

Impact



Fiscal year October 1, 2020 - September 30, 2021



We Moved it Forward

We told you we would move the mission forward – and we did.

“Moving the mission forward.” We said it many times over the last year. It was a promise you heard straight from our president, at our virtual events, and you even saw it in many of the videos we released on our social media platforms. As we near the end of 2021 – another year full of uncertainties amid of a global pandemic – we want you to know we held up our end of the deal.

We continued to work with local and state officials so they can make informed decisions about our environment; we reached major milestones in our scientific

research; we launched the new Mobile Classroom; we’re ready to open the renovated Dalton Discovery Center; and we worked with the city to help reduce injuries to birds due to intense angling activities at the Naples Pier while treating a record-setting number of animals inside the von Arx Wildlife Hospital.

The work done here at the Conservancy of Southwest Florida is critical and we are proud to show you what we’ve accomplished in the last year.

None of this would be possible without your support. Thank you for helping us to protect Southwest Florida’s water, land, wildlife, and future.

BREAKING NEW GROUND

We broke ground on the new Environmental Studies Dormitory Building donated by Jeannie Meg & Christopher Byron Smith on our campus. Once finished, this facility, funded with the support of over a dozen generous supporters and foundations, will house up to 30 interns at a time and will include a suite for visiting Ph.D. researchers. The building will also include a mixed-use floor that will have new office space and a video production studio.



Milestone Reached - 20,000 Pounds of Burmese Python Removed

Since launching its Burmese Python Research and Removal Program in 2013, the Conservancy has captured and removed over 20,000 pounds (9,072 kg) of pythons through active searching and scout snake tracking efforts.

“This is a heavy-lifting assignment and we’ve been hot on the trail of these invasive apex predators for the past eight years. The more we learn about their habitat use and movement patterns, the better we can inform and guide solutions for controlling the python population,” said Ian Bartoszek, the Conservancy’s environmental science project manager.

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During the breeding season, adult male pythons equipped with transmitters can lead biologists to breeding aggregations that consist of multiple males and a single large female. This technique allows researchers to then find breeding females and remove them from the wild, a targeted approach to reducing the population of pythons by removing females and their developing eggs.

“Our python research is a great example of scientific collaboration with partners at the local, state and federal level to address threats to our native wildlife and uncover strategies to control the population,” said Rob Moher, president and CEO of the Conservancy.



Project Manager Ian Bartoszek and Biologist Ian Easterling are pictured with a 125 pound captured female Burmese python located utilizing a radio-tagged male scout snake.

6,094 feet

of pythons removed. This is over a mile of pythons.



SEA TURTLE SUCCESS

This season on Keewaydin Island, we had a total of 444 nests involving 436 loggerheads and 8 green sea turtles. With a few more nests reported than last year, it is important to note that the trend in nesting numbers is slowly increasing. We also partnered with FWC to deploy satellite tags on two loggerheads that previously were tagged, monitored, and documented in years past to gain further insight on our sea turtle research. Our sea turtle program is one of the longest continuously running sea turtle monitoring projects in the world.

SURVIVORS Program Resumes

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida has resumed its partnership with Rookery Bay National Estuarine Reserve Center for the SURVIVORS program, a science-based field trip program for seventh-grade students in Collier County that was paused due to the pandemic.

“We had to cancel a few field trips when the schools shut down and we couldn’t do them at all last year. We are excited to be back on the water,” said Tonya Zadrozny, Conservancy of Southwest Florida’s Education Programs Coordinator.

The Conservancy partnered with Rookery Bay in 2019 to double the number of students who could participate in the program. Our team provided the Good Fortune II, a 35-passenger pontoon boat, to take participants out on the water for hands-on observation and data collection.



SURVIVORS program participant studies data collected.



Conservancy Launches Mobile Classroom

Hands-on science learning experience

The education team launched the new Learning Adventure Bus (LAB)! This state-of-the-art, custom-built vehicle provides a hands-on science learning experience for after-school programs across our five-county area. The Mobile Classroom allows our education department to expand its ability to provide more STEM learning opportunities to Title I schools and underserved communities. The Mobile Classroom features inventive learning tools including interior and exterior monitors, a touch tables installed with NOAA’s “Science on a Sphere” programming, high-powered microscope station, wet lab for samples collected outdoors, and student workspaces.

