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Conservation Groups Join Forces to Support Public Lands

Community urged to get involved to protect conservation lands.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE.

Jacksonville, FL -- Saturday, September 29th is National Public Lands Day, the largest single-day volunteer effort for public lands in the United States.

A coalition of Northeast Florida's leading conservation organizations are using this occasion to raise awareness about the importance of our publicly-owned conservation lands and to encourage the community to explore, volunteer and advocate for the protection of these vital natural resources.

The groups include St. Johns Riverkeeper, North Florida Land Trust, Audubon Florida, Sierra Club Northeast Florida Group, Public Trust Environmental Legal Institute, Timucuan Trail Parks Foundation, and St. Johns River Alliance.

Northeast Florida is fortunate to have a significant number of public parks and conservation lands, most of which are accessible to the public. These valuable natural resources are vital to our local economy, quality of life, and the health of our environment.

The City of Jacksonville operates the largest urban park system in the United States, providing services at more than 337 locations on more than 80,000 acres. The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) owns or manages nearly 700,000 acres of land throughout the St. Johns River watershed. Thousands of additional acres are publicly-owned and managed by the Florida Forest Service, National Forest Service, National Parks Service, and Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. Most of these lands are accessible to the public, providing opportunities for hiking, biking, hunting, fishing, paddling, wildlife viewing, and camping.

However, the value of conservation lands goes well beyond the recreational benefits they provide. These critical natural resources provide flood control, water storage and treatment, essential habitat and corridors for wildlife, aquifer recharge, stormwater management, timber production, carbon sequestration, air quality benefits, erosion control, ecotourism opportunities, and the enhancement of property values.

On National Public Lands Day on September 29th, citizens throughout the United States can demonstrate support for our public lands by volunteering at participating locations. **Locally, volunteers can help with a cleanup and trail maintenance at Ft. George Island State Park from 9 am – Noon. Volunteers should meet at the Ribault Club, 11241 Fort George Road 32226.**

In addition to volunteering, local conservation groups are encouraging the community to get out and explore and advocate for the protection of these precious natural resources.

"We are fortunate to have such an extensive park system in Northeast Florida," says Maria Mark, Executive Director of the Timucuan Trail Park Foundation. "These publicly-owned lands sustain our environment, enhance our local economy, and provide countless recreational opportunities and health benefits for the community. We hope everyone will take the opportunity to explore or volunteer at one of the numerous special places that exist in our area. After all, they are owned by all of us!"

Audubon Florida's Executive Director Eric Draper: "National Public Lands Day is a perfect reminder of the importance of our remarkable natural heritage and a great opportunity to get your family outdoors. From spotting

Painted Buntings and Clapper Rails at Big Talbot Island State Park, to watching Royal Terns and Piping Plovers at Huguenot Memorial Park, iconic Northeast Florida experiences are waiting to be had year-round.”

Unfortunately, efforts are underway throughout the state to possibly sell-off publicly-owned conservation lands. The St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) is currently undergoing a process to assess the conservation lands that it owns to determine if some properties should be sold.

“We are extremely concerned about the potential loss of important conservation lands that are vital to the water quality and the overall health of the St. Johns,” said Lisa Rinaman, the St. Johns Riverkeeper. “As a result, we are closely monitoring this process and urge citizens to get involved to ensure that our publicly-owned lands remain in conservation, continuing to benefit us and our river.”

“National Public Lands Day comes at a time when we are facing the real possibility of losing conservation lands, reversing generations of hard work and progress,” adds Bonnie Barnes, Executive Director of North Florida Land Trust. “We are in tough economic times and managing conservation lands isn’t cheap. However, these are valuable assets and liquidating them with little public knowledge or involvement would be a tragedy.”

Rinaman continues, “We could potentially lose conservation lands, if we don’t make our voices heard. So, let’s get out there and explore, volunteer, *and* voice our support for the protection of these treasured places.”

Citizens can learn more about this process and submit comments on the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD) website - www.sjrwmd.com/landassessment/.

For more information about National Public Lands Day, visit www.publiclandsday.org.

Partners and Resources:

St. Johns Riverkeeper www.stjohnsriverkeeper.org/the-river

Learn more about the threat to our conservation lands, take a virtual tour of the St. Johns, and purchase a “Get Your Feet Wet” guidebook of parks along the river.

North Florida Land Trust www.northfloridalandtrust.org

Find out about lands protected by the NFLT and strategies and plans for future acquisitions.

Timucuan Trail Parks Foundation www.timucuantrailparksfoundation.org

This informative website includes an interactive map of local parks.

Sierra Club, Northeast Florida Group <http://florida.sierraclub.org/northeast/>

Join the Sierra Club on one of its numerous outings to explore local parks and waterways.

Public Trust Environmental Legal Institute www.publictrustlaw.org/paddling-guide.html

Access paddling guides for the Intracoastal Waterway and the Timucuan Trail Waterway.

St. Johns River Alliance www.stjohnsriveralliance.com

Site includes an interactive map and information about the St. Johns River.

Audubon Florida <http://fl.audubon.org>

Founded more than a century ago to save Florida’s wading birds from extinction, today Audubon Florida specializes in science-based advocacy on behalf of Florida’s water, wildlife and wildlands.