

FLORIDA TURTLE

Florida Turtle Conservation Trust

Working to Conserve Florida's Rich Turtle Diversity

Update 2021

CONSERVATION TRUST



Hello friends and patrons of the Florida Turtle Conservation Trust (FTCT). Despite the challenges and limitations caused by the ongoing pandemic, we remain focused on turtle conservation opportunities. Our small conservation NGO continues working to conserve Florida's rich turtle diversity through research, education, and advocacy. We are pleased to provide you with this summary of our 2021 activities to date.

Thank you for your continued support of the FTCT. As you know, our projects and programs are entirely funded by grants and private contributions. We are most grateful to our generous donors who make this important conservation work possible. Your financial contributions have enabled us to complete a long list of field projects and conservation education programs since our formation in 1999. As a reminder, the FTCT is a tax-exempt organization under Internal Revenue Code 501(c)(3), so all donations and gifts are tax deductible as allowable by law.

If you wish to name the FTCT in your will or estate plan, we should be named as: Florida Turtle Conservation Trust, a nonprofit corporation, organized and existing under the laws of the State of Florida, with principal business address of 1213 Alhambra Way S., St. Petersburg, FL 33705-4620. Tax identification number: 65-0914313. Date of incorporation: 11 February 1999.

Respectfully,



George L. Heinrich, Executive Director



Timothy J. Walsh, Assistant Director

The Big Turtle Year continues to promote awareness

It has been nearly four years since The Big Turtle Year (www.thebigturtleyear.org), yet we still receive requests for speaking engagements. This conservation education initiative continues to promote awareness regarding the diversity, status, and conservation needs of this imperiled group of wildlife in the United States (most turtle-rich country). The pandemic prevented us from presenting in person again this year, so we went virtual and offered a webinar for Brooker Creek Preserve (Tarpon Springs, Florida).

Promoting gopher tortoise conservation on “Welcome to Florida” podcast

George L. Heinrich, FTCT Executive Director, discussed gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) ecology and conservation on the weekly podcast, “Welcome to Florida”. If interested, you can listen to the broadcast here: <https://stpetecatalyst.com/podcast-episodes/craig-pittmans-welcome-to-florida-the-gopher-tortoise/>. To learn more about this threatened keystone species and the world in which it lives, please visit the Gopher Tortoise Council’s website (www.gophertortoisecouncil.org) and Facebook page.

Bruce Experiences - Off the Beaten Path: Adventures in the Field

Tim Walsh, FTCT Assistant Director, was one of two conservation biologists who presented on how their childhood experiences in nature led to rewarding and productive careers during a recent program sponsored by the Bruce Museum. Tim included a nice overview of 17 years of FTCT fieldwork focused on Suwannee cooters (*Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis*). Dr. Craig Stanford (University of Southern California) presented on his career as an internationally renowned primatologist and turtle biologist. Watch the presentation here: <https://vimeo.com/613745732>

Latest publication resulting from our long-term Suwannee cooter research

We are pleased to share the following publication from our 6.5-year research on the distribution and status of Suwannee cooters in the Alafia River (Hillsborough County, Florida). Published in the Journal of North American Herpetology, this paper reports on the first field study of this turtle in a blackwater river system within the southern portion of the subspecies' range. Multiple survey methods during 2015-2020 revealed that a substantial population of Suwannee cooters inhabits much of this river system. Further research on these turtles in the Alafia River is needed to better understand what appears to be the largest population of this subspecies within its southern range. Our study provides a platform for future research and for conservation and management of a critical population of this turtle. Link to PDF: Heinrich, G.L., T.J. Walsh, D.R. Jackson, and J.S. Doody. 2021. Distribution and status of the Suwannee cooter, *Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis*, in the Alafia River (Hillsborough County, Florida, USA). Journal of North American Herpetology 2021(1):19-28.



Can turtles respond to global warming through nest site choice?

George L. Heinrich has joined Dr. Sean Doody's (University of South Florida) research on whether turtles can use nest site choice behavior to counter global warming. Field studies have been completed on Florida softshell turtles (*Apalone ferox*) and gopher tortoises at Boyd Hill Nature Preserve (St. Petersburg, Florida), and manuscripts are being prepared. Dr. Doody recently presented on the Florida softshell turtle work at the 17th Annual Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles (joint meeting of the Turtle Survival Alliance and the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group). Fieldwork focused on

peninsula cooters (*Pseudemys floridana peninsularis*) is ongoing at Sawgrass Lake Park (St. Petersburg, Florida). That makes three species, each representing a different family. This is interesting work. Results to be shared soon.



Grant received for new Tampa Bay diamondback terrapin project

We are excited to announce the start of a three-year field project on the distribution and status of the ornate diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota*) in the Tampa Bay region. This imperiled turtle is restricted to brackish water habitats, and identified threats include mortality in crab pots, impacts of climate change, and loss of nesting habitat. A grant proposal submitted by Dr. J. Sean Doody (University of South Florida), in collaboration with George L. Heinrich (Heinrich Ecological Services and FTCT) and Dr. Joseph A. Butler (University of North Florida), was selected for funding by the Tampa Bay Estuary Program's Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration Fund. This project will survey this under-studied species to determine distribution, identify nesting areas, and assess threats. The information collected will be incorporated into management recommendations to improve terrapin conservation in the Tampa Bay region. Data gathered will be valuable to researchers planning ecological studies and to habitat managers wanting to include terrapins in their management plans. Understanding the geographic distribution of species is vital to informing conservation and management decisions. Only then can biologists initiate field studies and land/water managers determine if and where habitats may be threatened and set a course of appropriate actions.



Diamondback terrapin conservation efforts

We continue to be active in efforts to address diamondback terrapin conservation needs. In January 2020, the FTCT joined the Center for Biological Diversity (www.biologicaldiversity.org) and the Diamondback Terrapin Working Group (www.dtwg.org) in a petition submitted to the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to increase protection for diamondback terrapins in Florida. Since that time, the agency has conducted multiple webinars on proposed regulatory changes regarding take, possession, transport, and sale, as well as the need for bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) on commercial and recreational crab pots. Implementing a regulation requiring BRDs on all crab pots used in Florida waters would be the greatest immediate conservation action that could be implemented by the state wildlife agency. We thank Elise Bennett (Senior Staff Attorney, Center for Biological Diversity) for her leadership and commitment to this multi-year effort which will likely result in positive conservation actions for this imperiled coastal species.

Donor recognition

Thank you to the following individuals for supporting the FTCT and turtle conservation during 2021: Barbara Cady, Steven Greene, Sanna Laitila, Mary Radice, and Eric Sievers.



Cover photo: adult female Suwannee cooter (*Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis*) basking on the Alafia River (Hillsborough County, Florida) by George L. Heinrich.

Page three photo: campsite during Alafia River fieldwork by Timothy J. Walsh.

Page four photo: adult female peninsula cooter (*Pseudemys floridana peninsularis*) at Boyd Hill Nature Preserve (St. Petersburg, Florida) by George L. Heinrich.

Page five photo: GLH measuring an adult female ornate diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota*) at St. Marks NWR (eastern panhandle Florida) by Dr. Joseph A. Butler.

Above photo: juvenile loggerhead musk turtle (*Sternotherus m. minor*) in Jackson County, Florida by George L. Heinrich.