

FLORIDA TURTLE

Florida Turtle Conservation Trust

Working to Conserve Florida's Rich Turtle Diversity

Update and Funding Needs
2023

CONSERVATION TRUST



Hello friends and patrons of the Florida Turtle Conservation Trust (FTCT). Our small, conservation NGO continues working to conserve Florida's rich turtle diversity through research, education, and advocacy, and we are proud of our achievements. We are pleased to provide you with this summary of our 2023 activities to date. This document shares an update on the status of current projects and related funding needs. We also encourage you to follow us on Facebook where we generally post 2-3 updates per month. Sharing those posts is a way for you to assist with spreading the word about our work and recruiting new supporters.

Thank you for being a patron of the FTCT. Our projects and programs are solely funded by grants and private contributions, and 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. Donations can be mailed to the address listed at the bottom of this page or made via the link provided on our website (www.ftct.org). 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.

In other organizational news, Timothy J. Walsh, FTCT Assistant Director, will be relocating from Connecticut to England this fall. His long list of responsibilities with FTCT includes project management, report and manuscript preparation, mapping, imaging, website design and management, and production of print and digital products. Tim is integral to our success and will continue serving in this key role.

Respectfully,



George L. Heinrich, Executive Director



Timothy J. Walsh, Assistant Director

Tampa Bay diamondback terrapin survey

Out of FTCT's three current field projects (described in this report), this research is certainly the most labor-intensive. We have now completed two field seasons of a four-year study on the distribution and status of the ornate diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota*) in Tampa Bay, the largest open water estuary in Florida. Funded by a grant from the Tampa Bay Estuary Program's Tampa Bay Environmental Restoration Fund, Dr. J. Sean Doody (University of South Florida), George L. Heinrich (Heinrich Ecological Services and FTCT), and Dr. Joseph A. Butler (University of North Florida) will determine distribution, identify nesting areas, and assess threats. It should be no surprise that habitat loss and degradation, as well as crab pot mortality have already been identified as major concerns. This project will inform management and conservation efforts for what the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has designated a species of greatest conservation need. Fieldwork in Pinellas County has largely been completed and we begin working in Hillsborough County during the 2024 field season. **Additional funding (~\$4,000) is needed for boat-related expenses (e.g., maintenance, fuel, and ramp and parking fees).**



Protection for an imperiled coastal species

The Florida Turtle Conservation Trust continues to collaborate with the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD) to secure protective actions by FWC on behalf of diamondback terrapins. Over the past two years, the state wildlife agency has made regulatory changes prohibiting take from the wild, limiting possession to only those already in captivity (permit required), and requiring 2x6-inch bycatch reduction devices (BRDs) on recreational pots (traps). Terrapin mortality in commercial crab pots remains a major threat and we are hopeful protections in that fishery will follow. This is the single greatest action that FWC can take to protect terrapins in our state. Working with our partners, we will continue to advocate for stronger turtle protection. Most recently, George L. Heinrich (FTCT Executive Director) and Elise Pautler Bennett (CBD Senior Attorney) presented on this topic at the Annual Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles (joint meeting of

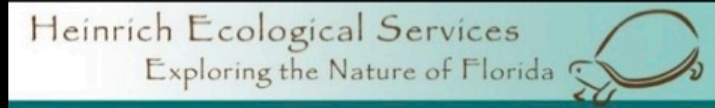
the Turtle Survival Alliance and the IUCN Tortoise and Freshwater Turtle Specialist Group) held in Charleston, South Carolina.

Diamondback Terrapin Conservation Needs and Recent Protective Actions in Florida



George L. Heinrich
(Heinrich Ecological Services,
Florida Turtle Conservation Trust)

Elise Pautler Bennett
(Center for Biological Diversity)



Determining the southern distribution of the Suwannee cooter

A significant part of FTCT's work has focused on threats to the Suwannee cooter (*Pseudemys concinna suwanniensis*), a large geographically restricted subspecies occurring in rivers that drain into the Gulf of Mexico along the west coast of Florida. Our early investigations (beginning in 2004) centered on conservation implications of illegal human harvest (based on the discovery of a Cedar Key dumpsite containing the remains of 170 poached turtles). That was followed by a field and museum study on the effects of boat strikes, and finally our current work on the southernmost distribution and status of this subspecies. The species occurrence south of the Weeki Wachee River was uncertain and hence of conservation concern. Understanding a species' geographic distribution is necessary to inform management plans and other conservation efforts. Our fieldwork since 2015 has produced records from six new rivers and three new counties, as well as a range extension. Further surveys are planned for 2023-2024. We recently presented on this work at the inaugural South Florida Herpetological Conference held in Fort Myers, Florida. **Funding (~\$3,000) is needed for lodging, fuel, and boat maintenance.**



Continued studies on global warming and turtle nest site choice

George L. Heinrich continues to collaborate with Dr. Sean Doody researching whether turtles can use nest site choice behavior to counter global warming. Preparation of manuscripts on field studies investigating gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) and peninsula cooter (*Pseudemys floridana peninsularis*) nest site choice is now underway. Both projects examined the potential for turtles to use nest site choice to offset the impacts of rising temperatures on developing embryos. Further, we have initiated a project (with multiple collaborators) designed to determine if North American turtles, in general, have used nest site choice, via canopy openness, to offset climate differences (from Florida to Canada) and to offset climate warming effects on embryos. Canopy openness is quantified using hemispherical photography and gap light analysis. Dr. Doody recently presented on this latest work at the Annual Symposium on the Conservation and Biology of Tortoises and Freshwater Turtles held in Charleston, South Carolina. **Funding (~\$5,000) is needed for purchase of cameras, and to cover lodging and fuel expenses.**



New gopher tortoise license plates to generate conservation funds

Wildlands Conservation is accepting orders for a specialty gopher tortoise license plate featuring the work of award-winning wildlife artist Matt Patterson. Funding generated will be used to support tortoise habitat conservation, habitat management, education, and research. The plates will be produced as soon as 3,000 vouchers have been purchased. For more details, please visit [Gopher Tortoise License Plate | Wildlands Conservation](#)



Donor recognition

Thank you to the following donors for supporting the FTCT and our turtle conservation efforts since our previous update: Ismail Ahmed, Alex Cannon and Marina Liem, Mary Carey, Marcie Clutter, Marla Despas, Krause Family Charitable Foundation, Suzanne Lio, Frederick Plate, Pete Robison, Abigail Simpson, Stewart Ulm, and Harold and Susanne Wahlquist.

Cover photo: summer campers watching a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*) at Weedon Island Preserve (Pinellas County, Florida) by George L. Heinrich.

Page three photo (left to right): George L. Heinrich, Dr. J. Sean Doody, and Dr. Joseph A. Butler during diamondback terrapin (*Malaclemys terrapin macrospilota*) survey in Pinellas County, Florida; selfie by George L. Heinrich.

Page four photo: title slide from presentation at Turtle Survival Alliance symposium.

Page five photo (top): Timothy J. Walsh surveying for cooters (*Pseudemys* spp.) on the Myakka River (Sarasota County, Florida) by George L. Heinrich.

Page five photo (bottom): hemispherical photographs used for quantification of canopy openness.

Above photo: gopher tortoise license plate which is now available for pre-purchase.