This year’s curriculum will focus on exploring various concepts related to

water and surrounding ecosystems. Students will dive into discovering different kinds of plankton, look at various forms of pollution, and learn about the lives of sea turtles, something our science team has been researching for over 40 years.

As part of the Outreach Program, the Mobile Classroom began its pilot year partnering with local agencies and organizations, and will eventually launch its in-school program that will visit local elementary and middle schools in the 2022-23 school year. In addition to school-related programs, the Mobile Classroom will make appearances at different venues and events throughout the year to showcase its education and specialties throughout Southwest Florida.

Protecting Southwest Florida's Waters

The Conservancy partnered with Sanibel-Captiva Conservation Foundation in March 2021 to hire a hydrological modeler, Dr. Paul Julian, to help our organizations further scientific knowledge and policy expertise regarding regional water quality in Southwest Florida, especially in the Caloosahatchee and surrounding watersheds.



Dr. Julian has already provided important model analysis for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Lake Okeechobee System Operating Manual (LOSOM), which is currently under development. LOSOM will guide how water in the lake is managed and the volume and duration of flows sent to the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries, and south to the Everglades. Dr. Julian's expertise in modeling helps ensure that the Conservancy and SCCF have the necessary scientific data to advocate for a lake management schedule that is balanced and is appropriately protective of Southwest Florida's ecology and economy.



Paul Julian, Ph.D., hydrological modeler for SCCF and the Conservancy.

We are Not Done Fighting

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida continues to appeal rulings relating to its challenge to Rivergrass, a 1,000-acre, inappropriately designed development to be built on Oil Well Road, just east of Golden Gate Estates.

The plan violates the Rural Lands Stewardship Area (RLSA) in the county's Growth Management Plan and will be detrimental to the Florida panther, traffic and taxpayers.

The timeline:

- In January 2020, Collier County commissioners approved 3-2 the development order for Rivergrass.
- In March 2020, the Conservancy filed a lawsuit challenging the county's approval.
- In May 2021, the judge ruled in favor of Collier County and the landowner, Collier Enterprises.
- In June 2021, Collier Enterprises received county approval for two more villages in the RLSA, Bellmar and Longwater.
- In July 2021, the Conservancy filed an appeal of the judge's decision on its Rivergrass challenge.
- In October 2021, the same judge ordered the Conservancy to pay the legal costs of the county and Collier Enterprises. The Conservancy plans to appeal, arguing that making the opposition pay legal fees is unconstitutional and creates a chilling effect on the public's right to challenge decisions and petition the government.
- In November 2021, the Conservancy filed its initial brief in its appeal seeking to overturn the trial court's ruling on its challenge to the development of Rivergrass Village. The Conservancy's appeal brief focuses on the fact that the trial court declined to hear evidence that Rivergrass will cost Collier County taxpayers millions of dollars, will result in widespread worsening of traffic congestion, and fails to comply with the Collier County Land Development Code.



2021 Magic Under the Mangroves Goes Virtual

Magic Under the Mangroves, the Conservancy of Southwest Florida's annual fundraising event, brought in \$1.4 million to support our longstanding mission of protecting the water, land, wildlife, and future in Southwest Florida. Themed "The Magic Hour," the March event was chaired by Katrina Lundmark-Kash with Carol Walter serving as vice-chair.

Held virtually due to the pandemic, the event was livestreamed from Keewaydin Island Lodge where the Conservancy first started in 1964 when a new road was planned to run right through the heart of Rookery Bay. We are grateful to our hosts, the Walsh Family and Ocean Properties, for graciously inviting us to use the beautiful Keewaydin Lodge as our livestream location.

Inside the Keewaydin Lodge, auctioneer Scott Robertson and co-host Rachel Pierce rallied competitive bidding throughout the live auction with packages ranging from culinary experiences to remote getaways to custom jewelry. Additionally, the event featured a live Fund-A-Need that raised \$592,000 to support the mission-critical work of the Conservancy including science, environmental education, wildlife rehabilitation, advocacy and policy.

