, they were also falling in love with a literary movement called “Nature Essays.” These essays extolled the wonders of nature, especially birds. In turn, this interest in birds spurred the proliferation of bird-watching, and these clubs would raise the first national hue and cry for conservation.

It wasn't just birds that concerned the new nature-lovers, it was all of nature—the flora and the fauna. This concern was greatly fueled by the work of Henry David Thoreau, a writer who would do more than any other literary figure of his time to further the cause of conservation. His book, "Walden; or, Life in the Woods" extolled the virtues of a simple life and created an intense interest in nature among his readers, an interest that evolved into desire to protect and preserve nature and the wilderness.

In a speech to the Concord, Massachusetts Lyceum in 1851 Thoreau claimed that "in Wilderness is the preservation of the World." This planted the seeds of the importance of

saving the wilderness in the American conscience that would ultimately lend support to the passage of the first Congressional legislation granting a state the right to establish and govern a public park. That would happen in 1864 and the land protected was Yosemite Valley.

The nationwide public support for preserving the beauty of Yosemite in its natural state had been building for several years. It began in 1860, when a popular eastern newspaper, the Boston Evening Transcript published the first in a series of articles about Yosemite that had been written by Thomas Starr King. In the articles, which were published in 1860-1861, he extolled the natural beauty of the area.

Another contribution to the country's love affair with Yosemite was made in 1861 by Carleton E. Watkins, who published his wealth of photographs of Yosemite. These photographs were very popular, especially in the stereoscopic form, and made the beautiful, far-away place very familiar and dear to people all over the country.

In 1864, George Perkins Marsh made his voice heard to a much wider audience when he published "Man and Nature." Once again he made the argument that man's impact on nature was often quite negative. Marsh backed up his argument with solid examples of ancient civilizations in China, Europe and North America whose carelessness in the use of land and water turned their once-fertile fields into deserts. This, in turn, led to the ultimate demise of the entire civilization. Marsh warned that the United States was headed in the same direction if immediate action was not taken.

Marsh's book raised a hue and cry among concerned citizens. In fact, "Man and Nature" is credited with being the impetus for the entire modern conservation movement.

1864 also saw the publication of the final work of Thoreau, who died in 1862. Entitled "The Maine Woods," the book called for the preservation of virgin forest....

“...Not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true re-creation.”

Perhaps inspired by Thoreau, in August of that year the New York Times newspaper published an article encouraging New York State to acquire the Adirondacks solely to preserve them.

Conservation efforts began to be more common as the 19th century progressed, with the arts being a prime motivator, most notably the publication of John Burroughs' first nature essay, "With the Birds" in 1865. Burroughs would go on to become an extremely important nature essayist. His essays praised the joy to be found in nature and encouraged people to experience all it had to offer. Burroughs wrote his books for an adult audience, but they also became very popular with youngsters whose teachers who found them a valuable, challenging source of information for students. His work was so well received by educators across the country that several schools were named for him, some of which are still active.

Burroughs, called the “Hudson River Naturalist” was a contemporary and friend of another important 19th century figure in conservation, John Muir.

Muir was a fascinating man of many talents. A native of Scotland, he became a great supporter of the beautiful Sierra Mountains in California. In 1892 he formed the Sierra Club, which is still going strong throughout the United States. Originally dedicated to exploring the beauty of nature, over the years the Sierra Club has become an extremely important element in every aspect of conservation.

In addition to becoming a close friend of John Burroughs, Muir would become a friend of Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt, who would come to be known as the “Conservation President.” Roosevelt’s love of hunting and the outdoors made him a fierce proponent of saving nature for mankind. To do that, he realized that first we had to save nature from mankind.

One of Roosevelt’s early conservation efforts involved the almost extinct bison. In 1887, he founded the Boone and Crockett Club. A non-profit organization, the club’s goal was to create a coalition of sportsmen and other lovers of the Great Outdoors. This group would provide the leadership needed to focus attention on the need to preserve our natural resources so sportsmen and others could continue to enjoy it.

In the first few years after the preserve was established fourteen bison and twenty-one elk were moved to the fertile prairie. Free of predators, within fifty years the restoration

project was so successful there were too many of the animals and the size of the herds had to be reduced.

Under Roosevelt's leadership the size of national forests almost quadrupled, from 42 million acres to 148 million. He created four large wildlife refuges, and over 50 bird sanctuaries. He was also the person in charge in 1903 when Florida's Pelican Island was made the first wildlife preserve in the United States, offering protection to the wildlife and natural habitats of the tiny island. It had taken 20 years of commitment and persistent hard to bring Pelican Island to national attention. As with so many other important events in conservation history, it started because an individual cared enough to do something.

