VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT: DARRYL & MELISSA UPDEGROVE

FOOTPRINT
Winter 2019 Volume 35 Issue 4

Seminole State Forest
Removing Roadwalk

Big Cypress Backcountry
Volunteer Work Party

Gaps in the Panhandle
Work Continues to Close the Gaps

Cast Your Vote
Mail-in Ballot for 2019 Board of Directors

Florida Trail Association
Suncoast Chapter volunteer, Ed Shindle, hiking back from a day of trail work in Big Cypress National Preserve.
Our Mission
The Florida Trail Association builds, maintains, protects, and promotes the unique Florida National Scenic Trail (Florida Trail), along with a network of hiking trails throughout the state of Florida. Together with our partners, the Association provides opportunities for the public to contribute to meaningful volunteer work, engage in outdoor recreation, and participate in environmental education.
The Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building, was established in 1966. The primary mission of the organization is the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,300-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida's own National Scenic Trail.

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Florida Trail Association
Building More Than Trails

Our Magazine:
The Footprint is published by the Florida Trail Association, a volunteer-based nonprofit organization focused on Florida hiking and trail building. Since 1966, the primary mission of our organization has been the care and protection of the Florida Trail, a 1,300-mile footpath across the Sunshine State - Florida’s own National Scenic Trail.

Our Goal:
To provide outreach to our readers through informative articles that express appreciation for and conservation of the natural beauty of Florida; to inform our readers of Florida Trail Association business; and to provide information on Florida hiking and outdoor recreation opportunities.

Contributors:
Contributors are welcome to submit items for our various departments as well as trail and association-related news. Please contact the editor at communications@floridatrail.org to discuss ideas for feature stories prior to submission.

Membership:
If you’re not already a member, join now. As a Florida Trail member, you receive a subscription to The Footprint magazine, membership in a local chapter, a local newsletter with local activities, opportunities for outdoor skills training, participation in regional and annual conferences and more. Call toll-free 877-HIKE-FLA for more information.

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Deadline for articles for the Spring issue of The Footprint is April 30.
Dear FTA Members,

I have tried to keep these letters short and sweet, but please allow my ramblings this time. This is my last one and I feel a bit sentimental.

The Federal shutdown in January was a big setback for this season’s work schedule. The absence of our administrative partner, the USFS led by Shawn Thomas, for a few weeks was a sharp reminder of how much we depend on them. The shutdown had another huge impact on FTA – the cancellation of multiple staff-led work parties in January. I know this was very frustrating to those of you who had made plans to attend. The shutdown also stalled the recovery efforts in the Panhandle. It will take several years to get the FT in good shape again in that neck of the woods. Fortunately, our budget was able to absorb the delay in reimbursements from the USFS during this time. Had the closure gone on indefinitely, we would have had to make some tough decisions. It was a strong reminder why FTA needs to continue to increase our own financial resources.

By now, you should have seen the first-ever FTA online election ballot! This is such a big step for our organization. Many, many thanks to the Nominating Committee, headed by Megan Eidel with the assistance of Helen Wigersma and Bill Turman. In the past, the Board of Directors was elected by only those who could attend the Annual Meeting. With the new Bylaws revision, the Board wanted to open the elections to become a statewide ballot. We are a state organization, after all. With the help of Megan, Van Tran and online platforms, we have been able to achieve this goal. I believe this will help FTA grow by allowing all members to participate in the governance of the organization. Please vote by visiting: https://www.floridatrail.org/board-directors-ballot-2019/

A mail-in ballot is also available on page 24.

In January, I had the privilege to participate in another growth opportunity in Osceola County at the Lake Lizzie Conservation Area. This is a prime example of Shawn’s behind-the-scenes work with County leaders including Bob Mindick and Fred Hawkins. I’d also like to thank Dale Allen, of the Greenway and Trails Foundation, for his expert assistance in negotiating between all the appropriate parties. Adding the FT to this county preserve helps to protect development. It was so much fun for me to meet and greet people that day. As a long-time FTA member, I already know how I treasure the FT. It made me feel so proud to tell people on the inaugural hike about FTA and the FT. It’s a 3+ mile section, and it will eliminate 19 miles of roadwalk! It was a great day to be FTA President.

David Waldrop and I represented the FTA Board in Washington DC recently. Hike the Hill is an annual gathering of all the National Trails organizations to educate our Federal legislators about the importance of funding trails. Along with Alex Stigliano and Kelly Wiener, we traveled the marble hallways of Congress for 3 days, meeting legislative aides and distributing FTA/FT information. Part of my speech was: “Did you know that our FTA volunteers donated thousands of hours of work last year to keep the Florida Trail open and accessible for the 365,000 people who walk on the FT every year?” We also asked for support for the John D. Dingell, Jr. Conservation, Management and Recreation Act. It was very exciting to
be in DC when the Senate passed their version of this critical bill. We also got to meet with the USFS and express again our support for the Big Bend reroute. The new Chief, Vicki Christiansen, was still recovering from the shutdown, but took the time to speak at the conference and attended a reception. We also had some one-on-one time with Jamie Schmidt, and others to discuss specific issues and needs of the Florida Trail.

When you are in DC and you see all the different kinds of people from all kinds of organizations, you realize how important it is that FTA goes to Washington every year. Had we not been present, our message would not have been heard. Of course, we also had a productive time meeting other leaders from other Scenic Trail organizations. We shared our similar challenges and creative ideas. I will mention that there were only a few Board members at this gathering, and I was glad David and I were able to attend. It is an expensive trip, but I think it makes a strong impression on the legislators when volunteers show up in their office. Now, the Board needs to do the same in Tallahassee.

So, this is my last President’s letter. It’s been an honor and a privilege to serve the Florida Trail Association. We have made good progress because of the dedication of the volunteers, the Board, and the staff. Over these past two years, we’ve approved a new reroute which will put the FT on protected public land, moved the office to a modern building, expanded the elections process, changed the mission statement to give priority to the FT, hired a new Community Outreach Manager, hosted two film festivals, and celebrated the National Scenic Trails Act-- and I know I’m leaving out some things! My Board of Directors have been responsive and engaged: David Waldrop, Pam Hale, Carlos Schomaker, Greg Knecht, Jan Wells, David Denham, Pete Durnell, Megan Eidel, Ralph Hancock, Bill Turman, Deborah Schroth, Mark Sheddan, Adam Wiegand, and Lauren Krebs. Thank you for your expertise, time and personal financial contributions to make the 4-times a year meetings, and for your responsiveness to the constant emails. I know the next group of Directors will be just as productive, if not more. I’d also like to thank the FTA staff: Janet, Diane, Jaklyn, Alex, Van, Jeff, Adam, and Kelly. My gosh – what I didn’t know when I started!! Each of these professionals has gently suggested better ideas and more accurate statements. It’s been a pleasure to work with all of you. Finally, I’d like to thank Shawn Thomas. We didn’t really know each other two years ago, but I can call him a friend now. Shawn is a knowledgeable and supportive leader for our mission of completing and protecting the FT.

So, thank you for your trust and support these past two years. On the sidelines, I plan to help find us a new Executive Director (so keep sending in those donations!). FTA is a very complicated organization and we really need a paid, full-time person to oversee it all. I’ll be more active in my own chapter, so I’m sure to see you on the FT soon. Thanks for all you do - now I know more than ever how much you all contribute to our mission. To paraphrase Emerson: “Do not go where the path may lead, but go instead where there is no path and leave a Florida Trail.”

Leslie Wheeler
Removing Roadwalk
by Kelly Wiener, Central & South Florida Trail Program Manager

Each year, the FTA and our partners build and maintain an increasing number of miles on the Florida Trail. It’s not easy, and it’s certainly not always a fast process, but gaps in the Florida Trail are being closed—one project at a time. An important part of celebrating these major accomplishments is recognizing and understanding our collaborative partnerships and the long term dedication of FTA volunteers that make gap closures possible. As it nears completion, we are thrilled to announce the latest gap closure effort in Seminole State Forest and also tell the story of how we got here.

Seminole State Forest (SSF) consists of 27,082 acres in Lake County, west of Sanford, Florida. The Florida Trail currently begins at the Bear Pond Trailhead off SR 46. Going northbound, hikers enjoy a scenic footpath through 7.75 miles of pine flatwood, live oak hammock, sandhill and sand pine scrub habitats before reaching the Cassia Trailhead. The gap begins here, where long distance hikers must exit the forest and head west on Brantley Branch Road, then walk 2.2 miles along busy SR44, then walk another mile along roads in the Royal Trails development before re-entering the forest again off Coconut Ave— totaling a 3.2-mile paved road walk. Continuing northbound, the trail meanders through the forest behind housing developments and weaves on and off Maggie Jones Road another 5 miles before entering Boy Scout Camp La-No-Che and eventually the Ocala National Forest.

In September 2000, a large scale reroute was devised and scouted for this section by local FTA volunteers, Bill Taylor and Francis Keenan. The envisioned route would have begun at SR44 and CR44A, shifting the trail south of its current placement, and west around Lake Norris. In 2007, after years of hiking and hours of meetings and negotiations, the...
FTA and USFS decided further exploration of alternative routing was necessary due to the extensive need for bridges and boardwalks on the westerly route. In 2008, a possible route involving a sod farm was scouted but unfortunately, was not feasible due to the inability to reach an agreement with local landowners to pass through their private property.

Later that year, Ralph was out in the field when a conversation with a local landowner about the location of the Florida Trail inspired him to take out his maps and see if there were any new opportunities to improve the trail routing. He devised a reroute that would use a combination of new and existing trails northwest of the Jumper Campsite to bring the trail up to a more northern point on SR 44 where two existing tracts of the forest meet. Hikers could cross SR44, walk 50 yards, then re-enter the forest—eliminating the 3.2 mile road walk. From there the route would follow a combination of dirt road, footpath and power line easement to rejoin the existing trail at Coconut Ave.

Nearly a decade later in the 2016 maintenance season, routing in Seminole State Forest was revisited by local volunteers and biologist Ralph Risch, whose enthusiasm for the trail would spur exploration into two reroutes. The first reroute, completed in February 2017 by the Highlanders Chapter, was a 2.5 mile reroute of the trail off Maggie Jones Road onto state forest land.