The event was presented by Northern Trust and supported by William Raveis Real Estate. Community supporters included Waterside Shops, *Gulfshore Life*, *Florida Weekly*, *Naples Daily News* and NBC2.



Magic Under the Mangrove's 2021 gala was produced live from the Keewaydin Island Lodge.

Dalton Discovery Center Looking Better than Ever



Science on a Sphere exhibit in the new John & Carol Walter Discovery Wing in the Climate Change Gallery.

The \$5 million renovation and expansion to our Susan and William Dalton Discovery Center is complete! The updates include exciting enhancements such as an augmented reality endangered species exhibit and Science on a Sphere – an immersive education tool that will allow our team to teach guests in new and exciting ways.

We also added an Invasive Species Gallery inside the new John & Carol Walter Discovery Wing that will explore Burmese pythons, the new apex predator in the Florida Everglades, and focus on the Conservancy's nationally recognized research and removal efforts. The gallery also will examine lionfish, cane toads, and invasive plants.

We can't wait to hear what you think about all of the improvements!

Pelican Protection: Staff Working with City of Naples

The Naples City Council approved a pilot program to ban fishing on Naples Pier every Sunday from January to May of 2022. The pilot program aims to protect pelicans that are injured from hooks and fishing line.

Staff at the von Arx Wildlife Hospital worked with the City of Naples and made recommendations in an effort to help reduce bird injuries due to intense angling activities at the Naples Pier.

From the Naples Pier alone, nearly 200 pelicans were admitted to the hospital after getting snared on fishing line in 2020. Rehabilitating those animals cost the Conservancy about \$70,000.

“That’s just pelican numbers. That’s not including any other species,” said Joanna Fitzgerald, director of the von Arx Wildlife Hospital. “Our budget can’t sustain these numbers of injured animals.”

To help reduce those injuries, the Conservancy recommended that the city limit the hours anglers are allowed to fish in order to provide wildlife time to forage and rest without encountering the dangers from fishing and to increase the amount of patrol coverage provided by the Naples Pier Outreach.

In addition to the Sunday ban, the city council also restricted fishing on the pier from 11 p.m. to



Conservancy staff member Ray Erickson holds a pelican whose pouch was torn by a fishing hook.

5 a.m. At past meetings, law enforcement has said illegal shark fishing occurs during those hours.

Year-round Pelican Patrol staff coverage was also approved, which means continued assistance for hooked birds and increased educational opportunities for visitors and anglers.

Protection of our native wildlife is in all our hands; preventing injuries and suffering affecting native wildlife at the Naples Pier is essential to ensure pelicans and other species thrive alongside the myriad of coastal activities.



OWL TAKES A WILD RIDE!

This great horned owl had quite a journey. As he was flying across the road, he was hit by a pickup truck, and actually broke through the front grill.

It wasn't until the driver finished his 300-mile drive that he realized that the owl was actually inside the grill of his truck! Thankfully, the driver was quick to call the von Arx Wildlife Hospital for help and one of our volunteer Critter Couriers was able to meet him and safely remove the owl.

After weeks of treatment, we are happy to report he was successfully released back into the wild!



Owl trapped inside the truck's front grill.



Protecting Our Wetlands

Our Challenge Against Florida's New Permitting Program

The power to provide Clean Water Act “Section 404” permits to develop in wetlands was transferred to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) in December 2020. For decades, this responsibility rested with the federal agencies.

The state’s program is less protective than the federal standards, and creates a loophole by which many of our foundational federal laws and processes are no longer triggered.

This means at the very time that we are under threat from increased development pressure, the thousands of applications before the state will

be considered with subpar wetland and wildlife standards. One out of five of these development applications are in the Conservancy’s focal area. In our region, FDEP will rule on multiple developments in eastern Collier County including thousands of acres of development near the Florida Panther National Wildlife Refuge. Other projects they will review include a huge mine on lands that recharge our drinking water and new oil drilling in the pristine Big Cypress National Preserve. The Conservancy and our partners have legally challenged the handover of the Clean Water Act 404 program to reinstate wetland protections.