That individual was Paul Kroegel, a boat builder who built his shop across from the Pelican Islands because he enjoyed watching the birds. At that time, 1881, Pelican Island played host to a wealth of birds, but that would soon change. There were several forces at work to decimate the bird population. Tourists would shoot the birds just for enjoyment. Unlike serious hunters who dedicate themselves to conservation so that game remains plentiful, the tourists were just interested in entertaining themselves. Feathers became a huge rage in women's fashion and feathers were gathered indiscriminately from both adult birds and nestlings. Even lovers of nature contributed to the problem by carelessly collecting bird specimens and eggs for display.

By the end of the century the egrets, herons, roseate spoonbills and white ibises were completely gone, and the pelican population greatly reduced and in danger of

disappearing, too. Kroegel decided to take action. He contacted two pioneers of wildlife conservation, Theodore Palmer and William Dutcher and for five years, from 1898 to 1903, they lobbied officials in Washington, DC to provide protection for the remaining birds.

Some people are surprised to learn that sportsmen who loved hunting and fishing would be some of the most important conservationists of the 1900's. One of the nation's most important sportsman/conservationists was Aldo Leopold, who some call "the father of wildlife ecology." Leopold was born in Burlington, Iowa the same year Roosevelt started the Boone and Crockett Club, 1887. A brilliant man, he became a famous philosopher, scientist and teacher, as well as talented writer. The love for wildlife and nature he developed as a youngster exploring the prairies, woods and wilds of an as yet undeveloped Iowa would stay with him forever.

In 1933 he published "Game Management" in which he described what basic skills and techniques were required to manage wildlife in order restore their disappearing populations. This book combined elements of agriculture, biology, zoology and forestry. One year after his death, his book *A Sand County Almanac* was published. It became one of the most influential nature books ever published.

Books and writers have played a major role in enlisting support for Florida's conservation efforts since the early days. Writers like Marjory Stoneman Douglas who moved to Miami in the 1920's to work for the Miami Herald, where her father Frank

Stoneman, was the paper's editor. While at the paper she worked as assistant editor and often wrote editorials promoting the protection of Florida's indigenous wildlife and natural habitats, which were being increasingly threatened by unregulated development. Along with architect Ernest Coe, she led a successful campaign to convince Congress to designate the Everglades a national park in 1934. It took another 13 years for the campaign to secure funding and buy land, and finally in 1947 Everglades National Park opened.

1947 also saw the publication of Douglas' first book, a best-seller entitled "Everglades: River of Grass." It was a history of the Everglades written from both the natural and political points of view. The book helped create national public awareness of the Everglades, which were no longer considered "just a swamp." Floridians and the rest of the country realized that the Everglades are a unique ecosystem and a national treasure.

Just as Marjory Stoneman Douglas' editorial writing made an impact on conservation, so did the editorial cartoons of Jay Norwood "Ding" Darling. Extremely talented both in wit and artistic talent—he won two Pulitzer Prizes—Darling had an audience of millions of readers thanks to syndication in more than 100 daily papers. An ardent hunter and fisherman, he worried about the extinction of wildlife and the pollution of the land. He incorporated his concerns in his political cartoons. He also became involved in political issues revolving around conservation and in 1934 President Roosevelt asked him to head the federal agency that would ultimately become the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Darling accomplished amazing things with the agency. He secured \$17 million for wildlife habitat restoration, initiated the Federal Duck Stamp Program and led the fight for proper game management. In 1938 he drew a political cartoon entitled “Don’t say it—sign it” that is still reprinted today. The cartoon was born of his belief that every political candidate should pledge to support wildlife conservation.

Captiva, Florida was Darling’s second home for many years. He loved the extraordinary wildlife and natural habitats of Florida and was an active, vocal participant in conservation efforts in the area. He died in 1962 and shortly thereafter the J.N. “Ding” Darling Conservation Foundation was created. In 1967 the Sanibel National Wildlife Refuge was renamed the J. N. Ding National Wildlife Refuge, and in 1978 was officially dedicated to him.

While conservation movements were making progress in the 1930’s, so were projects to promote economic development and create jobs. One of these projects was the Cross Florida Barge Canal, an idea that had first been suggested in the 1800’s as a way to connect the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean. The idea for the Canal began to gain popular public support thanks to the national fervor generated by the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914, but it wasn’t until 1935 that the project was begun.

With the advent of World War II economic development projects and the conservation movement both took a back seat to basic survival issues. When the war was over the country entered a period of unprecedented prosperity and the baby boom began.

