Critical Need to Update Florida’s Oil Drilling Laws

With Florida’s legislative session rapidly approaching, it will be critical that residents of Southwest Florida speak up and let their voices be heard to ensure our legislators know there is strong public support for meaningful comprehensive oil legislation.

Oil exploration and drilling is on the rise in Southwest Florida as the result of increased production from unproven extreme extraction techniques not previously used in Florida. New legislation needs to be passed immediately to ensure that these systemic legal and regulatory deficiencies are rectified to ensure a Hogan well situation doesn’t happen again.

The Conservancy is pushing for meaningful comprehensive legisla-

Burrow Borrowers

Burmese Pythons and Gopher Tortoise burrows - study results are in.

Conservancy scientists, in collaboration with partners from Denison University and Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve, have learned that Burmese pythons (Python bivittatus) in Southwest Florida often make use of burrows constructed by large, native wildlife.

“Pythons frequently occupy the burrows of Gopher Tortoises (Gopherus polyphemus) and Armadillos (Dasypus novemcinctus) in the dry season, both for shelter and reproductive activities,” said Conservancy biologist Ian Bartoszek. These burrows are in higher, upland habitats that are located adjacent to low wetlands and waterways. The identification of this association provides a useful target for land managers to direct their search activities and increases their odds of locating and removing the invaders.

Since Burmese pythons have been found nearby two of the Conservancy’s upland properties located within Rookery Bay preserve a concentrated effort was made by Conservancy scientists to explore these lands for indi-

SEE OIL page 5

SEE BURROW page 1

Oil pipelines at Racoon Point oilfield in Collier County.
Message from our President & CEO

Robert J. Moher

The first few months of 2015 have been ushered in with a promise for fresh opportunities for making significant positive impact while standing down a rather astounding set of challenges facing our region’s water, land and wildlife.

Both the Naples Daily News and News-Press, cited environmental issues such as oil drilling regulation, beach renourishment, and growth management as the most critical our area will face this year. In fact, the Naples Daily News editor wrote, “A year from now, the state will have failed Southwest Florida if there aren’t significant changes made in oil drilling regulations in 2015.”

I want you to know, with your support, we are indeed making an impact in these areas. To cite a few recent examples, collectively we:

• Passed the largest conservation constitutional amendment in US history – Amendment 1. Now, we face a new challenge – persuading our legislators to spend the money as voters intended.

• Negotiated a ground-breaking settlement with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) to ensure the proper remediation and testing in relation to the unauthorized drilling activities at the Hog Island Well site.

• Helped write language on oil regulation reform, which the Florida legislature will consider in the upcoming session.

• Participating in the Bonita Density Reduction Groundwater Resources (DRGR) task force and helped guide recommendations to ensure our water resources are protected.

This is a critical moment in our history. With renewed pressure from growth across our region, along with further intensification of land uses from mining and oil drilling, we must remain engaged and invested in providing solutions to these challenges. With your continued support, I know we will continue to influence the outcomes and serve our mission effectively.

The Conservancy is published by the Conservancy Marketing and Communications team.

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Catherine Bergerson

Graphic Design & Production Manager
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New Board Members

Python Patrol

Python Patrol trainings teach people how to identify, report and safely capture pythons. Florida Wildlife Commission and the Conservancy of Southwest Florida are working together to train natural resource workers who may encounter this species in the field. This program creates a network of citizen scientists to help stop the spread of this large, invasive snake.

More than 20 Conservancy staff participated in this voluntary training on Feb. 4. “Seeing so many staff elect to be a part of the solution to manage this invasive snake speaks volumes about the dedication they have to conservation efforts,” said Robert Moher, Conservancy president and CEO.

Burmese pythons are tan in color with dark blotches on the back and sides that are irregular shaped and fit together like puzzle pieces. Burmese pythons have a dark brown arrowhead shape on top of their head and a dark wedge behind the eye.

Evidence of skin sheds or large snake trails found that would have indicated the presence of a constrictor.

In addition to python sightings, there were sightings of native snakes, bear, panther, raccoon tracks and scat indicative that our properties are being utilized and support native wildlife, said Conservancy Science Director, Kathy Worley. Continued monitoring and representation of these types of surveys will hopefully enable the Conservancy to manage and keep these “prime exotic snake properties” constrictor free or at least under tight control.

