

# Environmental Partnerships in Habitat Conservation—Project EAGLE

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*Abstract:* In spring 1994 the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, the state agency charged with the conservation of Florida's freshwater fish and wildlife resources, recognized the need to better involve the community with solutions to current environmental problems: more specifically, community involvement in resolving with littering problems on public lands and waters. Toward that end, the Division of Law Enforcement developed Project EAGLE (Enhancing a Great Living Environment), a half-day voluntary cleanup of some of Florida's most sensitive public lands and waterways. The initial pilot program met with overwhelming success, in terms of both removing litter from the environment and community participation. Utilizing the momentum generated by the pilot program, Project EAGLE was expanded to a statewide effort in 1995. This effort paid off with massive amounts of litter being removed from critical areas and a greater sense of community awareness and support.

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The State of Florida offers many natural resource recreational opportunities to a wide range of diverse users. Some of these include hunters, fishermen, boaters, wildlife viewing, and numerous business ventures that utilize these precious resources for commercial purposes. Florida's natural resources include some very pristine and scenic waterways, such as clear natural springs and rivers, and very sensitive land formations that include hardwood hammocks, sandhill communities, cypress swamps, and coastal communities. Just as unique and different as the habitat, Florida's fish and wildlife populations are precious resources. These many lakes, rivers, and marshes abound with numerous species of freshwater fish, turtles, alligators, manatees, and wading birds. Florida has thriving populations of game animals such as deer, turkey, and migratory birds with scattered populations of endangered or threatened species such as bears, eagles, and the rare Florida panther.

The Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission is charged by state constitution, Article IV, Section 9, with the responsibility of managing these

unique fish and wildlife populations. Florida encompasses approximately 14 million ha, 2.9 million ha (20%) of which is open water or marshes. With more than 3.2 million ha (24%) of the state's forest and wetlands being cleared for human expansion in the past 50 years (Cox et al. 1994), Florida's growth and development has greatly stressed the fish and wildlife populations. With a resident human population that is expected to exceed 16 million by the year 2000, and with approximately 40 million tourists vacationing in the state each year (Fla. Visitors Study 1994), the fish and wildlife populations will be stressed even more.

Managing these living natural resources requires extensive and innovative biological and law enforcement techniques. In order to ensure quality future populations of fish and wildlife for both consumptive and nonconsumptive users, the Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission has undertaken both traditional and innovative steps. The traditional law enforcement method is the "catch the violator and arrest the same" scenario. Realizing years ago that this method alone was not enough, the Division developed educational programs and "environmental enforcement teams" (Hopkins et al. 1991). Based on the success of these different approaches and the concern for the effects of litter on public lands and waters to fish and wildlife populations, the Division expanded its programs to include direct community involvement.

## Methods

Project EAGLE (Enhancing a Great Living Environment) was developed as a pilot program, and it involved the Commission's Division of Law Enforcement in a leadership role. The objective of the project was to remove litter from public lands and waters utilizing local sponsorship to provide materials for the cleanup and community volunteers to effect it. We also recognized the added benefit of recruiting diverse groups and organizations, not just traditional users, to participate, in order to expand environmental awareness and the Commission's involvement to a larger populace. It was designed as a half-day operation that was scheduled for Saturday, 30 July 1994. The sites to be cleaned were chosen based on the following criteria: (1.) public lands or waters, (2.) areas containing litter, and (3.) accessible to the volunteers.

Realizing the scope of this endeavor, we contacted the Keep Florida Beautiful (KFB) organization for co-sponsorship. KFB enthusiastically embraced the concept and immediately provided valuable input from past experiences. Next, it was decided that the effort would concentrate primarily on cleaning the 4 Central Florida rivers located in Marion, Putnam, and Lake counties. The rivers selected were the Ocklawaha River, Silver River, Salt Springs Run, and Silver Glen Run, all of which are designated as National Outstanding Waterways. Eleven major boat ramps on these rivers were selected for collection and coordination sites, with 1 wildlife officer and 1 reserve officer to be stationed at each site for overall coordination, communication, safety, and medical responsi-

bilities. One of the sites was designated as the central command center, where reports and media requests were directed and where centralized coordination could be effected.