Americans were building houses, families and careers, and wildlife conservation remained pretty much on the back burner until the 1960's, when once again a great book would reawaken the country to the importance of protecting fish, wildlife and natural habitats.

The book was "The Silent Spring." Written by Rachel Carson, a biologist and dedicated conservationist as well as gifted author. Published in 1962, the book chronicled the devastating impact certain chemicals had—and were still having—on birds and other wildlife. A consummate, careful researcher, Carson's findings were proven to be absolute truth even though chemical companies tried to undermine her.

The entire United States, indeed most of the world, became alarmed when they were made aware of some of the threats to wildlife that had been created by humankind's largely unrestricted use of chemicals and other modern marvels. The long-dormant conservation movement in the U.S. was back in full force and grass-roots efforts to create laws that would protect our wildlife, natural resources and whole eco-system spread quickly. Over the next decade laws would be passed that made sweeping changes in land use, chemical use and other threats to the safety of all living things.

The impact of the book also helped a dedicated conservationist in Florida gain support for her crucial battle to stop construction of the Cross Florida Barge Canal, which had begun again in 1964. The woman leading the charge was Marjorie Harris Carr, a scientist and life-long advocate of wildlife and all nature. Both she and her husband, Archie Carr, a

world-renowned biologist, were important figures in Florida conservation and in the early 1960's she had been a leader in the creation of Payne's Prairie Wildlife Refuge, which ultimately became a popular state park.

As a zoologist, Carr knew that the Canal would devastate wildlife and natural habitats all across Florida, especially along the Ocklawaha River. At first hers was a single voice, but she became active in an organization called the Florida Defenders of the Environment (FDE) and they joined the battle. The FDE had been founded in 1969 by hydrologists, geologists, economists, zoologists, members of the Audubon Society and other concerned citizens. The organization wrote a carefully researched, scientific report called the Environmental Impact of the Cross Florida Barge Canal With Special Emphasis on the Ocklawaha River System. Thanks to Marjorie Harris Carr's untiring work, the FDE and the well-researched report, work on the canal was put on hold in 1971. After years of court battles the canal was de-authorized in 1990. The area was turned into a 110-mile greenway, and in 1998 was officially named the Marjory Harris Carr Greenway.

The impact of "The Silent Spring" inspired the formation of dedicated conservation groups and activities throughout the United States, because once people became aware and informed, they acted. In the first decade after its publication, several very important events took place.

- In 1964 The Wilderness Act was passed
 - The Wilderness Act designated 9.1 million acres as Wilderness in

Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, North Carolina, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Nevada, Oregon, Washington, and Wyoming. Congress has continued to designate new wilderness areas. In 1970, it included the smallest wilderness area, Florida's 5-acre Pelican Island.

- In 1970 Clean Air Act was signed into law

The Clean Air Act continued to evolve until 1990, when the final version of the act was finally put into full force. The Clean Air Act sets acceptable standards for pollutants, and empowers the Environmental Protection Agency to enforce these standards legally.

- In 1973 the Endangered Species Act was signed into law

More than any other laws enacted, the Endangered Species Act has had a major impact on protecting natural wildlife and habitats. Once a wild species, animal or plant, is placed on the "threatened" or "endangered" its habitat is deemed "critical" and no development, industry or any other

human undertaking can be initiated in that habitat. The Act established serious legal consequences for violations.

One thing that has remained constant in conservation efforts is the importance of the individual. The great anthropologist Margaret Mead once said:

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has.”

Thanks to the courage of individuals, the heroes of conservation, we have made huge strides. Many species have been brought back from the edge of extinction. Public awareness of threats to our unique ecosystem has increased a thousand fold. Hunting and fishing organizations, outdoor recreation associations and other nature and outdoor enthusiasts have contributed millions of dollars and millions of man-hours to a variety of conservation efforts and have supported important legislation to save Florida’s unique natural resources. But there is more to be done.

In a 1910 speech, President Teddy Roosevelt said:

"Conservation means development as much as it does protection. I recognize the right and duty of this generation to develop and use the natural resources of our land; but do not recognize the right to waste them, or to rob, by wasteful use, the generations that come after us."

That holds true for today, as well. We need to make certain that as future development takes place it does not create new threats to wildlife and their homes.

To do that, we need your help. Volunteer your time with one of Florida's many conservation organizations. Contribute what you can afford to support their efforts. If you see someone poaching, or endangering wildlife or natural habitats, report it. It isn't being a "snitch," it's being a thoughtful, committed citizen. A citizen not afraid to fight to save our outdoor heritage and make sure it survives for future generations to enjoy.

You are the key to securing the future of Florida wildlife and natural habitats. Be a hero.