There is a plethora of land owned by the State Forest surrounding the SR 44 and Royal Trails roadwalk, but Ralph noticed there was one missing link—a small parcel off Brantley Branch Road. He then remembered that this property had recently changed ownership. What was once a private residence had recently been sold to a non-profit organization called the Orianne Center for Indigo Conservation, a conservation facility for the propagation of the Eastern Indigo Snake. Ralph floated the idea of hosting a section of the Florida Trail with Orianne Center Director, Michelle Hoffman, and was excited to hear she was open to continuing the conversation.

After many meetings during the 2017 maintenance season, an agreement was reached between the Central Florida Zoo, who partners with the Orianne Society to manage the conservation center, and the US Forest Service, who administer the Florida Trail. With this agreement in hand, and approval of the reroute from the Florida Forest Service coordinated by Supervisor Joe Bishop, we were finally able to get to work on the 5.3 mile reroute.
Orianne Center for Indigo Conservation Sign.

Scarlet King Snake found while scouting SSF.

View of pond from trail at Orianne Center.
Our first task was to prepare a 946ft corridor along a power line easement on the Orianne Center property. The Orianne Center is not open to the public, so a component of the new access agreement included the FTA’s commitment to install fencing along the new corridor to help prevent trespassing. In October 2018, thanks to a $5,000 grant from REI Winter Park, we were able to fully fund the fencing project and host a Volunteer Work Party to complete the installation. Over the course of one weekend, 22 volunteers joined our efforts, including a great turnout of loyal volunteers from the Highlanders and Central Florida Chapters, as well as a showing of new volunteers who got involved as a result of attending our recent Trail Skills Training and National Trails Festival.

Over the course of the 2018-2019 maintenance season, under the leadership of Francis and Bobbi Keenan, members of the Highlanders chapter have continued scouting, flagging and clearing the route. The Highlanders are also working with a local boy scout troop and Seminole State Forest staff on three puncheons over small water crossings along the route. We hope to complete the reroute and announce a ribbon cutting and inaugural hike in the fall of 2019.

The FTA community is comprised of thousands of individuals across the state, all working toward a shared vision of completing the Florida Trail. The completion of the Seminole State Forest is exemplary in that it brought together a hardworking and diverse array of partners working toward this vision. FTA volunteers and staff, the Florida Forest Service, the US Forest Service, the Orianne Center, the Central Florida Zoo, REI Winter Park and local Boy Scouts can all be credited with helping to move this gap closure forward.

With ~270 miles of roadwalk remaining, there will many more reroutes in the years ahead as we work to close gaps in the trail. It’s important we celebrate each new mile of trail and appreciate the journey we have undertaken to get there.

INTERESTED IN GETTING INVOLVED IN THIS REROUTE?

JOIN US MARCH 30-31 FOR A VOLUNTEER WORK PARTY TO HELP CLEAR A NEW TRAIL SECTION IN SEMINOLE STATE FOREST. VISIT THE FTA WEBSITE FOR MORE INFORMATION.

FLORIDATRAIL.ORG

Lunch break while installing the fence at Orianne Center.

Baby gopher tortoise found while scouting SSF.

Finished Orianne Center Fence.
The 2019 backcountry Big Cypress Volunteer Work Party was a resounding success! With the uncertainty surrounding the federal shutdown, we worked hard to coordinate with local volunteers and National Park Service staff to coordinate the annual week-long trail maintenance event only days after the reopening of the government. We were fortunate to have 9 dedicated volunteers who were able to arrange their travel with such short notice. We were also very fortunate to be supported by the Big Cypress Chapter’s Trail Coordinator, Ralph Duharte, who coordinated the donation of a swamp buggy for the week from Captain Steve’s Swamp Buggy Adventures. With our own buggy, Ralph was able to shuttle volunteers to trail sections, increasing our ability to access the more remote areas of the preserve.

We set up our base camp just north of 10 Mile Camp to accommodate three full maintenance days. We were able to clear and blaze 10.5 miles of FT between 7 Mile Camp and .5 miles north of 13 Mile Camp. This included a 2-mile stretch south of 13 Mile Camp that had been affected by wildfires last season and was very much in need of re-blazing. Over the course of the week, we cooked delicious meals, shared stories around the campfire, and saw plenty of wildlife including gators, a diamondback rattlesnake, a water moccasin and wading birds. If you’re interested in attending the 2020 VWP, you can fill out an interest form on our Volunteer Opportunities page that will be posted this summer at floridatrail.org.
Home is where you hang your helmet.
Central & South Florida Trail Program Manager, Kelly Wiener.

Highlanders Chapter Volunteer, Sandy Bell.
Rhonda hiking back to camp after the first day of trail work.

Appalachian Trail Conservancy Trail Maintainer, Josh Reynolds.
Ed relaxing at camp after a long day of trail work.
Soot-covered Van enjoying a well-deserved sandwich after re-blazing a section of trail that had been affected by wildfire in the last year.

Indian River Volunteer, Rhonda Wise.

Tools of the trail.

Suncoast Chapter Volunteer, Ed Shindle.

Enjoying the new picnic table at Ten Mile Camp.
Appalachian Trail Conservancy Trail Maintainer, Josh Reynolds, traveled all the way from Maine to join us for his first FTA work party.

Big Cypress Chapter Trail Coordinator, Ralph Duharte, coordinated the donation of a swamp buggy for the week from Captain Steve’s Swamp Buggy Adventures.

Good moments were shared on the long swamp buggy rides.

FTA Technical Advisor, Abe “Beast” Christian.

Air plant in bloom.
In the Summer of 2018, the FTA received the largest trail grant in our recent history from The National Forest Foundation to rebuild a string of puncheon on the Western Corridor of the Ocala National Forest. Scattered over these eight miles of trail are puncheons of varying length, some just over roadside ditches, and some over one thousand feet, traversing deep cypress swamps. With some of the structures over twenty years old, most were in serious states of decay and disrepair with exposed nails, broken deck boards, and rotten mud sills.

With great anticipation, FTA staff planned the major undertaking to start in the fall. Site visits, field logistics, meetings with National Forest archeologists and biologists, equipment purchases, and even more logistical planning took place in July, August, and September with work planned to start in October. Abe Christian, dedicated Black Bear Chapter section leader, was hired on as the project manager, tasked with being the on-the-ground crew lead for the entire project.

Over the course of 16 days of consecutive work in October, over 40 individual volunteers worked tirelessly to remove and replace hundreds of tons of puncheon material. This back breaking work (literally- I had a disk injury in my back that put me out for 6 weeks) involved tearing out by hand, heavy and water-logged timbers that were deeply embedded in the ground by rebar, often far from a road, and hauling them back to a loading site where they could be disposed of. This was exhausting and dirty work and took the longest of any step in this project.

Western Corridor Puncheon Project

Lumber sits staged for pickup by a UTV to deliver down the trail.

Bob Wright drives the Cannycom being used to haul materials and tools down the trail.

Once the trail was free of the old infrastructure, the path was clear for the new material to be brought in. Using a combination of tools, both hand and machine, the new material was slowly delivered to each respective site and the installation began. This process involved laying timbers by hand, cutting curves with chainsaws, drilling pilot holes for rebar and timber spikes, and then hammering the whole thing together. This part of the process is instantly gratifying and went much faster than the tear out of the old material. Once the crew gets the rhythm, the installation process is a beautiful sight to see, with all the worker bees assuming their roles in precise steps.

Meanwhile, back at the Lake George Ranger Station where all three semi-truck loads of lumber were staged, the piles would shrink each day as we inched closer to our goal. Something to consider is that on October 10, the second day of the puncheon project, Hurricane Michael was ravaging the panhandle of Florida. Our crew was working on a sunny day with a steady breeze, just excitedly starting this project. After work, we were glued to our respective screens mesmerized and saddened by the destruction. The storm had no effect.
on the Ocala National Forest, which just goes to show how every major storm that hits Florida is so different. The Ocala National Forest was struck by Hurricane Matthew in 2016, so we are acutely aware of what a storm can do to the FNST—but immediate reports of trail damage from Michael were so far beyond what this region experienced that it was gut wrenching to process.

As the season rolled on, small sections of the puncheon were worked on by a threadbare crew of Black Bear Chapter volunteers until two additional Volunteer Work Parties were scheduled for December. A cast of new characters showed up for these events, including many first-time volunteers who we hope will continue volunteering with the FTA. We dealt with a deluge of rain during the month of December and it turned the job into a jungle adventure, complete with deep mud and flowing currents. Fortunately, it was all received with wide smiles by the crews.

Ed Shindle from the Suncoast Chapter handles the drill, prepping for timber spikes to be pounded in.

On December 18, we wrapped up the Western Corridor puncheon project, installing the very last of the 800 deck timbers. That is 9,600 linear feet of new material! What an incredible feat, knowing that just the deck boards alone weighted a whopping 80,000 pounds, and think about how many times each one of those was picked up and put down! We also installed 350 (26,000 pounds) of mud sills, 700 pieces of rebar, and hammered in 3,200 timber spikes. We had some machinery to help us along the way, but it was definitely an extremely physical project and each person’s labor is what carried us to the end. This was a unique project for the FTA and we could not have done it without the hard working volunteers who gave their all. At times, it was hot, cold, muddy, and swampy, and always hard work. Everyone involved should be very proud of the accomplishment.

I want to personally recognize the amazing leadership of Abe Christian. His leadership and dedication was a major factor in the success of this project and he has a lot to be proud of. There’s a reason his trail name is Beast, and after working with him, you’ll see why.

A huge thanks to The National Forest Foundation, REI Inc., and the Ocala National Forest for supporting this project.

Abe Christian and his motley crew of dirt hounding, lumber schlepping, nail smashing, trail dawgz.

OVER THE COURSE OF THIS PROJECT:

56 INDIVIDUAL FTA VOLUNTEERS WORKED
2,424 HOURS AND DROVE
A WHOPPING 8,585 MILES TO WORK ON THE TRAIL

The FTA’s very own Van Tran sits with John Nash taking a much deserved break from hard labor.

