

# **OCKLAWAHA RIVER RESTORATION: A CRITICAL FLORIDA WILDLIFE CORRIDOR CONNECTION**

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The Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN) is part of the legislatively adopted Florida Greenways Plan administered by the Office of Greenways and Trails (OGT) in the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (Florida Statutes, Chapter 260). The FEGN guides ecological corridor conservation efforts and promotes public awareness of the need for and benefits of a statewide ecological network. The FEGN identifies areas of opportunity for protecting a statewide network of ecological hubs and linkages designed to maintain large landscape-scale ecological functions including focal species habitat and ecosystem services throughout the state. The newest FEGN was completed in June 2021, and the top three priorities of the FEGN are now also recognized as the Florida Wildlife Corridor as part of the state law passed in 2021. The state legislature, the governor, and state natural resource agencies have all adopted the protection of the Florida Wildlife Corridor as a high state priority, and this initiative has renewed Florida's commitment to appropriate funding levels of our conservation land protection programs including Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands Protection.

Restoring the Ocklawaha River will significantly enhance connectivity between conservation lands south and north of Rodman Reservoir within the heart of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. Ocklawaha River restoration will have a very significant habitat connectivity benefit for wide-ranging and landscape dependent focal species in Florida including the Florida panther and Florida black bear. Restoring the Ocklawaha River's rare floodplain forest will also allow it once again to stretch from the St. Johns River to the Ocklawaha River headwaters, which will provide an unbroken source of abundant food and shelter and a safe route of travel for many terrestrial and aquatic species that use riverine corridor systems.

PRESENTER BIO: Dr. Hctor is Director of the UF Center for Landscape Conservation Planning and specializes in GIS applications for identifying conservation priorities and policies for maintaining biodiversity and ecosystem services. He has served as principal investigator on many regional-scale conservation analysis and planning projects including the Florida Wildlife Corridor.