Coordinators would be needed at each site for signing in volunteers, distributing cleanup materials, and for accepting and sorting the litter that was brought in for recycling and disposal. The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs became aware of the project and volunteered its members for this task. Arrangements were made with affected counties to waive all landfill fees for litter collected during the project. Local waste management companies agreed to donate large waste containers at each site. Silver Springs Inc., a local attraction which displays wildlife and uses the Silver River for glass bottom boat tours, offered to pay for all printed materials such as posters and handouts to promote the project. It also offered free admission to the attraction to all volunteers who participated in the cleanup. Admission was to be verified by a Project EAGLE badge issued at the conclusion of the cleanup. Silver Springs Inc. also hosted a recognition reception for the coordinators and special volunteers the night of the project. A bald eagle, drawn by a Florida artist, was selected as the project mascot.

Materials collection, volunteer recruitment, and media contacts were all that remained to prepare for the project day. Posters and handouts describing the event with maps, site locations, and times were produced and distributed by the sponsors. These publications advised the public of all the information concerning the efforts and that they could call for site assignments or just show up at the boat ramp of their choice. Wildlife officers began recruiting efforts by attending civic and club meetings, as well as contacting traditional user groups, all of which responded favorably. As organized groups or singular volunteers called in to participate, they were assigned to report to a specific site, prioritized first by their preference and then by deployment plans. The Commission's Division of Law Enforcement and Office of Informational Services assumed the task of informing the media, which also responded favorably. Keep Florida Beautiful, which has tax-exempt charity status, began the task of soliciting for all materials needed to complete the cleanup. These materials included items such as trash bags, weight scales, gloves, buckets, insect repellent, banners, drinks, sunscreen, ice, and water coolers. Local businesses and corporate sponsorships very quickly provided all that would be needed.

## Results

The cleanup was held from 0800 hours to 1300 hours on 30 July. All 4 designated rivers were cleaned along their entire lengths by 762 registered volunteers and 224 documented boats. Those volunteers who did not have boats cleaned along the shorelines and the adjoining wetlands. At the conclusion of the day, 5,387 kg of litter had been collected, sorted and placed into proper

**Table 1.** Litter removed (kg) during 30 July 1994 Project EAGLE in Florida.

Site	Glass <sup>a</sup>	Aluminum <sup>a</sup>	Plastic <sup>a</sup>	N Tires	Other <sup>a</sup>	Total weight
1	11	2	1		12	26
2	99	10	3		74	186
3	241	15	5	1	209	471
4	607	17	18	5	640	1,287
5	16	4	1		58	79
6	288	20	7		721	1,036
7	114	15	8	1	594	732
8	13	33	1		65	112
9 <sup>b</sup>					545	545
10	52	26	1		177	256
11		9	26	2	547	584
Totals	1,441	151	71	9	3,642	5,314

<sup>a</sup>In pounds. <sup>b</sup>Only received total weight data.

receptacles with a 54% recyclable rate (Table 1). The most unusual item recovered was a boat/motor combination that had previously sunk in Rodman Reservoir as the result of a boating accident. Not only had the boat been a hazard to navigation, it posed an environmental threat from the seepage of fuel and oil that was on board. There were approximately 60 different contributors to the project, half of which were media affiliates which provided public service announcements and on-site coverage and conducted numerous interviews. Fifty-two organized groups and numerous individuals participated. The groups included hunters, boaters, boy's clubs, airboaters, canoeists, senior citizens, women's clubs, bass clubs, school groups, attorneys, legislators, divers, physically impaired citizens, and local businesses. One of the goals of the project was to encourage interaction between diverse groups, and this was accomplished by assigning these groups to work together. Numerous positive comments were made by groups to one another and to the organizers of the event.