However, continued vigilance is needed, given that during this survey an 8 ft. python was captured by Rockland Bay staff less than 1 mile from Conservancy lands. These baseline surveys established that although pythons have not utilized our properties to date, there is still an elevated risk that these invasive predators could easily infiltrate these areas, given the close proximity of recently captured exotic constrictors.

These surveys were sponsored by The Mary Reinhart Stackhouse Foundation and we are deeply appreciative of their financial support.

The impacts of this exotic top predator on native wildlife are of great concern,” said Worley. Large declines have been recorded in mammal populations in Everglades National Park. “The combination of large size, extremely cryptic habits, and high rate of reproduction make it almost impossible to eradicate pythons from Florida,” said Bartoszek. The first observation of a wild Burmese python in South Florida was recorded in the Everglades in 1979. The population has increased dramatically in the last 15 years and can be found from coast to coast in South Florida. Population size can’t be estimated with current knowledge, but many experts estimate numbers in the hundreds of thousands.

New Board Members

LEW ALVIN
DR. DRUD HUSHON
LORALEE LEDBOURG
DR. KAMELA PATTON
BOB SALTARELLI
JEANNIE MEG SMITH

Python naturalist, Jennifer Bobka, participates in python training in order to help manage the invasive species population.
Annual Member’s Meeting

‘Inspirational, Emotional and Memorable’

WITH THE ELECTION OF SIX NEW BOARD MEMBERS, RIVETING KEYNOTE SPEAKERS AND THE PRESENTATION OF THE 2015 EAGLE AWARD, THE CONSERVANCY’S ANNUAL MEETING HELD JANUARY 20, WAS A NIGHT TO REMEMBER.

Guest Speakers

Environmental reporter for the News-Press, Chad Gillis, captivated the audience retelling his experiences working on the award-winning “Voices of the Everglades” series, which chronicled the struggles of the Seminole and Miccosukee tribes as state and federal agencies drained the wetlands and forests of South Florida. He was joined by LeRoy Osceola, the seventh-generation son of Seminole leader Osceola who works to maintain their traditional way of life.

Eagle Award

The meeting culminated with an emotional presentation of the 2015 Eagle Award, presented to Dolph and Sharon von Arx. The von Arx couple has been involved with the Conservancy and throughout the community for many years. Dolph von Arx served on the Conservancy’s board in 1998 and was board chairman from 2010 to 2012. Sharon von Arx has been an active member of the Magic Under the Mangroves Committee. One of their most significant contributions was their lead gift to fund the wildlife hospital that now bears their name.

Approximately 500 guests attended the Conservancy’s Annual Meeting, generously sponsored by PNC Bank.

WATERWORKS

Luncheon Inspires Commitment

The Conservancy hosted the premier Water Works luncheon January 14. The event encourages the community to protect our water and support the Conservancy’s dedicated efforts. Keynote speaker, National Geographic Journalist Joel K. Borne, spent a day with Conservancy teams learning about Southwest Florida’s unique ecosystem prior to speaking at the event.

Please plan to join us for Water Works next year in January 2016.

IT’S IN OUR NATURE

Florida is home to more than 133 threatened and endangered native wildlife species. This makes our home one of the most vulnerable wildlife habitats in the country.

Protecting our native wildlife is part of the Conservancy’s work every day. We are giving them special attention during the 2015 Magic Under the Mangroves™ Live FunSI-A-Need.

With the combined work of the Conservancy’s environmental Science, Policy, Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education teams – along with your generous support - we can help to make Southwest Florida a better place for all of us, including our threatened and endangered species.

Together we can make an impact to ensure the preservation of our many native species that are under imminent threat. Invest in the Conservancy’s innovative efforts to protect our precious threatened and endangered species!

For complete information about 2015 Magic Under the Mangroves, visit www.conservancy.org/magic.

Prosperity is based on the premise that our wildlife needs us as much as we need them.

Join us in our mission.

Voted the BEST

Naples Daily News visits the Nature Center

We’d like to thank Naples Daily News executives for coming out to the Nature Center January and February to speak with Conservancy team leaders in an effort to learn more about our organization as well as our current environmental priorities.

