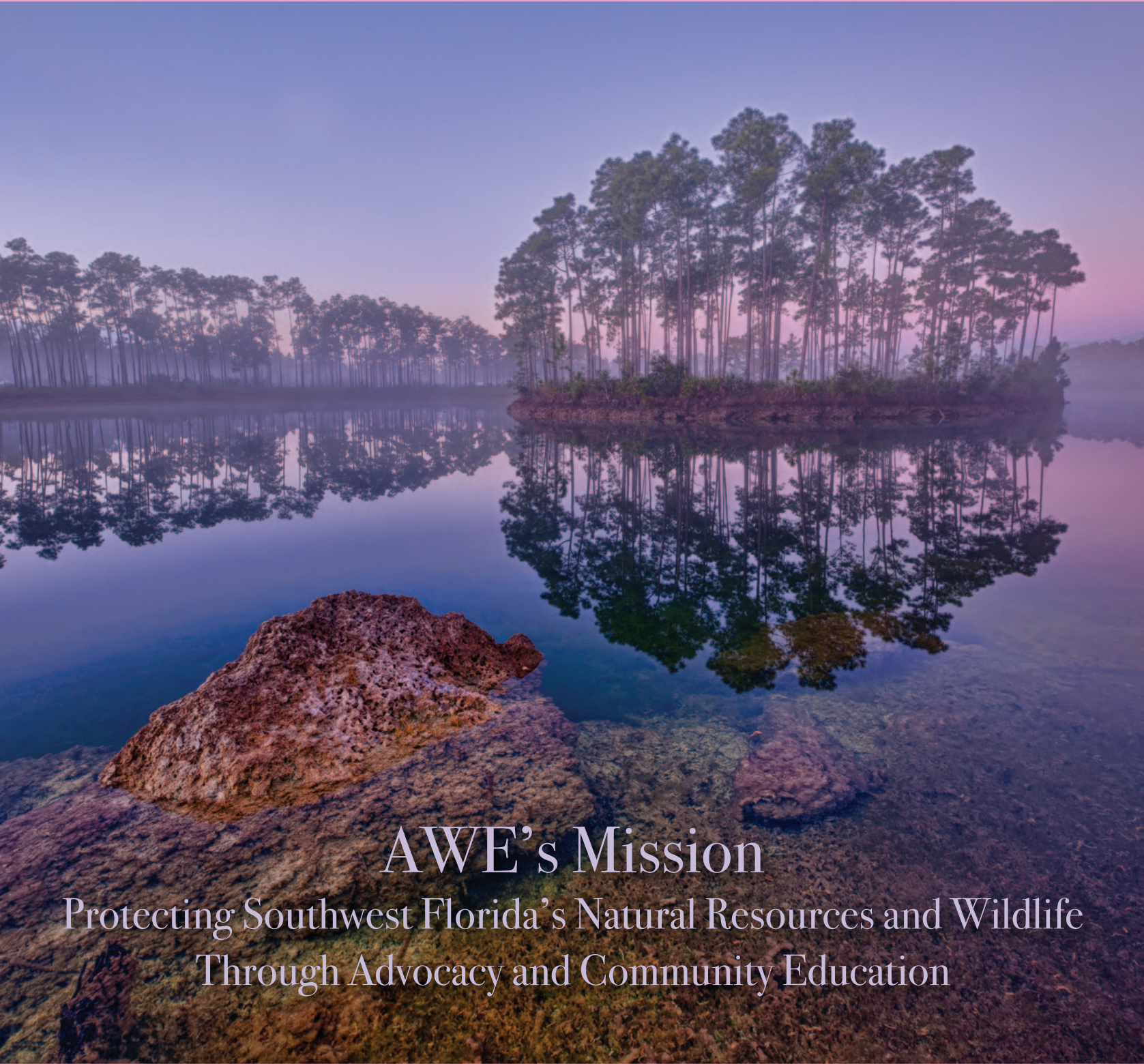


Audubon
Western Everglades
2020
Annual Report



AWE’s Mission

Protecting Southwest Florida’s Natural Resources and Wildlife Through Advocacy and Community Education

Director’s Report: Protect & Restore

Ted Rodman, Executive Director

As our July 2019 - June 2020 fiscal year got underway AWE certainly was not expecting the challenging operational and financial year it would become. Looking back over that difficult year, I realize that our conservation mandate to “protect and restore” may best summarize what we had to do to sustain southwest Florida’s oldest conservation organization.