A completed section of trail winds through a beautiful cypress and pine grove.
The Ocala National Forest has always been a ‘go-to’ destination on the Florida Trail. There are roughly 100 miles of continuous trail in the Forest, the longest stretch of backpackable trail without any road walks anywhere on the FT. A little known fact is that Marion County hosts over 130 miles of the FT, roughly 10% of its entire length! It’s also an incredibly diverse stretch of trail with sand pine scrub forest, longleaf pine, wiregrass, first magnitude springs, more than 600 lakes, prairies, and subtropical forests.

Even with all of these outstanding natural communities, it is something else entirely that often is a major attraction for hikers. Located directly on the trail, this oasis is often a needed resting point for weary walkers, a calm place to relax in the shade to cool off and have a drink. If water isn’t your thing, then you are in luck because they also serve ice cold beer, in frosty mugs to boot. If you’re not from this part of the state, then perhaps The 88 Store and Pub is new to you. But if you’ve spent time hiking in North Florida-- then chances are-- you’ve already heard, or better yet, patronized this establishment.

Beyond just a drinking establishment, The 88 is also a resupply point for long distance hikers as well as a place to fill up with water, take a hot shower, do laundry, receive mail drops, and arrange a shuttle. Owner, Dave Preising, operates a hiker shuttle for $1.00 per mile-- just call The 88 for booking. Located just off of County Road 316 near Salt Springs, the Pub is easy to find and is also a major social hub for the Forest’s full time residents and those who come up to recreate. If you visit here on any given weekend from November-March, there’s a high likelihood that business is booming with the usual crowd of bikers in leathers, hunters in camo, and hikers in wool and Gortex. There’s a jukebox in full swing, and there’s hardly an open seat inside or out. Be forewarned that if you’re not a fan of cigarette smoke, stay outside.

The 88 Store and Pub isn’t much to look at, but it's just the sheer fact that it exists right on the trail that makes it so special to the FNST.

The 88 Store and Pub has been serving Florida Trail hikers for almost 60 years and at least 300 hikers have visited in the past 2 years, or at least those are just the select few that have signed the trail register located inside the bar. Presumably, scores more visit the pub each season. It wasn’t always a bar-- it used to be a small grocery store owned by the adjacent junk yard. It has changed hands over the years and owner Dave Preising has owned The 88 since 2011. His penchant for the trail is obvious as he has taken it as a personal mission to immerse himself into the trail community as both a local business owner that caters to hikers as well as a shuttle operator. For those FT hikers carrying the new Florida Trail Passport book, The 88 is home to the only extra-large stamp, so be sure to get your copy of the book and visit the legendary 88 Store and Pub.

There’s only one review on Yelp.com for The 88, and of course it’s written by hikers:

Haley C. writes, “When you’ve hiked 8 miles and need to reward yourself with a cold beer STOP IN HERE! It’s a hole in the wall, but it’s got what you need and some of what you want. You can bring your dog too! The woman who helped us was friendly and down to earth. Great stop on the Florida scenic trail!”

This sums up perfectly what The 88 means to the Florida Trail. Call it a dive bar, but it has got to be the best dive bar anywhere on any National Scenic Trail, and it’s ours.
Bear in Mind
by Jeff Glenn, North Florida Trail Program Manager

Bear Activity in Juniper Prairie Wilderness

“A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.”

- The definition of wilderness. Section 2(c) of The Wilderness Act of 1964

In 1964, the Federal Government of the United States took what was at the time, and probably still to this day, the greatest single move to protect wild spaces in American history. The Wilderness Act protected more than 9 million acres of wild spaces as designated wilderness, which can be defined above. It was the first time that the American wilderness was seen to have such intrinsic value that it should remain intact and untrammeled forever. Today, almost 110 million acres of land are distinguished as federally protected wilderness.

The Florida Trail is fortunate to pass through a few wilderness areas: Juniper Prairie in the Ocala National Forest (10 miles), Bradwell Bay in the Apalachicola National forest (17.5 miles), and Port Leon in St. Marks National Wildlife Refuge (1.9 miles). Wilderness designation means that any part of the Florida Trail contained within the boundaries of a wilderness area are to be free of any form of mechanized equipment, including the regular tools we use to maintain trail: mowers, brush cutters, chainsaws, and hedge trimmers. The law prohibits simple machines such as wheeled devices like bicycles and wheelbarrows. What this means is that trail maintenance is done the old fashioned way: with hand tools and time.

Juniper Prairie Wilderness, at 14,283 acres, is the largest of several wilderness areas in the Ocala National Forest and is most likely the top destination for overnight hikers anywhere in the area if not the state of Florida. On any given weekend from November to March, it is common to see upwards of 100 hikers swarming the Florida Trail. On a holiday weekend, expect even more. Most if not all hikers are headed to Hidden Pond, an oasis amongst the scrub. After miles of dry and dense oak scrub, the crystal clear water of the spring-fed pond is a sight to behold and a much awaited opportunity to go for a swim.

The backside of the pond opens up to vast expanses of Juniper Prairie, evoking the feeling of African savannahs, complete with long range views of pine islands, ponds, twisted oak hammocks, and tall native grasses blowing in the breeze. There’s a reason that Hidden Pond has a decades or perhaps centuries old legacy that has kept hordes of hikers flocking to it. The

Hidden Pond in Juniper Prairie Wilderness.

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Footprint Winter 2019
The allure of the wilderness, that Florida has some semblance of the archetypal western wilderness, is enough to draw people from far and wide to get a glimpse of such a rare designation in our state. The truth, however, is that there are places that are as nice if not nicer elsewhere on the Ocala, with similar landscapes. Hopkins Prairie to the north and Farles Prairie to the south evoke a lot of the same feelings as Juniper, just without the crowds.

The real agenda of this article is to talk about the recent closure of Juniper Prairie Wilderness, including all 10 miles of the Florida Trail in this section. What has been posted online by the US Forest Service and the Florida Trail Association really only says that the closure is due to increased bear activity. While this is true, it could use some more clarification because there has not been enough to really show the urgency and direness of this situation. Human activity and carelessness at Hidden Pond is routinely problematic and has been the culprit for multiple incidents in the past year where close encounters have been too close for anyone’s comfort. There have been several incidents reported to law enforcement and most likely many more that went unreported as well. To put this into perspective-- and with the goal of eliciting a little fear-- imagine you are peacefully sleeping in your tent, lulled asleep by the white noise of evening prairie sounds, when a bear rips the front of your tent off with you still inside. You have no time to react other than to grab your pocket knife and cut a hole in the back half of your tent to escape through while the bear helps itself to all of your belongings inside the tent. You abandon everything and night hike back to your vehicle. This event actually happened. There were a couple of major problems here. First, having bears conditioned to seek out human food is a major problem. Second, and more importantly, this individual was a squatter, someone who was illegally living out behind Hidden Pond with rations for weeks or months, and who moved all but their living room couch out into the wilderness. Multiple laws were broken, including: using a wagon (no wheels in the wilderness), camping for more than 14 days in a dispersed recreation site on National Forest Property, and abandoning personal property on Forest Service land. But, what really sets this as a prime example of why Juniper Wilderness is currently closed is that this was the most egregious violation of Leave No Trace (LNT) ethics imaginable. It’s hard to describe the mess left behind by this individual but it was very bad. True, the bear had its way with the campsite, making it look like a bomb went off, but nothing about this situation from the beginning was low impact. There was no honoring the land, no respect for the beauty of the place, no respect for anyone who might have seen this large and illegal campsite, and certainly no respect for the wildlife that live there. Now, luckily, this person was not injured, but they were scared to the point of running miles without looking back, leaving the FTA to clean up their mess.

This is just one example of several that have happened on the Ocala National Forest, with most being reported at Hidden Pond. When a resource becomes loved to death, and when health and human safety become a management concern for the US Forest Service, decisions like closures are not far behind. Going back to the definition set forth in the Wilderness Act, it is easy to use the above bear encounter as an example as to why the current situation at Hidden Pond goes against Federal law. “A visitor who does not remain,” “without...human habitation,” “with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable,” “opportunities for solitude...” These stand-out phrases seem almost impossible to imagine when camping side by side with dozens of hiking groups crowded together. In addition, the health and human safety factor extends beyond wildlife encounters. There is one water source at Hidden Pond, and it is the place that not only provides clean drinking water but is also the swimming hole to thousands of sweaty, sunscreen and bug spray-covered hikers every year. There are no restroom facilities, it is a wilderness area with no infrastructure whatsoever, and the imagination can run wild with problems associated with so many hikers untrained in LNT backcountry potty use. There is a definite human waste problem at Hidden Pond, period.

The good news is that this is a resource loved by all, including the land managers who are tasked with protecting not just the land and the public that uses it, but also with honoring the laws that were created to protect it and respecting nature’s right to exist without an over-reaching hand. It has become a catch 22; managing a resource that is being overused and abused while being tasked with managing it as little as possible. Fortunately, there is an experienced team with diverse professional backgrounds ranging from law enforcement, recreation, and wildlife, including the District Ranger, that is working to solve this dilemma of how to keep Juniper Wilderness open and hikers safe and out of danger from wildlife. Of course, the FTA and USFS
Photos like this of Hidden Pond are commonly found on social media.

has a seat at this table too.

Solutions currently underway fall into the realm of education, engineering, and enforcement. Recently, a new bear awareness kiosk was built by the Black Bear Chapter of the FTA at Pat’s Island, the northern wilderness portal. More kiosks just like it are planned for Juniper Springs and the Yearling Trail, the other two entryways into the wilderness. A bear canister rental program is being developed by the FTA, USFS and the Ocala National Forest that will help keep food out of the grasp of hungry bears. Monitoring, education, and enforcement plans are being implemented through a joint effort by the FTA, USFS and the Ocala National Forest. Research is being done on the legal ramifications and ethics of installing light infrastructure to secure food along the Florida Trail.

One of the main objectives both as a resource protection issue and legal matter is to lessen Hidden Pond’s destination aura. No longer just a campsite, a scenic spot along the route, Hidden Pond is so much more...it’s on TripAdvisor! And, of course the first review is aptly titled, “Burrs Everywhere.” Nice.