As part of our Evenings at the Conservancy series, WGCU offered an exclusive sneak preview of a brand new PBS series, EARTH: A New Wild. WGCU General Manager Rick Johnson attended the preview with Conservancy President and CEO Rob Moher and Conservancy Board Chair Lynn Slabaugh. More than 150 Conservancy and WGCU members also enjoyed the show.

Sneak preview!

Sponsors

Supporting Sponsors

Presenting sponsor

They are part of the Everglades ecosystem, which is critically important to the health of our region.

Conservation on Private Lands

natural resources are protected in private lands.

restoration is critical to the recovery of our local wildlife.

The Conservancy is working to protect these important habitats through its conservation efforts.

With your help, we can make a difference for our native wildlife.

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Sneak preview!
2015 Everglades Restoration Priorities

The largest and most expensive environmental project in the world promises to deliver big economic and environmental benefits to our region. The investment is proving worthwhile despite the substantial cost, as a recent economic study showed that every dollar invested in Everglades restoration results in four dollars in direct economic benefits, and a cleaner, more abundant water supply for South Florida. However, to protect and restore the Western Everglades portion, much is still to be done.

One of the most notable projects in Southwest Florida is the C-43 West Basin Storage Reservoir project in Hendry County on the south shores of the Caloosahatchee River. This reservoir would capture some of the harmful high flows from Lake Okeechobee to the river and store them release back to the river during the dry season when the river and estuary need additional freshwater flow. The funding for this $846.6 million project is equally divided between the federal and state government, with the state already having purchased the land. Now that it is congressionally authorized, with adequate federal funding, the finalization of the engineering design and the construction of it can proceed. The Conservancy is working hard to educate and garner support for this vitally important project, so we can restore the Caloosahatchee River and Estuary.

Additionally, to divert other high flow waters to the river back to south of Lake Okeechobee where they historically flowed and below, we are strongly advocating that the Governor and Legislature purchase the remaining lands held under option from the US Sugar Corporation in the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA). Until the state publicly owns more land in the EAA to store, treat, and convey these flows back the Everglades, the east and west coast estuaries will be over-inundated and the Everglades and Florida Bay will suffer from insufficient freshwater flow. This option to buy these lands in the EAA expires in October, so it is critical that our state leadership take advantage of this opportunity to secure at least 26,100 acres of these strategi-cally vital lands now.

Lee County Commissioner Frank Mann spoke to Conservancy supporters on a boat tour of the Caloosahatchee River. Guests learned about the importance of funding the C-43 storage basin as part of Everglades restoration, and the Everglades and Florida Bay will suffer from insufficient freshwater flow. This option to buy these lands in the EAA expires in October, so it is critical that our state leadership take advantage of this opportunity to secure at least 26,100 acres of these strategi-cally vital lands now.

Bonita Springs Moving Forward on DRGR Recommendations

In Southwest Florida, protection of our water resources is a comprehensive theme, and drilling substituting to complex water-related issues, such as flooding, pollution and restoration of ecological systems, is absolutely essential. The Bonita Springs Density Reduction Groundwater Resource area (DRGR) provides an example of an area where tremendous opportunities exist to make substantial water resources improvements.

In December 2013, Bonita Springs City Council appointed a Citizens Water Strategy Task Force responsible for providing recommenda-tions to Council on water resources improvements, both within the Bonita DRGR and downstream in the Imperial River watershed. As a member of this Task Force, the Conservancy believes that the 94 recommendations forwarded to Council in December 2014 will, if implemented, result in net improve-ments for the City.

"Implementation in key," said Nicole Johnson, Conservancy direc-tor of governmental relations and task force member. "We have not yet gotten the water right, since the Task Force’s recommendations have yet to be acted upon by Council." Therefore, the Conservancy was pleased that at their January 22, 2015 workshop, Council directed staff to further explore the feasibility of many of the Task Force’s recommen-dations.

"There are three recommenda-tions that the Conservancy believes are critical for Council to act upon immediately, because they are foundational to understanding the impact of many other recommen-dations," said Johnson. “These recommendations identify the need to collect additional data on ground-water levels and to input this infor-mation into a model that would act as a decision-making tool and allow the City to run a series of ‘what-if’ scenarios, to better understand how various hydrologic projects can result in improvements to water resources.”

