

Protecting Wild Spaces_ Balanc...nt and Conservation in Florida

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SPEAKERS

Phillip Stokes, Ricky Telg, Alex Freeze

R Ricky Telg 00:04

This is Science by the Slice, a podcast from the University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences Center for Public Issues Education. In this podcast, experts discuss the science of issues affecting our daily lives, reveal the motivations behind the decisions people make, and ultimately provide insight to solutions for our lives.

P Phillip Stokes 00:32

Welcome to Science by the Slice, I'm Phillip Stokes, Education Coordinator with the PIE Center. Today's episode is all about the Florida wildlife corridor, which is an 18 million acre statewide network of connected lands and waters. You can think of this corridor as a highway of undeveloped land, which includes areas of wilderness and working lands. And to learn more about the corridor, you'll hear a conversation I had with Alex Freeze, who was with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation, an organization that champions a collaborative campaign to permanently connect, protect and restore the Florida wildlife corridor. While Alex has held several roles with the foundation, she currently serves as the Corridor Collaboration Teams Facilitator, Alex and I discussed just what the Florida wildlife corridor is, and how lands are identified as being part of the corridor. We talked about some of the expeditions that have taken place with the foundation, major successes and connecting lands and waters in Florida, as well as some of the opportunities to conserve even more of the corridor. Well, Alex freeze, thank you so much for being on the pie sinners podcast, science by the slice. We're thrilled to have you. And I'm excited to talk to you today about the Florida Wildlife quarter foundation. I'm also excited to hear more about yourself as well. So first, I just want to give you a chance to introduce yourself, tell us who you are and a little bit about your role within the organization.

A Alex Freeze 02:09

Awesome. Thanks so much for having me, Phillip. It's really a treat to be here. So jumping right in, I have been with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation for a couple years now, and all the way

in. I have been with the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation for a very long time going all the way back to 2015. I was the first ever intern for the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. Before we were even designated as a foundation. I am a sixth generation Floridian I feel so lucky to have been born and raised in Florida and truly raised in wild Florida. I come from a long line of ranchers and agriculturalists. And just people who loved the outdoors in Florida. And that really sparked my passion for wanting to be involved in conservation. And in an organization like the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. I started my journey into the professional world of environmental resources with a degree in wildlife biology that turned into a master's degree in environmental education. My heart has always been for wildlife and wild spaces. And I really found my niche in connecting people to wild places as much as I wanted to initially be a biologist and be the one boots on the ground. Learning about Panthers or bears or salamanders. I found that my skill set really was in connecting people to those spaces and those animals and what I could do to communicate the importance of nature in the natural world. And that led very naturally into that internship with the Florida Wildlife Corridor starting in 2015. I have to give a big shout out to Carlton Ward, who is the founder of the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation. And the guy who gave me a chance and hired me as his first ever intern and then convinced Mallory Dimmitt and Joe Guthrie, who were the other founding members of the foundation that yeah, we can totally bring it in turn on this 1000 mile seven D day hiking, biking kayaking expedition that we're going to do and she's going to be great. And it was one of the most formative experiences of my young conservation life and I'm truly so grateful for it to this day. That expedition that I mentioned was the second expedition that and will I know we're gonna get into talking about that much more later. But that 2015 trek that we called the Forgotten Coast. That was indeed 1000 miles and 70 days hiking, biking and kayaking and that's sort of my initial jump into foundation land. And now having been in the space for a while my role has graduated to becoming the corridor collaboration teams facilitator for the foundation, we have several different teams that act in different capacities collaborating over many different areas of conservation, that need somebody in the foundation to make sure that they're all getting what they need, that they are able to work effectively together and produce really impactful products that are making a difference in corridor conservation across the state. And that's what I've been doing ever since May of this year. 2023. And I'm just so stoked to be back with the foundation after several years away doing other work. And it's, it's been such a nice homecoming.

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Phillip Stokes 05:59

Yeah, that's really amazing to hear your story, Alex, and, you know, everyone, everyone's story, right, everyone's foundation and their, where they grew up, you know, it influences the way they their values and, and what they really want to devote their time into, right. And so hearing about where you grew up as a sixth generation Floridian and really just, you know, sounds like being an awe of of nature and all the different resources that Florida offers, I guess. And then fast forward to 2015. I didn't realize okay, you were an intern, and they said, Sure. Okay. Let's, let's bring our intern along on Okay, remind everyone, how many miles was it and you were hiking? You said biking, kayaking, I mean, just doing just kind of

