

Save the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge

SFWMD threatens to revoke refuge status for first time in U.S. history

INTRODUCTION

For more than 65 years the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge has been an oasis for wildlife in the northernmost section of the Florida Everglades and a recreational destination for outdoor enthusiasts and tourists. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) holds a license agreement with the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) to manage the 143,954-acre refuge. Both agencies share the responsibilities of managing the land and water resources.

According to the management agreement between the state and federal partners, it is the USFWS' job to manage invasive exotic plant species in the Refuge. Staff employs a variety of management techniques, including herbicides, mechanical controls with the use of heavy equipment, prescribed fire, hand pulling seedlings and vines, and biological controls. The intensive efforts of invasive exotic removal work is performed by Refuge staff, independent contractors, volunteers, and volunteer groups.

Numerous invasive exotic species dominate the urban, suburban, and rural South Florida landscapes. The sheer vastness of the Loxahatchee Refuge and proximity to other private and state-owned lands makes managing the invasive problem a challenge - one that the Refuge and its partners have done an admirable job addressing. The Refuge has met 12.5 out of 13 invasive species performance measures. More funding is needed to effectively tackle the Old World Climbing Fern.

Despite the USFWS's decades of diligent work managing the Refuge, the invasive Old World Climbing Fern is taking over this region of the Everglades. It's an aggressive invasive species that is strangling this region of the Everglades, specifically the tree islands that dot the sawgrass prairie. It is said to be one of the worst invasive species that Florida has ever seen, and the USFWS has been actively working to find solutions.

On August 11, 2016 the Governing Board of the SFWMD voted unanimously to issue a notice of default to USFWS for the licensing agreement shared by the two agencies, citing failure to control invasive exotic



Everglade Snail Kite

plant species, primarily Old World Climbing Fern. The district charges that Refuge staff are not eradicating invasive exotic plants fast enough, despite meeting 12.5 of 13 invasive species performance measures, as required by the licensing agreement.¹

This hasty decision will result in the loss of one of Florida's largest national wildlife refuges and could cause irreversible damage to the land that the USFWS has been managing for decades.

Delisting the Refuge also poses serious risks to the quality of the water that flows through this wildlife habitat. Left unchecked, the SFWMD could flood the land with polluted water discharged from Lake Okeechobee, changing the entire system by altering the habitat needed to sustain wildlife. The priority for SFWMD would be water management, not protection and management of wildlife for citizens to enjoy.

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THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE LEGACY

The National Wildlife Refuge System began in 1903 when President Theodore Roosevelt created a “Federal Bird Reservation” at Pelican Island in Vero Beach, Florida to save Brown Pelicans. This marked a pivotal moment in American conservation, laying the groundwork for what would become our system of national wildlife refuges.

The Loxahatchee NWR is one of more than 560 national wildlife refuges exist across the country today, and it’s home to one of the most biologically diverse places on Earth—the Florida Everglades. The Refuge System is the world’s most outstanding network of lands dedicated to wildlife, providing habitat for more than 200 endangered and threatened species as well as hundreds of other birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, and plants. Loxahatchee NWR alone protects at least 63 state or federal endangered, threatened, or of special concern species. These species including wading birds such as the wood stork, Florida sandhill crane, and raptors such as the Everglades snail kite. USFWS uses a variety of management programs, including fire management, invasive species management, and water management, to greatly enhance the wildlife habitats on the Refuge.

The Refuge attracts more than 300,000 people annually and more than 5,000 children visit per year for structured science and environmental education programs. It produces \$1.9 million in sales tax revenue and creates more than 100 local jobs, and for every dollar spent on Loxahatchee, \$6.81 is returned to South Florida’s economy, the community, and wildlife.²

Along with the loss of the wildlife Refuge, SFWMD’s limited financial capabilities and loss of federal funding through USFWS to maintain it would likely result in an added burden to Florida taxpayers.

Eliminating a National Wildlife Refuge will set a dangerous precedent for the rest of the nation to follow in the state of Florida’s footsteps.

Never in the history of the National Wildlife Refuge system has refuge status been revoked.

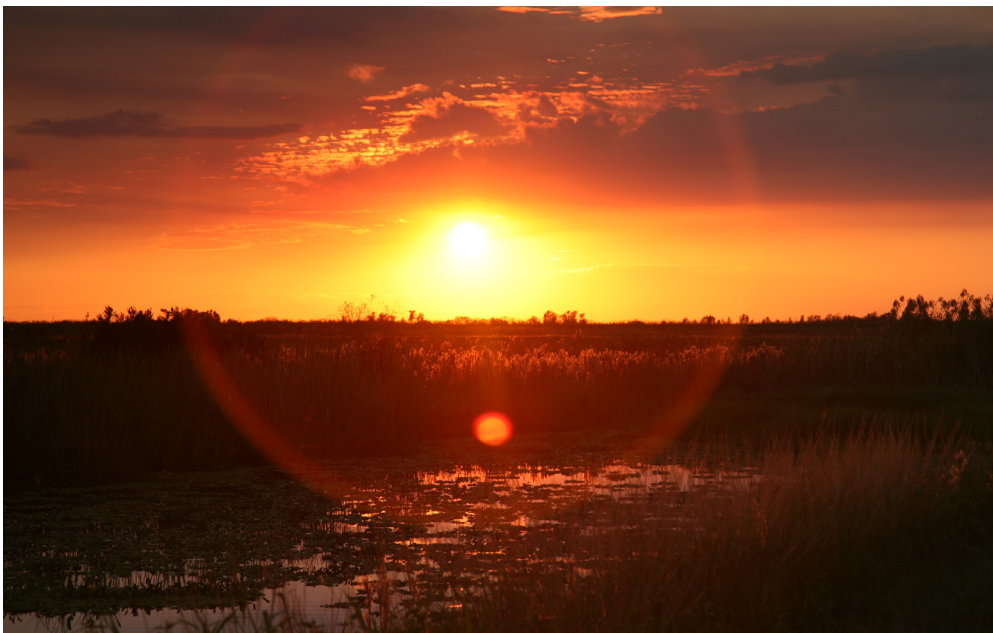
DEFEND LOXAHATCHEE WILDLIFE REFUGE

We need leaders to stand up on behalf of public lands because they are vital assets to our community and environment. Instead of breaking ties with the federal government, SFWMD should help by eradicating more of the exotic plant species on the land that the state owns.

If the goal is to improve management of invasive exotic plants, then the SFWMD should be collaborating with USFWS by sharing state funding, while also collectively advocating for additional federal funding. Continuing a collaborative partnership between the state and the federal governments will ensure that we avoid arriving at the worst case scenario—removing the USFWS from continuing to manage the National Wildlife Refuge while the invasive species issue remains. ■

¹ Andrews, Candice Gaukel. “Bad Economics: Pachyderm Poaching and Refuge Reductions.” Goodnature.nathab.com/World Wildlife Fund. 8 Nov 2016. Web.

² Ibid.



Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge at sunset
Photo by Daniel Schwen

“There is a delight in the hardy life of the open. There are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy and its charm. The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value. Conservation means development as much as it does protection.”

Theodore Roosevelt