The reception that followed the event was equally successful as evidenced by the diverse groups that were observed together planning for future events. The results of the project were released at the reception, and numerous special volunteers and organizers were formally recognized by being presented framed project posters that were signed by the governor and lieutenant governor of Florida and the Project EAGLE artist. The media continued to follow the success of the project for weeks, with numerous requests for project data and interviews. One local newspaper labeled the effort a "four star" performance.

Although already feeling that the project was a success, little did the Commission know what lay ahead. Requests for information continued to be received and then acknowledgements began to be awarded. The Commission was the recipient of the Partnership Leadership Award at the 1994 Keep Florida Beautiful annual meeting. Four other participants in Project EAGLE were also recognized with leadership awards at the event.

The community of Marion County and the City of Ocala, the county seat,

were the next to make a move. Ocala/Marion County applied for recognition as an "All America City" through the National Civic League. This is a coveted designation to a community as it recognizes citizen and government cooperation to work together to solve local problems. Only 10 communities in the United States may receive the title during any 1 year. Ocala/Marion County submitted Project EAGLE along with 2 other volunteer projects to represent the cooperative efforts of its citizens and governments. It was competing against 146 other communities from across the nation. After the first round eliminations, Ocala/Marion County was one of 30 finalists selected to attend the National Civic League's final competition in Cleveland, Ohio. At this event the community and its project participants made a live presentation before a jury of selected leaders, such as governors, CEOs of national corporations, and civic leaders from nationwide organizations. A Commission representative and 9 Project EAGLE participants made the trip and after 3 intense days of competition, the Ocala/Marion County community emerged a winner.

Plans had been made to expand the project to a statewide effort, and given the success of the pilot program and the attention received from the public and media, a date of Saturday, 22 July 1995, was selected. The Commission's Division of Law Enforcement selected a statewide coordinator, and a law enforcement supervisor from each of the Commission's 5 regions volunteered to coordinate the local efforts. Regional public information coordinators from the Commission's Office of Informational Services assisted with publications and media coordination. Keep Florida Beautiful agreed to cosponsor the event again, and Silver Springs Inc. requested to be the overall statewide financial supporter. The recruiting, media notification, materials collection, and local sponsorship efforts mirrored the pilot program, and all met with success again. Cosponsorship at regional levels included timber companies, women's clubs, tourist attractions, local Keep Florida Beautiful chapters, and the U.S. Forest Service. Volunteers came from many diverse backgrounds as before and materials for the cleanup were contributed from many varied businesses and corporations.

The sites to be cleaned were selected based on the pilot program criteria and were located in the following counties: Polk, Columbia, Baker, Escambia, Santa Rosa, Palm Beach, Marion, Putnam, and Volusia. All sites were rivers, lakes, or wildlife management areas which receive heavy public use.

Above average temperatures and heavy rains greeted the participants on the project day, but their determination was not daunted. The effort lasted 5 hours and at the conclusion resulted in the following statewide results: 2,382 volunteers turned out to collect an estimated 67,564 kg of litter, >10 times more than the previous year, of which approximately 48% was recyclable (Table 2). Recognition of the volunteers was undertaken at regional levels and many positive comments were again offered.

**Table 2.** Statewide Statistics for Project EAGLE, 22 July 1995.

Region	<i>N</i> Volunteers	Total weight collected (kg)
Northwest	283	17,797
Northeast	272	2,788
Central <sup>a</sup>	695	32,778
Everglades	684	4,903
South	448	9,298
Totals	2,382	67,564

<sup>a</sup>Region utilized for pilot program—experienced groups participated.

## Discussion

The success of Project EAGLE is based on many factors including the dedication of Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission personnel, the environmental commitment of the involved communities, and their desire to participate. Support from environmental organizations, such as Keep Florida Beautiful, was essential to planning and deploying a project of this nature. Corporate support, local business involvement and input, and participation from organized clubs and civic organizations were also essential. Finally, the media played a key role in the success of such a project. Not only did television, radio, and newspaper coverage promote the importance of environmental awareness through community cooperation, the recognition it gave participants will be valuable to the success of future projects.

## Literature Cited

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