

Gladesmen creating more recreational opportunities for generations to come

Sportsmen's Trust Group has finally accomplished what the group started 11 years ago: access to hunting in all National Wildlife Refuges in Florida that have hunting opportunities. Danny Brantly and I were asked to form a Sportsmen's Trust Group (STG) in June 2011, and it was created to organize Sportsmen who are trying to gain more access to USFWS land.

In 2012, Sportsman's Trust Group members traveled to Washington, D.C. They testified in front of the Natural Resource Committee, giving an aggressive approach to fighting for more sportsmen's access to National Wildlife Refuge Lands.

This group has also worked on a memorandum of understanding between the Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission and the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Because of this leadership, sportsmen are recognized by large landowners and environmental and conservation-minded groups.

Thanks to everyone who makes a difference with a positive attitude by sitting at the table and working with federal staff and legislators who are willing to listen and understand the problems. Working toward increasing membership in conservation organizations, boosting morale, and inspiring a sense of volunteerism toward leaving our natural resources better than we found them bridges the communication gap between state and local governments and frees bureaucratic logjams.

After 11 years of dedication, the final links of the chain came together to accomplish the goal set on day one: to hunt on Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee NWR and Florida Panther NWR.

The Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee NWR is approximately 143,924 acres of northern Everglades, and cypress swamp refuge was established in 1951 under the authority of the Migratory Bird Conservation Act and managed through a license agreement between the South Water Management District and USFW.

To mitigate the first expansion of the EAA, the Loxahatchee NWR was created by Walt Braden, Jack Moller, Robert Stossal Sr, and Wes Sarves. It was a place where the draining and clearing of Everglades South of Lake Okeechobee displaced the birds. When WCA1 was flooded, the USFWS closed all hunting in the area. For years, old sportsmen did what they could to get the site open to deer hunting because there was a large deer herd.

They ultimately scheduled a deer hunt In 1982, but this was a permit-draw hunt, and no pre-hunt scouting was allowed. You had to access either by foot or canoe, and the entry location was via the northern part of Loxahatchee NWR. He didn't recall the number of hunters, but it was not many, perhaps 20. He remembers those who participated said the vegetation made it almost impossible to use a canoe. The few who participated and made it to the islands could take nice deer during the 3-day hunt.

After the hunt, they learned that the anti-hunters animal rights people had applied and were given many limited permits.

After the hunt, these anti-groups went to work and used the low number of deer taken not to allow future hunts. They used economics and harvest rates to convince Congress not to spend money and included language in the next Congressional budget for hunting activities on the Loxahatchee NWR. This meant that the USFWS people could not even talk about hunting, equating to labor costs and money spent. We had to start by first getting the sponsor of such language un-elected. They did, but bigger ones soon overshadowed this issue.

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Years later, at the Sustainable Commission for South Florida, near the end of the Commission's time, the USFWS announced they were pulling Loxahatchee NWR out of CERP. This was alarming because if the Federal government agency considered the Everglades Restoration's outcome harmful to the land they managed, why would it not be damaging to the rest of the Everglades? Of course, the USFWS had waited until the near end of those meetings, so there would be no opportunity to challenge them or raise questions about the Restoration Project.

The last hunt was held in Loxahatchee, NWR, before this year's deer hunt was 40 years ago. There were two mercy hunts due to high water in the 1980s. They were in 1982 and 1986. A lot of people today still talk about this.

Mercy Hunt in 1982: few today know there were two deer mercy hunts. The 1982 hunt took place on WCA3B. This small area had not been hunted for more than 11 years. During this time, the Florida Game and Fish Commission (GFC) said there were not enough deer to hunt. They did their deer surveys via airplane observation. As we all know, you do not see deer from the air in such a habitat because they are under thick canopies on islands and tall sawgrass.