Hidden Pond has become a designated campsite in a place where designated anything is just not allowed. And for good reason. The large impact of thousands of hikers each season needs to be spread over the entire length of the Florida Trail in the wilderness. The old adage that the solution to pollution is dilution applies to spreading the impact of concentrated overnight use at Hidden Pond to the other 14,000 acres in the Juniper Prairie Wilderness. Florida backpackers need to become educated and practice the art of Leave no Trace camping, especially those who frequent the area in large groups.

There are a lot of misguided frustrations from the hiking community that have surfaced after this recent closure. This is not a Rainbow Gathering issue, although they are easy targets, especially after burning Hopkins Prairie badly several years ago. There are no conspiracies to be found anywhere here, only a terrible situation that is correlated to hikers. Chances are, if you are reading this, you are in-the-know and are up to speed on your outdoor ethics, but we all know that for every one of us, there are many more who are not as educated when it comes to the preservation of a wild space.

Really good land management is being practiced by people who have dedicated their educations and built their careers to resolving situations like these. They are working to alleviate this problem. It could be argued that the problem went on far too long, and that it should not have come to this. But for now, please know that the Florida Trail Association and the US Forest Service are doing everything possible to keep the trail open every day of the year and to keep the wildlife/human interface in balance. Educate yourselves with the 7 Principles of Leave No Trace and preach it to anyone who will listen, because it is on all of us to keep Florida’s few wilderness areas truly wild.

For more information Visit WarriorExpeditions.org

When campsites like this become commonplace, wilderness character is removed and we are left with very tough and unpopular management decisions.
Cast your vote to play an important role in the future of the Florida Trail Association

As a member of the Florida Trail Association, you have the privilege of casting your vote in the 2019 Board of Directors election. You have a voice, and we want to hear it!

SEVERAL WAYS TO CAST YOUR VOTE!

By Mail: on page 26, there’s a paper copy of the ballot that can be mailed. Mail in ballots must be postmarked by March 30, 2019.

Mail your ballot to: Florida Trail Association 1050 NW 2nd Street, Suite A Gainesville, FL 32601

Electronically: There is now an option to vote online! https://goo.gl/forms/nqkhSHSFTgtk9GZU2

Online voting is currently open! Online voting will close March 30, 2019.

Annual Meeting: April 6, 2019 9AM-12PM at the Wyndham Garden Hotel in Gainesville, FL

*You must be an FTA member in order to vote. Note, only one vote per membership. If you chose to submit your ballot by mail, you will not need to vote electronically.

The Florida Trail Association Nominating Committee has verified all applicant qualifications. To learn more about 2019 candidates, please read the bios below. If you wish to learn more about Board of Director duties and responsibilities, head to www.FloridaTrail.org.

OFFICER CANDIDATE BIOGRAPHIES

President

David Waldrop
Lake Wales, FL

David is a graduate of USF with a BS in Engineering Technology and is employed by the Lake Wales Charter School District. He has been a member of the Florida Trail Association since 2005 having joined after working with members of the Heartland Chapter doing trail maintenance. He is a section leader for the Kissimmee River section of the FNST, and chapter chair of the Heartland Chapter. For the past five years, David has served as VP Trails on the FTA Board of Directors.

VP Development and Outreach

Carlos Schomaker
Fort Myers, FL

Carlos has been active in outdoor recreation and environmental causes since the 1970s, including USFS RARE II, Passport in Time, and trail work in CA and the Pacific Northwest. He is employed as a Radiation Therapy Equipment Service Engineer, and has also worked in R&D and factory testing environments in that medical industry. He is an active PADI scuba instructor and guide. Raised in Venezuela, Japan, Spain and the US, he attended Michigan Tech University and served in the United States Navy. He is a former Chapter Chair and Chapter Council Rep in the FTA. Carlos previously served as President and VP Development and Outreach on the Florida Trail Association Board. Carlos enjoys hiking and a number of other outdoor land, water and winter sports.

VP Governance

Pete Durnell
Deland, FL

Pete graduated from Miami University (Ohio) with a BA in Psychology and has an MA in International Relations from the University of Arkansas. After graduating from Miami, he joined the US Air Force and served a 20-year career there with a focus on Intelligence. After serving at various locations worldwide with the USAF, including living and working in England for several years, Pete returned to the US in 1994 and joined the FTA.

Pete became active with the Central Florida Chapter serving as an Activity Leader, Activity Coordinator, and Chapter Chair. He helped with the transition of the FTA Footprint from a newspaper format to a magazine format and served as co-editor and editor. He joined the Board in 2000 and served as a Director, Vice President of Administration, and President until 2011. He has now rejoined the board and has served his most recent term as VP Governance.
On a personal front, she is a native Floridian who enjoys learning more about Florida's environment and the benefits of protecting it. Through her experiences, she has gained an in-depth understanding of creating balance with the public good versus private benefit. As FTA continues to work towards the development of its National Scenic Trail in Florida, she believes her experience can be beneficial in the effort and communication of such endeavors.

Steve Womack
Port St. Joe, FL

Steve's background and experiences are primarily from 28 years in the military. He is a retired Army Command Sergeant Major who has led organizations of over 5,000 soldiers. He has a Bachelor of Science degree from Troy State University. Steve has always been an outdoor enthusiast who enjoys the National Parks and the various state parks around the country. He moved to Florida with his wife, Heather, and they soon found the Florida Trail and the Florida Trail Association.

Steve is currently serving as a Trail Section Leader and Activity Leader in the Panhandle Chapter and is also the Chapter Membership Chair. He attends Volunteer Work Parties when possible. He is also a board member for the Friends of St. Joseph Peninsula State Park and monitors eagles for the Eagle Watch Program with his wife. They are attempting to visit all the National Parks, but still have many to go. He says he has the time to volunteer and would be able to participate extensively as the VP Trails.

His goals for this nomination are to support the five-year strategic plan and to "build more than trails." He says he will work hard to develop innovative solutions with our partners and volunteers.

Deborah Schroth
Orange Park, FL

Deborah has been a member of the North Florida TrailBlazers for a number of years now, and participates in hikes, maintenance work, and has volunteered for IDidAHike for the past three years. She is proud to have a National Scenic Trail in Florida, and knows the importance of managing this resource. She is a Florida public interest attorney interested in environmental matters with experience in both state and federal regulatory matters.

For almost 25 years she has worked for non-profit law firms, gaining public advocacy and litigation skills. She is experienced in grant writing, and for a number of years was tasked with raising the money for her own salary. Deborah has previously served on the FTA Board as an at-large board member.

Darryl Updegrove
Panama City, FL

Darryl graduated from the University of Virginia in 1988 with a Bachelor of Science degree in electrical engineering. He began his career at the Naval Mine Warfare Engineering Activity in Yorktown, VA where he met his wife Melissa. In 1994 they moved to Panama City, Florida to continue his career for the U.S. Navy at the Coastal System Station. In 1998 he completed his Master of Science degree in electrical engineering from Florida State University in Panama City while continuing to work for the Navy.

In 2007, Darryl became a project manager, and then enrolled in a Master of Business Administration program at FSU, completing his degree in 2012. In 2013 Darryl was promoted to a management position, where he oversees engineers and engineering projects.

Besides his engineering profession, Darryl has been involved with the FTA since 2016, beginning as a trail maintenance volunteer. In 2017 he was elected as the Co-Chair of the Panhandle Chapter and became an Activity Leader for the 2017-2018 hiking season. He also completed chainsaw training to help support trail maintenance activities.

In 2018 Darryl was elected as the Chair of the Panhandle Chapter and has also recently completed trail skills training. He is currently the Activities Chair and continues to support fundraising events, educational activities, trail maintenance and fun hikes. He enjoys leading overnight camping trips and longer hikes but has also led shorter hikes within the Florida Panhandle. His other interests including playing electric bass for his church orchestra, volunteer child care worker, bicycling, jogging, reading and helping his wife with gardening.

Jan Wells, PhD, AICP
Lakeland, FL

Jan is a native Floridian and graduate of Florida State University. However, she spent most of her professional life in New Jersey where she taught urban planning at Rutgers University, specializing in housing, land use and transportation. Her major focus of research concerned transit-oriented development and pedestrian issues.

Jan is an avid hiker and in addition to being active in FTA since she returned to Florida, she is a long-time member of the Appalachian Mountain Club, life member of the New Jersey-New York Trail Conference, member of the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the Carolina Mountain Club. She loves to travel and has hiked widely in the US and around the world. Jan also serves as a docent at the Frank Lloyd Wright Visitors Center at Florida Southern College in Lakeland. Jan has previously served on the FTA Board as Secretary.
Florida Trail Association’s 2019 Mail-In Ballot

- Mail in ballots must be postmarked by March 30, 2019.
- Mail your ballot to: Florida Trail Association 1050 NW 2nd Street, Suite A Gainesville, FL 32601
- Your first and last name is required as a control measure to verify your FTA membership. Member names will be separated from their votes once verified.
- One vote per FTA Membership. If you chose to submit your ballot by mail, you will not need to vote electronically.

Are you a current member of the Florida Trail Association? ___Yes ___No

First and Last Name (print legibly): ________________________________

Email: ________________________________________________________

**PRESIDENT**
David Waldrop

**VP DEVELOPMENT AND OUTREACH**
Carlos Schomaker

**VP GOVERNANCE**
Pete Durnell

**VP TRAILS**
Steven Womack

**SECRETARY**
Deborah Schroth

**AT-LARGE BOARD CANDIDATES**
Select up to three (alphabetical order)

Shellie Johnson
Darryl Updegrove
Jan Wells
Suwannee Bicycle Association

Pedal, Paddle and Play with SBA!

Since 1989, SBA has been promoting environmental awareness through bicycling, paddling, hiking and camping in the Suwannee Valley region. SBA’s historic clubhouse is just outside Stephen Foster State Park in White Springs, FL. Most of our events take place at the park, with easy access to hiking, road riding, paddling and 50 miles of mountain bike trails. For more information: [www.suwanneebike.org](http://www.suwanneebike.org)

**Year round fun!**
Spring and summer really lets you enjoy the river and spring flowers; fall provides a kaleidoscope of colors; while winter allows you to see past the pines, palms and hardwood trees, deep into the forest.