Soon it became apparent that income was falling below projections for the July 2019 - December 2019 period, and the Board approved expanded future fundraising including more sponsored private meetings, targeted membership renewal campaigning, and more foundation grant appeals.

Just as that plan was to be implemented COVID marched onto the scene affecting us as well as many other worthy not-for-profits. Face-to-face group meetings had to be cancelled, foundations temporarily stopped accepting new funding appeals, sponsorships from normally dependable businesses dried up, and many private donors put a hold on giving until they could assess the likely effects of COVID.

To keep the ship afloat and fully functioning, AWE quickly adapted to the emerging world of virtual work. Staff willingly accepted what hopefully would be temporary salary cuts, office expenses were reduced through setting the stage for a move to less expensive office space, government grants and loans were obtained during the last days of the outgoing fiscal year and the early days of fiscal 2020-2021, and several long time individual supporters increased gifts to offset losses from others. Hopefully without revealing too many of the highlights of our next Annual Report, I should note that we were able to finish outgoing 2019-2020 only slightly behind financial goals and that in fiscal 2020-2021 we are once again on track, staff are back to previous salary levels, and we are happily ensconced in new, less expensive office space.

More importantly, as will be detailed in the remainder of this report, AWE was able throughout exceedingly difficult times to continue to make progress toward:

- Protecting western Everglades inland and shoreline ecosystems.
- Inspiring Community Environmental Stewardship.
- Advancing programming for new efforts aimed at Developing Tomorrow’s Environmental Leaders Today.
- Promoting planning for Climate Resiliency.

On behalf of our board of directors and staff, I thank all who stepped up to help us weather this storm.

TWO YEAR FINANCIAL SUMMARY (\$)

	FY-2019	FY-2020
REVENUE		
• Contributions/Grants	248,682	272,046
• Programs & Services	28,881	68,496
• Investment	na	1,402
• Other revenue	<u>34,624</u>	<u>31,984</u>
Total	312,194	373,928
EXPENSE		
• Grants Paid	19,000	16,500
• Salaries	136,616	196,938
• Other Expenses	<u>140,314</u>	<u>192,474</u>
Total	295,930	405,912
P&L	16,264	(– 31,984}
2020 Fundraising Expense		40,833 (10%)
NET ASSETS	67,493	35,509

AWE Conservation and Policy July 2019 - June 2020 and Future Directions

AWE's conservation policy priorities involve long standing Western Everglades "stock in trade" issues including wetlands preservation, water availability and quality, conservation of ecologically vital private lands, and protection of inland and coastal wildlife habitats. Similarly our priorities now also embrace more recent initiatives relating to Marco Island urban wildlife protection and research and winter shorebird research and stewardship which expand our mission and contributions to the ecology of SW Florida.

Recent achievements and future actions include:

Greater Everglades

Throughout the reporting period AWE has pushed for completion of the C-43 Reservoir and Picayune Strand Restoration Projects. There have been authorizations and major progress on the Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP) Phase I (Big Cypress/Alternative H), and Lake Okeechobee Watershed Restoration Project (LOWRP) Phase I. To bring eventual better health to the Greater Everglades we still need to:

- Advocate for the completion of WERP Phase I and authorization of Phase II in C-139 Basin for water quality improvement.
- Advocate for planning/construction of the water quality features in Caloosahatchee basin (C-43 Reservoir, Lake Hicpochee, Boma Nitrogen Reduction facility, septic to sewer, Lake Okeechobee protocols, post-Hoover Dike/ Kissimmee fixes and added treatment and storage north, east, and south of the Lake).
- Advocate for planning and implementation of the Southwest Florida Comprehensive Watershed Restoration Plan (Everglades Restoration for southwest Florida), including



the Corkscrew Regional Ecosystem Watershed, Estero Bay, Golden Gate Estates, and Belle Meade portions. AWE will continue to oppose rock mines in the Corkscrew Road corridor and support maximum protection and restoration of wetlands, flowways and Florida panther habitats in the Lee County Density Reduction/ Groundwater Resource Area, which includes much of Corkscrew Swamp watershed.