There are no easy fixes for the Bonita DRGR, and meaning-ful improvement will require both short- and long-term commitments. Local policies that require higher water quality standards should not be difficult to implement. However, regional improvements, such as hydrologic restoration and additional land acquisition, will require a multi-jurisdictional, multi-year process. Yet such processes begin with the first step. Council took that step at their workshop and the Conservancy looks forward to working with all stakeholders to ensure that implement-ation becomes a reality.

SEE DRGR page 5
New Play Zone Opens!

The Conservancy has opened its doors to the youngest among us. The Coffin-Williams Little Explorer Play Zone is designed to be a space where young children can do what they do best—play! But this isn’t just any play space. In the nature-themed Little Explorer Play Zone, designed for children ages five and under, children can crawl through a gopher tortoise burrow, investigate the animals that call the burrows home, play in the mangroves, and climb into a life-size bald eagle’s nest.

Special programs are held on select Thursdays. Each program includes an animal story and an animal-themed craft, and maybe even the opportunity to meet one of our live animals up close.

Meet the New Director of Education

The Conservancy welcomed new Director of Education Nicki Dardinger, to the team this past December. We had a chance to catch up with Nicki and learn more about her.

Where did you move from?
While I grew up in Ohio (Go Buckeyes!), and have lived in Ithaca, NY and Charlotte, NC, most recently I worked on Bald Head Island, North Carolina’s southern-most barrier island. My team was focused on barrier island conservation, preservation, and education. Our educators conducted summer camp programs and public programs such as bird watching, beach combing, guided kayak tours, and so much more!

What made you decide to move to Naples and work for the Conservancy?
I love the Conservancy’s multi-faceted approach to conservation. The combination of policy work, scientific research, wildlife rehabilitation, and environmental education ensures that the organization reaches people at all levels and has an enormous impact on the future of Southwest Florida’s water, land, and wildlife.

Where did you go to school?
I attended Cornell University where I earned my undergraduate degree in animal science. While a student, I became involved with the Cornell Raptor Program, which spurred what has become a life-long passion—birds of prey! After graduating, I returned to Cornell to study Massasauga rattlesnakes, an endangered species that has seen large population declines.

What was your career before coming to the Conservancy?
I have been working in conservation education for 17 years. I spent time in the research and policy arms of wildlife conservation at the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island and the Nature Conservancy. I worked on Bald Head Island, North Carolina’s southern-most barrier island. While working there, I created the island’s first educational programming and worked with a team of conservation educators.

The new Little Explorer Play Zone is open 7 days a week from 9:30 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Generous Grants Expand Environmental Education

Generous support from the Best Buy Foundation earned the Conservancy’s STEM Institute a $10,000 grant. The grant, provided in partnership with the Naples Best Buy store, will be used to provide teens with access to technology to learn about wildlife and the natural environment in Southwest Florida.

The Community Foundation of Collier County awarded Conservancy Education programs a $5,000 grant. Conservancy naturalists were able to use the funds to meet with children in the Boys and Girls Club of Collier County 8 times! This equates to a total of 16 hands-on outreach programs to Collier County 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 6th graders!

Thank you to all of our grantors for allowing us to reach so many in our community!

Winter Camp

Manatees, alligators, hawks, oh my!

This year’s group of winter campers had some great experiences getting into nature as they visited Corkscrew Swamp and Manatee Park in search of the wildlife that call this region home. Campers traveled through trails, and explored different habitats where they encountered all sorts of animals including alligators, wading birds, turtles, hawks, and of course manatees! We all learned about these amazing animals and habitats, and how we can do our part to help protect them.
The von Arx Wildlife Hospital is about to expand. Phase II of the hospital renovations include the redesign, replacement, and improvement of outside recovery and flight enclosures. Another key component of the project is to enhance the guest educational experience by providing viewing of a number of wildlife “ambassadors.”

These permanent resident animals were rehabilitated, but due to the severity of their injuries, are unable to survive in the wild.

Guests will learn about the plight of native wildlife, while coming face-to-face with many protected species, such as bald eagles, pelicans, and owls. The new construction will bring all of our facilities up to the latest code requirements for the optimal care of native Florida wildlife, including those threatened and endangered animals.