**You’re invited: Spring Pedal ‘n’ Paddle Festival, May 2 - 5, 2019**
2-3 days of paddling, cycling and more. Camping and meals included. [More info](#)

**SBA events:** IDIDARIDE, Suwannee Sweetheart, Spring Pedal ‘n’ Paddle, Spring Hop, Dog Days, Suwannee Fat Tire Festival and Secret Santa, as well as several open house weekends. [Planning calendar](#)

**Hike or bike to Big Shoals**

**Sharing trails**
Some SBA and FTA trails are shared by hikers and mountain bikers. A few years ago, the Town of White Springs, working with the FTA and SBA, created a reroute that takes FT hikers on SBA’s Bridge to Bridge mountain bike trail, along the Suwannee River and through the historic town of White Springs. In return, the FTA turned over to SBA a trail in Gar Pond. Another current FTA initiative, supported by SBA, is reopening a section of the Big Oak tract, across from the Suwannee River State Park, for hiking and cycling.
To all of our donors,

THANK YOU!
The Florida Trail Association
sincerely appreciates you!

$5000 AND ABOVE
The Estates of Kathryn and Elizabeth Criscola
Anthony Rawson
The Estate of Ileana Sisson

$1000-$4999
Anonymous  Bill Turman
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Dawn Brown  Leslie Wheeler
Allen Jelks  Ted Winsberg
Elizabeth Twyford Kunkee

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Anonymous  Joe and Pam Hale
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Linda Benton  Howard Pardue
Fred Davis  Carlos Schomaker
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Kathryn Abels  Gwendolyn Kirby
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Anonymous  Lauren Krebs
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Walker Banning  Lois Neal
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Anonymous  Wendy Leader
Anonymous  Cathy Leavers
Anonymous  Elizabeth Leib
Anonymous  Mark Levine
Those who truly champion the mission of the FTA, the promise of the Florida National Scenic Trail, and pristine natural spaces are kindred souls, although they come from a wide variety of backgrounds and uniquely chosen lives. They cherish outdoor experiences, and have committed to fully enjoy and share this wild world– and to fight for its protection. One of these special people was Ileana Sisson. The Florida Trail ran through her wide intellectual interests, her love of all creatures and sun-kissed places, and her open curiosity and empathy. Ileana left this world too soon, denying many of us from knowing her kind heart. But Ileana’s spirit and fire continue to fuel the important work of the Florida Trail Association. We are eternally grateful for her incredibly generous bequest.

Ileana was a very unique and special woman. She persevered through countless obstacles to achieve her goals and through it all remained true to herself and to those she loved.

She was born in La Habana, Cuba in 1956. In 1966, due to the political turmoil on the island, the family immigrated to Spain and eventually immigrated to the United States and settled in Pennsylvania. Her parents instilled in Ileana the value of hard work and the idea that anything is possible if you work for it and, Ileana, a highly intelligent and motivated person, took this to heart. She eventually obtained her Bachelor and Master's degrees in Clinical Psychology from the University of Central Florida. She opened her own practice and served the community for many years. Always a lover of the written word (she wrote her first novel at the age of 8 and read everything she could get her hands on) she also pursued her interest in writing by publishing many articles in the local papers and in national magazines. She created the “Women in the Wild” women’s retreats to help empower and motivate women. In her spare time she became an advocate for animal rights, adopting many “furry children” along the way, an avid long distance cyclist, a runner, and an outdoors enthusiast (camping and hiking in the Smokey Mountains of NC were two of her favorite things to do). She also volunteered her services to the Emergency Animal Rescue Service, and to the Matlacha/ Pine Island Fire Control District. Besides all this, Ileana was an ordained Minister, a level two Cycling Coach, a member of PETA, the Sierra Club, and the Florida Trail Association.

In her later years she achieved two more goals she had set out for herself. She published her book, Seasons of Healing and obtained a PhD in Natural Health. Ileana was an energetic, passionate, and loving soul who touched this earth with her generosity, talent, and devotion.

She passed away from cancer on July 2nd, 2017.

She is greatly missed.
One of the great challenges facing the Florida National Scenic Trail is the need to “close the gaps,” relocating the trail from temporary roadwalks to permanent footpaths. The problem is especially pronounced in the Panhandle, where thru-hikers currently face a little over 80 miles of road walking between the northern terminus at Gulf Islands National Seashore and the western edge of the Apalachicola National Forest. Unlike many of the other National Scenic Trails, the route of the Florida Trail has been constrained by the highly developed nature of our state; isolated parcels of public land are separated by farmland, timber plantations, and ever-encroaching residential development. Florida is the third most populous state, and continues to rapidly grow. Even in the rural Panhandle, we simply don’t have the same access to vast tracts of undeveloped public land that is enjoyed by many of our sister organizations working to build and protect National Scenic Trails in other parts of the country. Despite these challenges, the FTA and US Forest Service has continued to make steadfast progress towards the goal of a continuous, perpetually protected footpath across the state. A great example of the work done—and the challenges we must still confront—can be found in the western Panhandle.

The Yellow River Ravines

The Florida Trail in the western Panhandle passes through a striking variety of landscapes and ecosystems. The trail begins along the white sand dunes and pristine seashore of Santa Rosa Island, a landscape unique among all of the National Scenic Trails. The route eventually crosses north across Santa Rosa Sound into Navarre, and then meanders through longleaf pine forests and steephead ravines on the western outskirts of Eglin Air Force Base up towards the Yellow River. It is here that vol-
unteers from the Western Gate Chapter have embarked upon the ambitious task of linking together a few isolated, often wet and difficult-to-access parcels of public land into a new continuous trail segment. Known as the Yellow River Ravines (YRR), this area features expansive cypress swamps bordering the river, pine flatwoods at higher elevations, scattered hardwood groves, and thick Titi undergrowth. Standing water is common and some of the terrain is subject to seasonal flooding. The landscape is also traced by numerous clear, spring-fed creeks, which in some cases have eroded deep ravines that give this segment its name. It all makes for difficult trail building and the work has occupied the Western Gate Chapter for many years.

Before the Yellow River Ravines segment began to be pieced together, thru-hikers faced a long and tedious roadwalk up Highway 87 towards Milton and then over along US 98 through Holt before heading on into Crestview. In 2007, several large parcels north of the Yellow River were acquired from timber companies by the Nature Conservancy and ultimately transferred to the Florida Forest Service. Now part of Blackwater River State Forest—and adjacent to several tracts owned by the Northwest Florida Water Management District—these properties presented the FTA and USFS with the rare opportunity to move the trail onto a corridor of newly available public land. Led by Vernon Compton, a visionary Chairman of the Western Gate Chapter, FTA volunteers began bushwhacking through the difficult terrain with hopes of finding a passable route through the wetlands. Their efforts have paid off; we now have a little over 10 miles of gorgeous new hiking trail spanning the western shores of the river. Hikers are treated to pitcher plant bogs, stunning cypress-ringed ponds, and unique aquatic ecosystems of the quick-flowing creeks, all of which is a far cry from the din of traffic along US 98.

In recent years the Yellow River Ravines project has been spearheaded by FTA volunteer Ed Williamson, who has a particular knack and passion for researching, scouting, and developing new sections of trail. Under his guidance and leadership, the Western Gate Chapter has continued to expand the YRR segment, focusing now on important infrastructure projects that are necessary for further trail expansion and accessibility. Two of
the more difficult creek crossings—Gar nier Creek and Julian Mill Creek—are now receiving attention from our agency partner, the US Forest Service, which has committed to assisting in the design and construction of sturdy footbridges. Earlier this field season, a USFS survey crew inspected the sites and bridge designs are currently being drafted for both locations. The final structures will ensure the crossings are safe and accessible for many years to come, as well as simplifying trail maintenance by allowing our volunteers to transport large brush mowers across the waterways.

Together with the Forest Service, Ed and the FTA team have also begun scouting several key wetland crossings that will require major infrastructure investment in order for the Yellow River Ravines segment to reach its full potential. Once again, we’re primarily limited by the availability of public land; these wetlands are the only alternative to roadwalks for this section of trail. Just east of Highway 87, the proposed route would need to cross the Dead River, an 800’ span of navigable waterway. While exact designs for this crossing have not yet been chosen, we envision a long scenic boardwalk with a 40’ raised section to permit boat traffic. Further east lies a potential crossing of Nichols Creek, another large waterway bordered by extensive wetlands. This crossing will require another 80’-100’ bridge, with long boardwalk approaches on either end. The main span will again need to be elevated enough to allow boat traffic below. While these projects are clearly large and complex, spanning these two waterways would ultimately allow us to remove another 7 miles of roadwalk, putting us one major step closer towards a continuous footpath through the western Panhandle. Of course, the largest road section—the 20 mile roadwalk through Crestview—would still remain to the east. Addressing that part of the story will take us over to the other side of the Yellow River, where the Choctawhatchee Chapter has built and maintained its own spur trail along the banks of this scenic waterway.
USFS staff surveying the Julien Mill Creek Bridge Site.

Hikers resort to some creative measures in order to keep their feet dry at Garnier Creek.
The Cimarron Trail

The second key piece of the Yellow River story is the Cimarron Trail in Eglin Air Force Base. A little over 8 miles long, this popular trail section cuts west from Highway 85 within the Eglin Reservation, ending along the banks of the Yellow River opposite of Western Gate’s YRR segment. The Cimarron Trail is not currently part of the official orange-blazed Florida Trail; the footpath is blue-blazed, heading west into the woods as the main route picks up a roadwalk north into Crestview. Despite the fact that the route currently ends at a dead-end along a remote riverbank—and is missed by thru-hikers following the orange blazes—it remains a popular location for local hikers and backpackers, particularly given its close proximity between Crestview, Niceville, and Fort Walton Beach. The scenery with the military reservation is spectacular, featuring some of the longest unbroken stretches of longleaf pine forest in the world, let alone the Panhandle. Along the Cimarron Trail, hikers pass numerous scenic ponds and creeks, traveling within the expansive pine flatwoods before descending down to the cypress groves of the Yellow River floodplain.