Miracles happened, and when the water came up, it was determined there were too many deer in the area. A mercy hunt was needed to prevent crowding the deer onto islands and diseases breaking out that would kill all the deer. The oldest deer harvest was a doe; if Jack's memory is correct, it was 11 years old.

Mercy Hunt in 1986 was a national disaster; Governor Graham was in office. Johnny Jones roasted Graham in several national publications. A mercy hunt was planned for WCA3A north and South, not WCA3B. There was a great deal of publicity. Some said the deep water resulted from heavy rains on the Everglades. There were indeed heavy rains all over South FL. Some tried to get the general public to believe it did not fall on the EAA and other areas. In these areas, the water was three feet below the canal banks, while in the Everglades, where deer and all wildlife were drowning, it was 6 feet deep.

The anti-hunters filed litigation to stop the hunt. The judge appointed a blue ribbon committee to advise him on the proper action. During this time, the committee presented their recommendation that the deer were dying. With more deer north of Alligator Alley, the death rate was higher, and the remaining deer were in feeble health. The committee recommended that the hunt be allowed.

The hunt took place, and a few deer were captured, which were given to an anti-hunter to care for and release once conditions in the swamps improved and the deer's health in captivity was good.

Jack Moller told me he was on L28 and Alligator Alley and talked with many reporters. They were only interested in reporting on the killing of deer and refused to consider the actual cause or water management decisions. Poor decisions caused drowned deer and other wildlife. Remember, deer are the tallest animals in the

Everglades, and when they drown, everything else has drowned unless it can climb a tree. The trees were only temporary refuge because their roots died, and they fell over.

There were other serious results of this 1986 drowning; Jack called the Superintendent of Big Cypress National Preserve and asked if he had caught the deer in the Everglades, had them checked by biologists and vets, and if the deer be released in the Big Cypress National Preserve. The superintendent said no, they had plenty of deer. Such action took place in the 1960s, but only this time, were deer released in Rotenberger WMA and Holely Land WMA. Jack called the Superintendent of Everglades National Park and tried to get him to open the S12s. He said not because his alligator nest would drown. Jack responded that they were drowning in the Everglades north of Tamiami Trail. He responded that it was a state problem.

The animal rights people went after the chairman of the Blue Ribbon committee and tried to get the University of Miami to fire him. They threatened to impact donations. Sportsmen had to find donors to the University of Miami to help the man keep his job.

The following serious action was Governor Graham's appointment of a committee to study the situation and develop a solution so that no future governor would have to deal with such publicity. As soon as Sportsmen saw the members of his committee, they knew their solution would not be good. They recommend keeping the Everglades deer herd at a population level, which could survive on 10% of the upland acres in the Everglades. Jack asked GFC and DEP how many acres of uplands were in the Everglades, not counting levees and counting levees. They could provide data on either condition. So, how many deer would be in their drastically reduced herd size? They did not know.

The GFC, under political influence, held doe hunts. These hunts were designed to collapse the Everglades deer hunt. Freddy Fisikelli and Jack called the first Everglades biologist; Freddy knew him from his work in the Everglades. He worked for a western state's game commission when they called him. He asked for conditions and information about the situation. Freddy presented it. The response was, "If the conditions were the same as when he was working in Everglades, the deer herd would collapse." Today, there are still very few deer in the Everglades because of the 1986 flood and resulting political solution.

A point of interest is the animal rights folks donate money to the group, Jack Kassewitz, trying to nurse captured deer back to health. The Dade County Fulltrack

Conservation Club donated more money to this cause than the animal rights folks. Most deer died under their care, but when the time came to release the few surviving deer back in the Everglades, sportsmen with their equipment and at their expense under the supervision of the GFC released these deer.

In the 1986 mercy hunt, GFC estimated 10,000 (yes 10K) deer were drowned in WCA3 north and South. They harvested about 500 animals at the hunt, half bucks and half does. Most of the hunters were adults, but one young boy carried away a fawn that was as tall as he was. Only one man was cited for not having a permit to take part in the special hunt. Meanwhile, a small band of conservationists in 10 airboats caught 13 deer and rushed them to a Dade County farm owned by Jack Kassewitz Jr., leader of National Wildlife Refuge, Inc. All the animals reportedly were in good condition.

