

Achieving Conservation through Citizen Science

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Abstract: The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) Volunteer Stewardship Program (VSP) was established to implement citizen science projects that focus on priority habitats and species, as well as fill data gaps for species of greatest conservation need identified in the Florida State Wildlife Action Plan. The program builds partnerships with conservation agencies and organizations to develop a statewide network of trained volunteers. These volunteers participate in various activities including wildlife research, biological sampling and monitoring, habitat restoration, and laboratory work, as well as education and outreach. Several projects will be presented which highlight volunteer activities, along with project objectives, results, successes, measures learned, and future directions. The benefits and barriers to successful citizen science will also be presented relative to our agency goals of developing an internal capacity to support volunteer programs, focus volunteer efforts on implementing targeted conservation projects, and creating a culture of volunteerism. The VSP coordinators have provided the support necessary to create successful projects that leverage limited budget and staff resources, as well as provide an on-the-ground conservation benefit. Volunteers provide manpower and resources, expand productivity, and allow staff to divert time and energy elsewhere. The VSP has increased overall project capacity and volunteer retention for the agency, and has brought about the added value of an increase in overall public knowledge, support, and environmental awareness. As the program continues to expand, future efforts will translate project accomplishments and volunteer contributions into quantitative measures of conservation gain pertinent to agency habitat and species management plans.

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