Locating the trail within an active military training reservation comes with a number of challenges, and it’s a great testament to the commitment of FTA volunteers and the staff at Jackson Guard—the natural resources branch of the base management—that we have arrived at an arrangement allowing the hiking public to access this unspoiled environment. When looking at trail conflicts,
most Florida Trail maintainers need to consider issues such as mountain bike use or horse access; in Eglin, volunteers deal with missile testing, bombing runs, and potential unexploded ordinance! Much of the early trail routing and advocacy was accomplished by Vernon Compton, that same FTA volunteer who put the YRR re-routes in motion. FTA leadership had been pursuing the idea of routing the trail through the base since the 1980s, but it wasn’t until the late 1990s that their proposals began to get some traction. Chief to their success was a commitment that opening a hiking trail would not interfere with the primary military mission of Eglin Air Force base. Many years of trail building and maintenance later, we have confirmed that this balance is possible, and Eglin remains committed to outdoor recreation even as the base continues to see an increase in military testing and training.

Most recently the entirety of the Florida Trail within Eglin has been supervised by Section Leader Keith LeFevre of the Choctawhatchee Chapter. Keith’s tireless advocacy on behalf of hiker access to the FT within the base, as well as his determined efforts to improve trail infrastructure and routing, have made a tremendous impact on these trail sections. The Cimarron Trail in particular has also been stewarded for many years by Paul and Wallis Mayo, longtime local FTA volunteers with deep knowledge about the history of this area. The Cimarron Trail is one of the more wet stretches of footpath within Eglin, and the Mayos have done great work in building the bridges and boardwalks along the path, as well as helping to develop the ideal routing for this section. It is this long history of volunteer passion and engagement that have made the Eglin trail sections so successful, despite the unusual challenges of working within an active military facility. Our volunteers’ understanding and connection to this area, as well as our close working relationship with Jackson Guard, will be key to the FTA’s success as we embark on the next major step of this project: connecting both sides of the Yellow River.

A Bridge Over the Yellow River

Now, many years after these two trail segments began to be pieced together, a final grand infrastructure project is beginning to come into focus. On a map, the route looks tantalizingly unfinished; the Cimarron Trail coming to a dead-end point along the banks of the Yellow River, with the last current trail segment of the Yellow River Ravines ending in the wetlands on the other side, just a few short miles away. Our final challenge is to construct a major bridge across this river, spanning several hundred feet to connect the eastern and western banks. Once complete, this final link will remove one of our longest remaining sections of roadwalk, a 20 mile stretch of busy highway walking that takes hikers through the bustling community of Crestview.

It’s no accident that these two trails have converged at this point. The idea for a bridge across the Yellow River has been percolating for many years, envisioned by the same volunteers who laid out the early routes through Eglin and the Yellow River Ravines. Much of the initial groundwork was accomplished by Choctawhatchee Chapter volunteer and former FTA VP of Trails, Tom Daniel, who scouted and researched the terrain and land ownership patterns along the Yellow River. The location for a footbridge over the waterway is highly constrained by the surrounding topography and land use. Nearby are several sensitive areas of the Eglin reservation with restricted access, there are few high riverbanks suitable for anchoring a bridge, and numerous privately-held parcels cut off otherwise favorable locations. After several recent scouting trips, a final location has been identified that allows a direct crossing from Eglin property to a parcel held by the Northwest Florida Water...
Management District (NWFWMD). By keeping the project entirely within the bounds of these two committed Florida Trail partners, we avoid the cost and uncertainty associated with negotiating access with private landowners.

It goes without saying that constructing a bridge over the Yellow River will be a tremendous undertaking, requiring a great deal of funding and close cooperation between many state agencies, the US Forest Service, the FTA, and our land management partners at NWFWMD and Jackson Guard. Few structures along the Florida Trail approach the scale of this proposed bridge; the crossing and approach will be several hundred feet long, and the span must be suspended high enough not to impede the major navigable waterway below. Complex permitting situations will need to be resolved to satisfy the many requirements associated with wetlands construction and working within a military reservation. The physical construction itself will also be difficult, most likely requiring large barges to shuttle the necessary tools and materials to the remote construction site. The scale is far greater than the already complex demands of the bridges required to cross the Dead River and Nichols Creek. It can all seem a bit overwhelming! It’s worth keeping in mind, however, that this envisioned bridge is the culmination of the entire trail building project in the Western Panhandle, the capstone of almost 30 years of commitment by volunteers and FTA leadership to move the trail off roads and into the woods. Building on all that has been accomplished, the final gaps will naturally require a great investment in time, effort, and money. While the cost is great, the final payoff is even greater; a completed footpath that will guarantee access to Florida’s unique natural and scenic beauty for untold future generations. We’re confident this project can be completed, and we’re excited to keep working with our partners to make it happen.
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Florida Trail Association

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Heading west on Highway 20 towards Panama City, you’ll steadily approach towns and forests that were heavily impacted by Hurricane Michael this past October. Buildings and homes—places that once represented shelter and livelihood for their community—are a fraction of what they were, if not reduced to rubble. What was once stretches of dense pine forests and oak hammocks are now an alarming landscape of fallen trees. Canopies are unhinged from their base. Whole trees lay on their sides, their exposed roots resembling hands frozen in a desperate grasp. One after another. This damage extends to major sections of our Panhandle community’s home away from home—the Florida Trail. The destruction is disorienting and devastating to witness. And then there are those who are experiencing it by the day. With each day, they’re working to move past it.

Members of the FTA Panhandle Chapter, including Darryl and Melissa Updegrove, represent that resilient and hopeful populace.

Darryl and Melissa always seem to hold the silver lining within their sight. In any given situation, they are a consistent source of kindness and optimism. Our team was grateful to spend time with them at consecutive events we hosted in early October, just before the eye of Hurricane Michael hit their town. Melissa completed a Wilderness First Aid course while Darryl took the Technical Skills track at our 6th Annual Trail Skills Training. A week later, they volunteered at the National Trails Festival in DeLand.

On their way home that weekend, they discovered the storm was headed in their direction.

In spite of the destruction and immediate stressors they were dealing with at home, Darryl and Melissa kept the Florida Trail and the Panhandle Chapter close to their hearts. As soon as they were able to access the internet, they sent out a newsletter to their chapter relaying the current impassable damage on the trail. But the greater message they conveyed was that they were still connected as a community and that the only way to move was forward.

On January 11, I had the pleasure of joining the Updegroves and FTA Panhandle Trail Program Manager, Adam Fyska, on a hike to scout out some of the damaged sections along Econfina Creek.
At the time, hurricane recovery and the partial Federal Government shutdown were at the center of our conversation.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, “Faith is taking the first step, even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” Although fallen trees and limbs currently stand in the way of hiking the Florida Trail in their area, it does not obscure the Updegroves’ vision of what the trail can be again. And it certainly does not stop them from forging ahead one step at a time to clear new paths.

Where are you originally from and how did you make your way to Florida?

**Darryl:** I’m from Pennsylvania originally. I went to college in Virginia and got a job there. Melissa and I met and got married in Virginia. During a government base realignment process, they moved us to Panama City in 1994.

**Melissa:** I grew up all over because my dad was in the Air Force. I lived in England throughout my teenage years.

When did you start becoming involved with the FTA and how did you first discover the Florida Trail?

**D:** We started hiking around the area when we first moved here. We would often hike in Pine Log State Forest. One day, Melissa noticed the orange blaze Florida Trail markings. We followed them years ago but I didn’t know what the Florida Trail was and hadn’t looked into it. Then, in 2016, the News Herald featured a story about a person who mentioned they were a member of the Florida Trail Association. That caught my attention so I did a little research, found the local chapter and joined the Meetup site for the Panhandle Chapter. I participated in my first work party and started getting involved with the FTA in 2016.

My primary interest originally was in activity hikes. Before we joined the FTA, we had hiked the Econfina and Pine Log sections a lot with our dogs and our children when they were younger. But we never knew where else the trail led and had never followed it all the way through. So I figured that if I joined the FTA activity hikes, I would find people who would...
show me other sections along the trail and things of that nature. Of course, I also wanted to lead hikes, meet other hikers and learn from our experiences on the trail together.

Did you have a hiking background before you moved to Florida? What got you into hiking?

D: I didn’t have very much hiking experience before we moved to Florida. I had been up to the Appalachian Trail around Skyline Drive because it was close to college. Melissa is really the one who got me started with hiking. In 2008, Melissa did a 4 or 5-day hike on the AT with St. Andrews Baptist Church and she really liked it. The following year, I went on the same hike. That was my first time doing a multi-day hike and I really enjoyed it. I was in grad school at the time so we kind of fell out of hiking for a little while after that, but we would still regularly day hike Pine Log and Econfina near our house. Being involved with the FTA has widened our experiences with hiking and deepened our interest with it.

M: I developed an interest in hiking and being outdoors early on. My grandfather owned a campground in Williamsburg, Virginia off I-64. When I was little, my grandfather would set up tents for me and my cousins down in the woods and often took us fishing and camping. There were primitive sites with outhouses deep in the woods and I used to have to go down and check them. There were snakes, different plants and birds. Things you were interested in as a kid. Being outside in the woods became familiar and comfortable to me.

When we had kids, I wanted them to experience hiking as well. I ended up taking our son, Grant, to a lot of places. We went to Acadia, the Adirondacks and Shenandoah National Park in Virginia as well as the Lake District, England and Mt. Snowdon, Wales. Our son really liked to hike and has continued going on his own hiking trips as an adult. We’ve also done a lot of single, overnight trips in nearby areas like Pine Log. Many of them with our kids and neighborhood kids. We had a Sunday School class for a couple of years and we would take those kids out as well. I enjoy taking kids out on hikes with me and I try to get them interested in being immersed in nature.