- Maintaining opposition to fracking and other enhancing oil/gas extraction techniques and any unsustainable mineral exploration work. However, AWE will maintain support of the original agreement for protection and establishment of the Big Cypress National Preserve, which includes traditional access and uses such as low scale oil/gas production where resources are not permanently degraded. AWE generally opposes oil/gas extraction in other parts of the Everglades, supporting purchase of mineral rights instead.

Private Lands Conservation

AWE advocacy has been associated with progress toward obtaining federal approval for the Habitat Conservation Plan and adoption of the Rural Land Stewardship 5-Year Amendments by Collier County Commission. Both are key to conserving vast areas of environmentally valuable privately held lands in eastern Collier County. Going forward all inland development plans, sector plans, roads such as M-CORES, etc. will be scrutinized for potential environmental impacts Restoration of OK Slough flows under SR29 to Panther Refuge and Fakahatchee Preserve will be promoted. The Rural Land Stewardship and Florida Panther Protection Programs may become models for private lands incentive driven programs appropriate for north of the Caloosahatchee and into central Florida.

AWE Conservation and Policy July 2019 - June 2020 and Future Directions

Imperiled Wildlife Programs

Our Burrowing Owl Watch program on Marco is growing and is expected to grow further given a new volunteer data collection APP, expansion to central Florida ranches, research, and success of the starter burrow experiment initiative. We had 80 active volunteers who completed over 3000 burrow checks at 404 sites including Marco Island, Iles of Capri, Fiddlers Creek Community in South, and downtown Naples for the 2020 nesting season. Completion of our gopher tortoise research program surveying phase on Marco will be followed by conservation field stewardship by local students. Winter Shorebird Stewardship remains a unique AWE program and dovetails with Audubon nesting summer efforts. AWE's work on panthers remains linked to private lands preservation while wood stork recovery is linked to Everglades and wetland protection.

Land Acquisition:

AWE has successfully advocated for the renewal of Conservation Collier, plus maximal implementation for regional scale habitat/ecosystem restoration and protection and public access and understanding. AWE advocated for Florida Forever and Rural and Family Lands Program funding, plus Lee's Conservation 20/20. AWE will continue general support for Land & Water Conservation Fund in greater Everglades as well as Farm Bill conservation easement buying and restoration — "general support" means AWE adds its voice to those of state and national group leadership on these important issues.

SLR/Climate Change

AWE works with local and state colleagues on adaptation planning to protect coastal and other Southwest Florida habitats that are particularly threatened by sea level rise and climate change. AWE also supports local and regional strategies including silviculture, renewable energy, smart sustainable growth and campaigns to raise awareness using indicator bird species being threatened. AWE supports the University of Florida and Florida Gulf Coast University ACUNE modeling for sea level and storm surge adaptation in Collier County, and the Southwest Florida Climate Change Compact.



Wetlands and Habitats

In conjunction with Corkscrew science staff AWE will continue to identify and advocate for best ways to minimize harmful algal blooms, catastrophic wildfire risk, increased flooding, water supply loss, and economic harm from all the above. Well functioning wetlands are necessary for adequate water supply and quality which in turn are critical for minimizing blue-green algae and red tide outbreaks which have plagued southwest Florida in recent years. Hence AWE continues its pioneering work on improving permitting practices with the aim of zero loss of functional wetlands. AWE has been supporting the development and utilization of improved tools for measuring functionality of various types of wetlands — especially short period, seasonal ones. Assessments with improved tools are key to improving permitting practices which still result in loss of functional wetlands. AWE also continues to oppose proposed developments where proper assessments of wetland impacts have not taken place. These regulatory efforts are complemented by AWE support for public and private restoration of damaged watersheds.

