

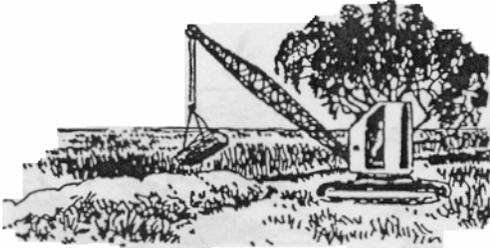
Fact Sheet

Why Florida's Wetlands Are Important



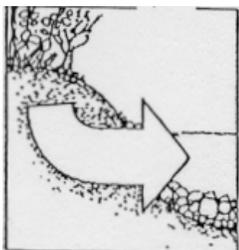
February 2004

Historically, up to 2/3 of land in Florida was wetland. Large-scale drainage of land began in the



1880's. This, along with the population explosion in Florida in the decades after World War II, resulted in a tremendous loss of wetlands. In the last 150 years, Florida has lost more than 60% (over 12 million acres) of its wetlands. The effects of this were noticed by the 1970's in declining fisheries, the "dying" of Lake Okeechobee, and saltwater intrusion into coastal aquifers. Several state and federal statutes were passed in the 1970's to better protect and manage wetlands in Florida and the nation as a whole.

Wetlands in Florida perform a number of functions valuable to society. Wetlands store water, maintaining the water table for urban and agricultural supplies. They also help prevent flooding in adjacent and downstream areas by slowly releasing water after rains to rivers or lakes via groundwater.



Streamflow Maintenance

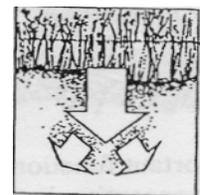
Coastal fringing wetlands such as mangroves or brackish marshes buffer landward property from storm surges.

Wetlands also stabilize shorelines of estuaries, lakes, and rivers, thus protecting against erosion caused by waves and river currents. Florida's coastal wetlands are nursery areas for commercially valuable fish and shellfish such as redfish, snook, trout, shrimp, and crabs. Over 2/3 of the economically important fish and shellfish species in Florida depend on wetlands at some point in their life cycles. Wetlands throughout the state are habitat for threatened and endangered species such as black bears, bald eagles, manatees, panthers, and pitcher plants.



Fishing on the Kissimmee River

Some wetlands recharge groundwater supplies and prevent intrusion of saltwater into coastal county aquifers used for drinking water and other purposes. Wetlands in Florida also help water quality by filtering pollutants in urban and agricultural runoff before they reach lakes, streams, and estuaries. This in turn helps to prevent problems such as hydrilla growth, loss of seagrass beds and fish kills.



Groundwater Recharge

Many wetlands in the state are popular recreation areas and provide opportunities for hunting or fishing. In some cases, farming or timber harvesting can be done in wetlands with little adverse impact if conducted according to best management practices.



Hunting area on state land

Not all wetlands provide all functions. For example, wetlands along the headwaters of streams and rivers may be relatively small and not important as habitat for large mammals; however, they often drain a large portion of the watershed and are very important in filtering pollutants and sediment from runoff. A ponded depression in a field may not contribute to water quality enhancement but may contain valuable food sources for waterfowl or wading birds.

Wetlands do not have to be inundated with water for all or even part of the year to provide some of these important functions. A common misconception is that an area is not a wetland, or not a



Prairie slough during dry season

valuable wetland, unless standing water is present. Some Florida wetland types hold water near the surface during the wetter parts of the year, but generally, water is not above the surface. However, they can sustain unique plant and animal communities and become very important during droughts when they are the only sources of water available to animals in the adjacent uplands.

The protection and management of Florida's wetland resources pays off in preservation of wetland functions for human benefit. The preservation of these lands reduces costs of water treatment, flood control, and other services and commodities. It also helps preserve the biodiversity of some of the most unique and beautiful landscapes in the nation and the world, contained here in the state of Florida.



Cypress wetland during wet season

*Photos courtesy of the South Florida Water Management District and the University of Florida Center for Wetlands.
Drawings courtesy of the Washington State Department of Ecology.*