Another rather strange influence on our original interest in hiking came from a neighbor who stated that the end of the world was coming. This was alarming to us! The neighbor said that the world as we knew it was probably going to end soon and that we as neighbors needed to come together and grow our own food. That’s when I got into gardening. He started telling us about how we needed to be prepared with backpacks and be ready to hike and set off on foot at any moment. The neighbors behind us noticed my angst and donated their whole set of Foxfire books to me. I started reading them and I was like: “Darryl, we’re going to need to learn how to backpack, live off the land, and grow our own food. We’re going to need to learn how to field dress a hog…”

D: That’s my favorite part of the Foxfire books.

M: So we had all these books and I actually read them to find out what we would need to do to survive. And then it just progressed from there. It has gone from “how do we keep ourselves alive hiking through the woods” to now... we get mail from REI for 20% discounts off gear. We’ve come a long way from approaching hiking as survivalists to being comfortable recreationists.

D: Yeah we haven’t field dressed a hog or anything yet.

Have you noticed a difference in kids’ behaviors or attitudes after taking them out for their first time hiking?

M: One thing I’ve noticed with taking kids hiking for their first time is that it takes them a couple of miles to really connect with their environment. I’ve noticed they don’t readily notice their surroundings. It takes them a while to get into that frame of mind to observe nature. I think it’s hard for them not to be focused on their games or their phones. We’ll let them bring their phones in case of emergencies or for taking pictures, but it is difficult for them to remove themselves from their phones enough to notice their environment. It makes me sad to see that. There could be something really exciting happening on the trail, like birds eating fish out of a pond… And some kids can just be oblivious. But we like taking kids out. This was going to be our big year. I had gotten in touch with one of the teachers from a local elementary school and had planned the day that the hurricane hit to deliver fifty of the Florida Trail Junior Explorer Guidebooks for him to use in his curriculum… So that got dashed. We had another local group called Girls, Inc. that was also interested in the guidebooks and joining us on the trail… But that has all been put on hold since the hurricane occurred.

D: Yeah, two weeks after the hurricane, Girls Inc. was going to have seventy to eighty girls join us on a hike at Conservation Park (a local park in Panama City Beach) and learn a little bit about hiking and the environment. Unfortunately, everything fell through because of this hurricane.

M: For our chapter, it’s been one thing after another. The hurricane… the weather… the government shutdown… People are so hungry to get out on the trail. We’ve had three activity hikes since the hurricane and they were packed.

How were you first able to make contact with other chapter members after the hurricane passed?

M: It still gives me shivers to think back on it.
D: We went a full week without cell phone service. Adam Fryksa and Brittany Roles (Adam’s partner) came by to check on us and make sure we were alive as well as Jennifer Larck, our Co-Chair.

M: People had to walk in through the neighborhood to access our house because there were trees down everywhere.

D: Communication at first was a real challenge. We didn’t get a somewhat stable connection with our Verizon service back for almost a month.

M: While the hurricane hit, we were watching it from the windows of the house. Once it was over, we all walked around and were in a daze. We were climbing over trees and there was flooding on the main road... As my son and I were walking around, it really looked like a bomb had gone off. All I could think about was what people have lived through in war zones. My second thought was, “What’s the trail like?” We were worried about the trail before we had even completely assessed our neighborhood. And then we found out the trail was in bad shape. Adam and Brittany had gone out to assess the damage shortly after the hurricane. It was devastating. If you look at the town now, we’ve come a long way as far as home and yard debris removal. People were having to get rid all of their household goods because of mold. If you had seen it earlier, you wouldn’t have been able to believe all the trees that were stacked along the side of the road.

D: And the roads, once they were accessible, were down to single-lane roads.
There were power poles and power lines down everywhere. We were driving over dead power lines, it was crazy.

We got our power back ten days after the storm and we didn’t have internet until after Thanksgiving. However, we were able to use our phones as hotspots for internet. By October 31st, we were able to get our Chapter Newsletter out to our chapter members. We were also able to get on Meetup and cancel our events. That way, the people who did have internet were at least able to know that we were okay and were obviously needing to cancel and reschedule events until further notice. I still can’t believe we were able to get our newsletter out. It was important for people to know that we as a chapter were still alive. We just needed to regroup.

M: I just wanted to connect with them. So many things have changed. There is not one person’s life in Bay County and the surrounding area that hasn’t been affected by the storm in some way; either through their family, their home or their job… Even some of the medical facilities, veterinarians’ offices, and restaurants are still closed… I just wanted people to know that the Florida Trail is still here and it’s solid. When I wrote our October newsletter, it was about two weeks after the hurricane… And we were still hurting. We were still just numb.

D: Our neighborhood kind of turned into a commune of survival, if you will. We had one guy with the weaponry, another one with the gas tanks, our neighbor next door has all kinds of tradeskills... Then there was the guy with the Foxfire books. And we were the ones with the chainsaw and the outdoor gear.

M: I just kept thinking: This isn’t necessarily torture. I do this all the time when I’m hiking.

D: Yeah, you go through the shock and denial and then you enter the grief mode. That grief period lasted for a while. It was a traumatic event, especially for those who stayed and actually experienced the storm. After the hurricane, we were careful not to do anything foolish or dangerous that may have led to a medical emergency because you couldn’t even get out to the street. It was all survival and safety first and a bare minimum existence.

With your hiking experience and the training you’ve received through FTA, can you elaborate on how your were able to apply some of those skills and resources to your hurricane response?

M: I’ve gotten used to relying on my body to get me places and do things. For over a week after the hurricane, we didn’t have electricity or water. It was like primitive camping at home. I know a lot of women who are uncomfortable dealing with mosquitoes or heat, which was oppressive after the hurricane. But I think for me, I was more okay with feeling uncomfortable because I often choose to be in those kinds of environments recreationally. I felt we were prepared.

D: It’s so easy in my office to be like, “It’s 70 degrees in my office, I’m getting cold… It’s 74 degrees in my office, I’m getting hot.” You get stuck in the “I love my ideal temperature” mindset. Hiking helps you adapt to the idea of not being in your ideal temperature zone. So that when there is a catastrophe, you don’t suddenly say, well I don’t want to sweat - maybe tomorrow I’ll start working. We didn’t have time to wait. It took four days to get a tree off the roof before we could even see if we had any holes in the roof. In four days, it’s hard to sleep worrying if you might have rainwater coming in. Luckily, we were okay and fared well by comparison to others.

M: A few weeks before the storm, I had just completed my Wilderness First Aid certification at Trail Skills Training. That certainly came in hand. After the hurricane passed, one of my elderly neighbors...
was putting on a tarp to cover his roof. While he was up there, I started noticing that he was starting to suffer from heat exhaustion. When he came down from his roof, he was dizzy and fatigued. I immediately got him to sit down, put a fan on him, doused him with cool water and covered him in cool towels. I realized then how dangerous and compromising those conditions were to people’s health, especially the elderly people in my neighborhood. I was glad I’d had the training to know how to respond to that.

D: And I had just finished sharpening all my tools after attending Trail Skills Training and participating in the Tools 101 Workshop where we learned about keeping your equipment and tools in good shape, how to use them and how to maintain them. We keep all of our personal tools in our shed for trail maintenance. Before the hurricane, I had been keeping all of our tools sharp and they all came in handy for clearing out the storm debris. Through my chainsaw training, I was also able to help chainsaw fallen trees and limbs for my neighbors and at the Science & Discovery Center where our chapter meetings had previously been hosted.

It’s amazing how many skills we had learned and were able to put to use from being active with the FTA, as well as all the gear we had acquired. All of our hiking gear came in handy after the hurricane. We used our headlamps when we didn’t have power. We had Pocket Rocket stoves, extra fuel cans, dehydrated meals and synthetic clothes…I had chainsaw boots I had purchased for my chainsaw certification. So I had steel-toed, full leather boots to wear and stay safe while I was chainsawing fallen trees in my neighborhood.

How do you plan to move forward with the Panhandle Chapter in the wake of Hurricane Michael?

D: Before the hurricane hit, we had so many plans in terms of work parties, activity hikes and other chapter events. We were going to go table at the Fort Walton Outdoor Festival in October the weekend after the hurricane and the following weekend was going to be Goat Day in Blountstown where we were going to have an FTA booth set up. We were planning to do overnight camping in Torreya State Park that night. Adam and I had already been talking about getting materials together to build a footbridge in Pine Log East. We also had wanted to revive the campsite in Pine Log East. Our goals for this year before the hurricane were to do more overnight camping for beginning hikers and all that kind of stuff. Now, my goal is to get Econfina open and accessible somehow. Just to have the trail we used to have back. My commitment to FTA right now is 100%. I’ve accepted the setbacks. It is what it is. I’m encouraged that we’ll have opportunities to do all sorts of work parties this year, weather allowing and once the government shutdown is over. With the extent of hurricane damage to the trail, we want to be as careful as possible to minimize risk of injury as we complete the trail work that’s needed. We’re making sure to do a thorough assessment of the damage and the kind of work that will need to be done and we’re making sure our trail sawyers are Forest Service-trained and certified.

There is an extensive amount of damage to the Florida Trail in the Econfina Creek Water Management Area. Since the hurricane, we’ve been hit with so much rain that there are sections under
water right now. I don’t want to take people schlepping through two to three feet of water with a chainsaw. Hopefully it will dry up soon. We have a three-day work party planned in early March. We’re hoping we could potentially extend that. We’d like to be able to make a week of trail maintenance out of it and get as much trail work done as possible. We’re still trying to assess the areas where we may need additional help or machinery. With the hurricane, the recent flooding, and now this government shutdown... so many plans have fallen through... But it is what it is. We can’t change it. Now, we just need to re-scope for the year. I look forward to getting some trail sections open.

M: For me, I’ve always wanted to get people out to enjoy the trail. Right now, I’m just concerned for people’s emotional well-being. It has been devastating on so many levels. So many levels of loss and sadness. With all the blowdowns, everything in town is more exposed and you hear more road traffic. Without trees and with many people’s fences still down, there is a lack of privacy now. My goal is to just get people outside away from all the hurricane damage within the city, and let them rejuvenate by being in a fresh environment.

What’s your favorite piece of wisdom or philosophy?
M: I’d have to say.. Share your food... to Darryl!

D: As I’ve gathered from the hurricane: There’s some things you can do and there’s some things you can’t. And you just have to let it go. With the work parties and activities we’ve had to cancel, you just have to let it go and push on.