Mangrove Restoration Project Starts New Phase

A September groundbreaking kicked off the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project – considered one of the largest mangrove forest restorations in Florida history.

In 2010, Conservancy biologists partnered with other organizations to restore a small section of the mangrove die-off along San Marco Road near Goodland. They were able to “re-plumb” it in order to mimic the natural hydrology that existed prior to man-made alterations and re-establish tidal flushing. Now, a decade later, that area of restoration hosts established young trees and a new canopy is forming.

With that success, it is time for the next phase of restoration. Conservancy biologists will continue to assess the success of the restoration activities from an ecological lens.



Partners pose for a portrait during the Fruit Farm Creek Mangrove Restoration Project groundbreaking event.

HOT OFF THE PRESS

The Conservancy Science Department published multiple pieces to reputable journals in the last year. We are very proud to announce that every single member of the Science team was either listed as an author or recognized as a project contributor in at least one of those publications.

Kemp's Ridley Sea Turtles

Dr. Jeff Schmid is the first author of a paper published in Herpetological Review.

Burmese Python Movements & Habit Use Patterns

Ian Bartoszek is the first author of a paper that was published in Ecosphere. Ian Easterling is listed as a contributor to the project.

Treefrog Species Compositions in Wetland Habitats

Melinda Schuman is the first author of a paper that was published in Herpetology Notes. Ian Bartoszek, Kathy Worley, Vanessa Booher, and Dr. Jeff Schmid are all listed as co-authors.



Mayan Cichlid Feeding Habits

Dr. Jeff Schmid is listed as the second author of a paper published in Gulf and Caribbean Research. Conservancy volunteer Copely Smoak is listed as first author.

Burmese Python Genetic Diversity

Ian Bartoszek is listed as the second author of a paper that was published in the Journal of Herpetology.

Loggerhead Sea Turtle Nesting, Migration, & Foraging

Dave Addison is listed as second author on a paper that was published in Bulletin of Marine Science.

The Heart of the Conservancy

We always say the Conservancy could not operate without its volunteers. Even more so than usual, that fact was evident inside the von Arx Wildlife Hospital over the past year.

When hospital staff was handling a record number of admissions, while significantly understaffed, we relied on a few very dedicated volunteers. They were asked to wear face masks at all times, maintain social distance, avoid any flight travel and to stay away from crowds.



Hospital volunteer, Nancy Spahl, helps with an injured pelican.

We knew if COVID spread through the hospital, it would be the animals in our care that would pay the price.

"We were down staff, interns and volunteers due to COVID-19. We were incredibly grateful for all the volunteers that worked through the height of COVID, even during the lockdown month. We couldn't have cared for all the animals that we did without their help" said wildlife hospital director Joanna Fitzgerald. "Volunteers managed to maintain social distancing while providing patient care, some folded laundry outside and others ran errands for us."

Our volunteers are a wonderful example of what people can do when they believe in a common cause.

2021 RedSnook Tournament Nets Almost \$140,000

The Conservancy of Southwest Florida hosted the 2021 RedSnook Catch and Release Charity Tournament Oct. 8-10. Though the Friday night kick-off event was canceled due to COVID-19 restrictions, that did not dampen the spirits of the anglers as they launched from locations around Collier County.

The tournament netted almost \$140,000, which is the highest raised for the tournament. Funds are used by the Conservancy in its work to protect the waters in Southwest Florida.

The event was chaired by Wayne Meland of Meland Kahl Wealth Management-Benjamin Edwards. Twenty-two companies or individuals sponsored the tournament with Meland Kahl Wealth Management-Benjamin Edwards and the Tompkins Family being the presenting sponsors.

Committee members for the tournament were: Wayne Meland, Kyle Coar, Jessica and Tony Fontana, Buddy Hornbeck, Brad Jones, Jon Kukuk, John McLean, Mokey Shea and Henley Shotwell.



Jon Kukuk pictured with a large snook. He and Wayne Meland placed first in the guided artificial bait category.