Alliances and Relationships

AWE will maintain active roles in the Audubon Regional Conservation Committee composed of chapters in southwest Florida and in the Everglades Coalition. Similarly AWE will maintain leadership in the Florida Panther Protection Program (FPPP) and Shorebird Partnerships in Lee and Collier Counties. We will continue relationships with FGCU and its Water School, Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary's Western Everglades Research Center, Big Cypress Basin Board and staff and its parent South Florida Water Management District Governing Board and staff, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Army Corps, and other agencies, NGO's, and allies. AWE should eventually evolve into a coastal habitat policy leader and focus less on broad regional water policy, while acknowledging the upstream relation of watersheds to downstream coastal habitats. Environmental Protection, Army Corps, and other agencies, NGO's, and allies. AWE should eventually evolve into a coastal habitat policy leader and focus less on broadregional water policy, while acknowledging the upstream relation of watersheds to downstream coastal habitats.

AWE Owl Watch Program



Our incredible group of volunteers work year round to monitor burrows and protect nesting areas.

AWE's Owl Watch Program is in its fifth year and we are happy to report that this year has been another successful nesting season for the burrowing owls and AWE's Owl Watch Program. Given this growth and other wildlife research and stewardship initiatives we run on Marco Island, we now require two staff biologists -- a PhD owl specialist to direct research elements (banding, DNA sampling, starter burrow program design) with offsite and on-site responsibilities and another field biologist technician overseer for volunteer training, community education outreach, and habitat stewardship responsibilities. This year we implemented a "Safe Harbor Agreement" with the help of The City of Marco Island and Florida Wildlife Commission to offer incentive payments (\$250) to residents of Marco if they put a starter burrow on their property to attract burrowing owls.



Class of 2020

- 80 volunteers made 3000 burrow checks at 404 sites
 - 255 pairs nested on Marco Island
 - 6 pairs nested in Naples
 - 79% of pairs fledged at least one chick
- 586 chicks fledged was 17 more than last yr.
- 255 nesting pairs was 62 more than last yr.
- During the past 4 yrs. 125 owls have been banded and 20% off those have been followed.



AWE Winter Shorebird Stewardship Program



Naples Clam Pass beach goers are fascinated with early season flocks of shorebirds.

AWE established its Winter Shorebird Stewardship Program on Marco Island and at Clam Pass the winter of 2019/20, which has been run by our staff biologist ever since. The program usually starts in October and continues through April. Presently there are good numbers of birds on Marco, Caxambas and at Clam Pass. However, we are concerned about last season's bacterial infections of over 100 black skimmer fledges, which are now being analyzed by FWC and U of GA. Serious water quality issues with Marco's surrounding waters from sewage leaks are suspected, but no conclusive evidence yet. We are advocating for better state and local water quality monitoring relating to this issue. Typically, rest or nest winter season for terns and skimmers who migrate here for egg laying and chick rearing, starts in February or March, but months before that we recruit and train a corps of volunteer staff. Over 65 trained volunteers worked with our staff last season. This program inspires kids, seniors, residents, visitors, beach vendors, and volunteers alike. Stewarding is not always about protecting birds or resighting bands, but rather about connecting birds and people through stories of conservation, management, and research. And the great aspects of stewardship are that volunteers can do at several sites whenever it is convenient for them and that it is often a gateway to lifetime birding.



AWE Gopher Tortoise Research & Stewardship Program



AWE works to identify populations of Gopher Tortoise on Marco Island and establish a new community service venue for Marco students.

Audubon Western Everglades has partnered with the City of Marco Island to survey burrows and develop a conservation plan for its growing gopher tortoise population — a state threatened species. The field surveying first phase of the program will estimate tortoise population and identify properties with ideal habitat. Phase two will involve recruiting and training Marco students for habitat stewardship. Gopher tortoises are dry-land turtles that usually live in relatively well-drained sandy soils generally associated with longleaf pine and sandhills. They also live in scrub, dry hammock, coastal grasslands and dunes, all habitats that have been disturbed or altered by man.



A Keystone Species, the gopher tortoise is a wildlife landlord providing shelter for more than 350 other species including endangered wildlife such as burrowing owls and indigo snakes. Tortoises spread seeds of many plants in their droppings, filling another important role in the ecosystem. Gopher tortoises need relatively deep, sandy soils in which to burrow and open sunny sites for nesting. Marco Island is an ideal habitat for this important species as they attempt to live among humans. Stewardship objectives for the program involve determining optimal density and relocating individuals off island with proper permitting. They live for 40 to 60 yrs and more than 80 percent of tortoise habitat is in private hands.

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A special thanks to all our supporters and friends who made this commitment to care.

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