Also, you’ll always run into adversities while hiking. It’s not always fun but it always leads to the best stories afterwards.

What is something unique about the Florida Trail that you appreciate?
D: The flora and fauna that are unique to this state. On our group hikes, there are a lot of questions about plant identification and I don’t know how to answer all of them. So I’m learning as I go. There’s a lot of unique plants we have even in our own area.

A lot of people criticize the Florida Trail for being flat but... For that reason, you can also see a lot of the Florida Trail really quickly. It’s easier hiking. It may not have the highest peaks or the greatest vistas, but it’s one of the trails I can hike all winter long.

M: I like the Florida Trail because I feel like it’s mine. I know what a great resource it is. I get to work and hike within our chapter’s part of the trail and I guess I have a sense of ownership over it. I feel really proud to be a part of the Florida Trail. My feet are moving me forward more freely now. Maybe they aren’t slogging through the gloom of Michael and they’re walking with more hope now.

Being involved with the FTA - it gives meaning to our lives. I’m glad we have chosen to find meaningfulness in a dirt path. Since the storm, I’ve heard much talk about community and being strong but I believe the community can only be as strong as the human relationships contained within it. One purpose of our chapter is to strengthen our relationships with each other through the FT. The trees can be cut down, blown down, or burnt down but that dirt path is still going to be there. The sun is still going to shine on it. The clouds are still going to rain on it. There’s a feeling that it’s permanent and ancient, and the dirt is the texture of time. My hope is that while enjoying and experiencing the trail with others, I might step off that dirt path having become a part of my better self. Hopefully, I can use that better self to make my community stronger.

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Renewed Paths
by Van Tran, Community Outreach Manager

As we all know, Hurricane Michael was destructive to an expanse of towns and natural areas in the Florida Panhandle this past fall. The storm made landfall on October 10, 2018 as a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of up to 155 mph, causing catastrophic havoc along its path. On the Florida Trail, the areas strongly impacted by the storm include: roughly 18 miles of trail in Econfina, 1 mile of trail in Chipola, and 14 miles of trail in Apalachicola National Forest. In these sections, the trail has suffered major blowdowns, infrastructure damage and increased flooding. These sections represent treasured backcountry for our FT hikers, especially for members of the Panhandle, Choctawhatchee and Apalachee Chapters-- the FTA Chapters that tirelessly maintain the trails and lead regular activity hikes in these areas. With increased flooding from this winter's unseasonable rainy weather and cancellations of trail work parties due to the partial Federal Government shutdown in January, there is still a significant amount of work needed to recover these damaged sections of trail. However, with the shutdown over and our maintenance program back in full swing, efforts to recover these revered sections of the Florida Trail are making headway.

On October 22-25, 2018, Florida Trail Association staff attended the 16th

Hope
From a Partner Trail in the Aftermath of Destruction

An FNST sign buried under blowdowns in Econfina.
Clearing Two Penny Bridge over Econfina Creek.
National Trails System Conference (formerly National Scenic and Historic Trails Biennial Conference) in Vancouver, WA. The Partnership for the National Trails System (PNTS) hosted this event to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the National Trails. The conference brought together private and public organizations and Federal agencies dedicated to the preservation of the nation’s scenic and historic trails.

For one of the days of the conference, participants were given the opportunity to choose from a diverse list of mobile workshops offered to explore cultural, scenic and historic resources in the surrounding natural area. Alongside representatives of other trails organizations and forest agencies, Central and South Florida Trail Program Manager, Kelly Wiener; Gateway Communities Coordinator, Halle Goldstein; and I participated in a group day hike on the Pacific Crest Trail (PCT). The PCT section we explored was a section in the Columbia River Gorge just south of Cascade Locks that was affected by the 2017 Eagle Creek Fire. The Eagle Creek Fire was a destructive wildfire in the Columbia River Gorge that was started on September 2, 2017 by a teenage boy igniting fireworks during a burn ban. The fire spread rapidly and ultimately reached a total of 49,000 acres. It burned for three months before it was declared completely contained on November 30, 2017. The Pacific Crest Trail and other trails in the area reopened to hikers for the first time since the fire on June 14, 2018. The mobile workshop and hike on the PCT was led by staff members and volunteers of the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA) who also facilitated thoughtful discussion about the effects of the 2017 fire as it related to the PCT, as well as the importance of...
outdoor recreation to the small communities along the Columbia River.

The first PCTA crew entered the burn area on the PCT with the U.S. Forest Service on January 17, 2018. The section of the PCT they were first able to access and do recovery work on was the section our hiking group was led through. By the time we were hiking that section in October, new green growth had already sprouted throughout the forest. The trees that had survived the wildfire were continuing with their annual cycle of fall foliage. The vibrant flora was a striking contrast to the backdrop of charred tree trunks. It was a persisting testament that the forest had survived and was recovering and continuing with life.

In addition to being able to explore a stunning landscape, we had the pleasure of meeting Roberta Cobb, chair of the PCTA Mount Hood Chapter. Roberta was one of the pivotal crew leaders who led skilled volunteers from her chapter in clearing and recovering the PCT after the burn. It was evident that she was deeply connected to the gorge and she was humble in sharing the tremendous amount of work she and fellow volunteers dedicated to repairing affected trails within the gorge. We were floored by the cumulative numbers she provided for what the PCTA had accomplished from January to October of 2018 to reclaim trails in the Columbia River Gorge:

| 43,000 feet of tread rehabilitated |
| 10,000 hours worked              |
| 858 volunteers                   |
| 89 work parties                  |
| 57 miles maintained              |
| 34 miles logged out              |

In a blog post announcing the trail’s reopening last June, the PCTA’s Volunteer Programs Outreach Associate, Emily Bauska, wrote:

“Working in a burn area presents tough challenges. In addition to steep hiking and long days required for any crew working in the Columbia River Gorge, volunteers had to contend with fire-caused hazards such as loose rock and soil, burned branches that could fall and underground voids left by burned tree roots.

Volunteers removed 210 logs from the PCT and nearby trails. Despite their best effort, their saws dulled from the

Enormous evergreen trees with trunks burnt entirely through their core offer a daunting impression of the fire’s magnitude.
charred wood. The PCTA is very lucky to have strong volunteer crew leaders, who have both the technical skills to get the work done and the ability to keep their crews safe in these challenging conditions.”  

[Source: https://www.pcta.org/2018/pct-open-columbia-river-gorge-59244/]

What the PCTA and other trail crews in the Columbia River Gorge have accomplished is nothing short of heroic and inspiring. Similar monumental efforts will be required of our FTA trail maintainers to recover the hurricane damaged sections of trail in the Panhandle. Our staff has no doubt that our skilled and dedicated volunteer force can make this happen. As the Florida Trail is recovered and the corridor is cleared---with dense walls of blowdowns sawed and removed and new blazes painted in their place---you’ll see that at the center and heart of it all are passionate, hardworking trail maintainers, doing their best to ensure that we and generations to come can continue to experience the legacy of our treasured statewide traill.
When you join the state-wide Florida Trail Association you automatically become a member of your local chapter based upon your zip code. However, members may attend the activities of any chapter and may transfer to any chapter they wish simply by informing the FTA Office.

Florida Trail activities are organized by our local chapters and are led by authorized volunteer activity leaders. Many of our activities are open to the general public so you can get to know us before you join. Activities can be found online at www.floridatrail.org. Click on “About Us” then click on the “Upcoming Events” button on the left. Local activities are usually also listed on the chapter websites, Facebook pages and Meetups. Click on “About Us” then “Our Chapters” for links to local chapter sites.

Participants in activities must sign an Assumption of Risk form and agree to accept personal responsibility for their safety and the safety of accompanying minors. Always contact the activity leader in advance for more information, to let them know you are attending, to find out any special requirements or equipment for the activity, and to check for any last minute changes.

For more information about chapters and links to websites/meetups/photos go online to FloridaTrail.org/about-us/chapters/ then select the chapter.
MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION AND GIFT FORM

ORDER BY PHONE 877-HIKE-FLA OR ONLINE AT WWW.FLORIDATRAIL.ORG

Name ____________________________ Daytime Phone Number __________________
Address __________________________________________ Email ____________________
City _____________________________ State ______ Zip ____________

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

Please mark one of the boxes below if you are joining or renewing your membership in the Florida Trail Association
☐ Trail Steward ($35)
☐ Trail Builder ($50)*
☐ Trail Advocate ($100)*
☐ Trail Protector ($500)*
☐ Trail Champion ($1000)*
☐ Please send a gift membership to:
Name __________________________
Address __________________________________________
City _____________________________ State ______ Zip ______
☐ I do not want my address shared with FTA-affiliated organizations
Daytime Phone Number __________________
Email ____________________________

Spouse Name __________________________
Spouse Occupation __________________________
Ship membership package to ☐ Me ☐ New Member
Number of children __________________________
The Footprint magazine? ☐ Digital ☐ Printed

I learned about the Florida Trail from ____________________________________________

MEMBERSHIP CATEGORIES

I am making a gift to the Florida Trail Association and want my gift designated to:
☐ Annual Fund ☐ Endowment Fund ☐ Trail Protection Fund ☐ Map Fund

My gift is In Memory of ____________________________ In Honor of ____________________________

FUND AMOUNT

SEND FORM AND PAYMENT TO:
FLORIDA TRAIL ASSOCIATION
1050 NW 2nd Street, Suite A, Gainesville, FL 32601.
MEMBERSHIP TOTAL __________________ GIFT TOTAL __________________ GRAND TOTAL __________________

PAYMENT OPTIONS:
CHECK: Make checks payable to “Florida Trail Association”.
CREDIT CARD: ☐ Visa ☐ Mastercard ☐ American Express ☐ Discover

Credit Card Number: ____________________________ Exp. Date: __________
Signature: ____________________________ Security Code (3 or 4 digits): ________

To order merchandise from the Florida Trail Store, visit www.FloridaTrail.org
or call the Florida Trail office at 1-877-HIKE-FLA.
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You can start volunteering today!
www.FloridaTrail.org/NewVolunteers/