This year, Hunt had three hunters; two of them were in an Airboat, and one was in a canoe; the two in the Airboat harvested a Buck deer. These were the first two deer harvested in the area in 40 years. There was a total of 10 for the permit for the regular gun season hunt. Only three hunters showed up to Hunt. There was also an archery hunt and a youth hunt on the perimeter of the conservation area, where they harvested one buck.

Florida Panther NWR was Established in 1989 and encompasses 26,605 acres. Florida Panther NWR's purposes are to conserve fish, wildlife, and plants listed as threatened or endangered species (Endangered Species Act of 1973) and for the development, advancement, management, conservation, and protection of fish and wildlife resources. Also, the Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge is located in Southwest Florida in Collier County between Marco Island and Everglades City, Florida. The refuge was first established in 1996 and covers 35,000 acres of the Ten Thousand Island refuge, including fresh and saltwater. It also protects a large area of mangrove forest. Activities include fishing, hunting, bird watching, kayaking, and camping.

During the 1980s, the Big Cypress National Preserve (BICY) had a superintendent trying to convert the BICY into a National Park.

This was his words at a dinner honoring him as he was moved to another NPS unit. He said when he got the assignment to the Big Cypress National Preserve, he was told to go there and not cause any problems. He said, "I tried my best to make the Big Cypress National Preserve into a National Park."

It is essential to know the above to understand how the Florida Panther NWR came about. STG Member of the Everglades Coordinating Council, should the area now known as the Florida Panther NWR be made a part of the Big Cypress National Preserve or a National Wildlife Refuge under the USFWS? The response was easy: NWR. Besides, many of us have attended public hearings on this matter.

We had heard the USFWS tell us and put it in writing in their baseline study of the area that making the property an NWR would suit the local economy because hunters would come to the area and spend money. The same legislative act that created the Florida Panther NWR also created the Ten Thousand Island NWR. Duck hunting is allowed on this NWR. From day one, there was hunting there.

However, STG Members of the Everglades Coordinating Council were shocked when the Florida Panther NWR opened up and had a manager who disapproved of hunting on the property. It did not matter that the property had been the best, according to John DiNunzio, who had a hunting lease in Southwest Florida. The opening manager did not allow hunting and had no plans to do so. He would not even allow his people to train on the property physically. They had to run on SR29 to train. No one was allowed to visit the land or fish in rock pits.

Jack Moller, John DiNunzio, and Wayne Jenkins, Members of the Everglades Coordinating Council, had worked for years to get hunting, particularly deer hunting, on this Florida Panther NWR for years. Jack and Wayne's last visit with the manager he told them they would have to get money to do a Florida deer study to verify deer hunting would not harm the Florida Panther. They explained that once they get the money, they will have to make you spend it for the purpose intended, and the manager just smiled. We also learned the NWR wants to expand its control over all undeveloped lands in Southwest Florida north of their current boundaries.

Today, thanks to the work of Mike Elfenbein, we have a spring turkey hunting on the Florida Panther NWR with swamp buggies on designated trails to get into the interior. We all need to thank Sportsman's Trust Group members for their efforts in the last 11 years to obtain recreational opportunities on these NWRs, including vessels and buggies.

As for deer hunting, you will never see this on the Florida Panther NWR because the Florida panther is running out of food to eat; for this reason, you will never see a deer hunt on this property.

I hope everybody who takes the time to read this article understands everything in hunting is political; it's unfortunate, but that's the world we live in today. STG asks the federal government to follow the law and the way the rule was written it took us 11 years to accomplish what was not done in the last 29 years, but we never stop fighting to ensure Sportsmen have the proper access to enjoy the land and the Gladesmen culture.