Please help us get this project off the ground. See more about our plan online at www.conservancy.org/wildlife/phasell or contact Paul Seifert, Conservancy Vice President of Development and Marketing 239.262.0304 ext. 205 or pseifert@conservancy.org.

New Hospital Video goes Behind-the-Scenes

Rare footage taken inside the von Arx Wildlife Hospital, now running in the Sapakie Family Classroom, shows viewers what happens inside this emergency care and rehabilitation facility. Checkout the five-minute story, written by Sid and Linda Sapakie, that takes you through wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and release.

Don’t forget our daily Wildlife Hospital Talk with a Conservancy expert at 2:15 p.m., and our young visitors love the Jr. Vet Lab. Put on a lab coat and stethoscope and give some native stuffed animals a check-up!

See all of our Nature Center activities online www.conservancy.org.

Is Rescue Required?

As we approach the start of our busy spring and summer baby season, staff at the von Arx Wildlife Hospital prepare for an increase in patient admissions and an influx of phone calls from concerned citizens who have found a baby animal they think needs rescuing. Here are some tips to help determine whether a baby animal is in need of rescue:

1. Is the animal fully furred/feathered?
2. Is the animal alert – eyes open and aware of its surroundings?
3. Is the animal active (either hopping, climbing or moving quickly)?

If “yes” is the answer to these questions, the baby animal is probably not orphaned. The baby has most likely been left for a short period of time while its mother and/or father are foraging nearby.

If you find a young animal that is weak, thin, unable to stand or flee and barely not orphaned. The baby has most likely been left for a short period of time while its mother and/or father are foraging nearby.

Call 239.262.CARE or go online www.conservancy.org for more information.

Conservancy of Southwest Florida volunteer, Susan Snyder, studies “leaf litter”. This “litter” is made of leaves that accumulate under trees in the Conservancy’s Smith Preserve. Many creatures live in the leaf litter at the Conservancy; some are smaller than one millimeter. She’s identified rare mites, spiders, and tiny springtails. After examining leaf litter collected from just a small section of one hammock she discovered 451 tiny animals! In the collection were three species of springtails, which appear to be new to science, according to Frans Janssens with the Department of Entomology at the University of Antwerp in Belgium and co-author of Checklist of the Collembola of the World. “It is a scientific laboratory for discovery,” said Snyder. “This proves that if a person takes the time to look, interrelationships within an ecosystem are truly amazing, and new species are there to be discovered. Imagine the diversity in larger tracts of land.”

With the help of experts from around the world, Susan has attempted to identify every species she photographs. In less than 18 months of study, she has documented more than 630 different species of plants and animals. Last year, while looking under loose bark on a maple tree growing adjacent to the Smith Preserve pond, Snyder discovered a bark louse species that had never been documented in the United States.

The online photo field guide of the Smith Preserve, titled “Secrets of the Scrub,” can be viewed at www.susanleachsnyder.com/GopherTortoisePreserve/TortoisePreserve.
EVENINGS AT THE CONSERVANCY

Specialty Lunch Cruises on Rookery Bay

Mangroves & More
March 17, April 14:
10 AM - 1 PM
with Conservancy Director of Environmental Science & Biologist Kathy Worley

Secrets of Sea Turtles
March 3, April 7:
10 AM - 1 PM
with Conservancy Research Manager, Dr. Jeff Schmid

Hidden History Cruise
March 24, March 31, April 28:
10 AM - 1 PM
with Conservancy Naturalist Michelle Rebilas

MARCH 10
Elam Stoltzfus
Filmmaking in Florida

APRIL 14
Charles Sobczak
The Human Footprint

MAY 12
Jennifer Hecker
Inappropriate Oil Drilling & Water Don’t Mix

General Admission
$10
FREE TO CONSERVANCY MEMBERS
6:30 PM

Presentations are held in Jeannie Meg Smith Theater Eaton Conservation Hall

Evenings at the Conservancy:
General Admission $10
FREE TO CONSERVANCY MEMBERS
6:30 PM

Presentations are held in Jeannie Meg Smith Theater Eaton Conservation Hall

239.403.4228
Reserve your seat today!