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Alex Freeze 06:49

An adventure of a lifetime. I would say yes. So trekking, trekking, to highlight how important the connectivity is of, you know, this landscape and showing that, you know, these lands are literally still connected and we can move through them on foot or on bike or on, you know,

paddle craft. So that was 1000 miles in 70 days over three months from Central Florida. All the way up to the Panhandle in Gulf Islands National Seashore. We started right around the Green Swamp, which is kind of often talked about is like the heart of Florida, the green beating heart of Florida, too crazy close to Orlando, this absolutely beautiful cypress swamp with pine lands and beautiful wetlands. And there is a branch of the Florida wildlife corridor which we'll talk about what that means. That goes all the way up into the Panhandle. And we finished at the beautiful Gulf Coast Gulf Islands National Seashore 70 days later. And it was absolutely wild and myself I grew up in Tampa so the Gulf Coast is really my home. I grew up running through dunes and watching crows breed and fledge in the springtime and in the early summer, my grandparents had a almost 400 acre cattle ranch, just outside of Bradenton, Florida and a small town called Parrish and I have distinctive memories as a child of running through palmettos and having my parents and my uncle's point out deer tracks and maybe a panther tracker to cannot confirm or deny I was like nine years old. So you know, I don't have any evidence to support that. But they told me they were Panther tracks could have been Bobcat tracks, also could have been coyote tracks. I would have loved it no matter what it was. But it really sparked my imagination as a young person to think oh my gosh, there's there's big cats in my grandparents woods. And the great sadness of that story is that that ranch no longer exists. And unfortunately, that's the story and the ending to so much ranch land and working land and family land in Florida when families can no longer afford to keep the land or the stewards the original stewards pass away like my grandfather did. And the children are scattered to the four corners and it doesn't make sense for the family to keep it so my grandmother's house still stands on a small 20 acre patch but the remainder of that beautiful 400 Acres is now cookie cutter development and it's truly heartbreaking but thankfully that is not The story everywhere. And I'm really excited to, you know, keep sharing with you all of the collaborative work that the Florida wildlife corridor Foundation is doing to ensure that what happened to my family's ranch land is not the story and is not the narrative for for so many working families in Florida who have beautiful, incredible pieces of land that are vital to the connections of the corridor.

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Phillip Stokes 10:24

Yeah, and I think you know, what you've touched on. So starting back with the expeditions, and connecting people to the wild spaces of Florida. I think it sounds like that's a pretty integral part of the Florida wildlife corridor Foundation, because a lot of times we don't see those spaces. And, you know, you mentioned how a lot of those wild spaces have been turned into developments and, you know, things, you know, human development that that we need, you know, we need communities and places to live. But also, you know, any, any Floridian who's, you know, you know, maybe been here for a long time, yeah, you drive around with them. And you say, Hey, you see that? Yeah, that used to be an orange grove that used to be, you know, pasture for cattle that used to just be a tree stand, you know, or whatever, like a an area of forested area. But what's happening, and I want you to describe this a little bit better is a lot of land development, and Florida does fragment the connected wild lands of Florida, maybe not intentionally, but it does break up those contiguous lands for for animals, for you mentioned before, like Storm buffers, and all sorts of, you know, services that we rely on. So why, you know, tell us, you know, what is kind of the issue at hand. And, you know, what are some of those, you know, long term goals of the Florida wildlife corridor foundation?

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Alex Freeze 11:59

Absolutely. And you bring up such a good point. Humans need to be able to survive and live

and thrive in Florida just as much as wildlife needs to be able to survive and live and thrive in Florida. But it's all about how do we build? Where do we build? What is the design implementation that is going to make this what we call a corridor compatible community, we have about 1000 people a day. That's the one of the best, you know, estimates that we have for people moving to Florida, and how we accommodate those people is really important. So when we're looking at the corridor, and I'll give a little bit more of like a specific definition of what the Florida wildlife corridor is like, what is this? It's kind of an abstract idea. Corridor. I mean, that could mean anything. So when we're talking about the Florida wildlife corridor, we are talking about a statewide from all the way at the bottom of Florida, the Everglades, up through peninsular Florida to the very top the edge of Georgia, the Okefenokee Swamp. That's a funny word, but I love it the Okefenokee Swamp, yeah. And then there's a V of the corridor that goes through the Panhandle. And that's the exhibition we were talking about earlier. And this corridor is made up of 18 million acres of wilderness working lands, public and private property that is home to some of the, you know, most endangered imperiled, but incredible species that Florida has to offer. So you think of it as like a highway for wildlife and wild lands and water is absolutely included in this as well. So just like we need eye for just like we need I 75 to travel and move where we need to in the state. Animals like the Florida panther, the Florida black bear, the gopher tortoise need to be able to move throughout the state to find partners to breed to find food to find appropriate habitat. And keeping that corridor connected is absolutely possible, while still developing intentionally at the same time. So so much of the corridor is made up of working lands, and of that 18 million acres that I talked about that encompasses the entire corridor, 8 million acres of that is still unprotected. So we've come so far, there is so much positivity, you know, very often, especially nowadays, if we have environmental conversations, they tend to take kind of a darker turn, I think the message of the corridor is such a positive one, because there's so much opportunity, and there's so much great work that's being done in a very interdisciplinary collaborative way that is, you know, keeping this corridor connected. One misconception I think people have about the corridor is that maybe all, you know, open, undeveloped land in Florida is part of the corridor. And that's not necessarily true, although all land is valuable and worth, you know, conservation protection? Absolutely. We're really thinking of this green highway. So say we wanted to build, you know, a new housing development. If the city planners and the county planners and the decision makers that are coming together with the developers to decide, how is this new community going to go in? If they were thinking in terms of corridor compatibility, they would think, Okay, where can we put this development, that's not going to cause a fragmentation or a breaking up of that highway, a highway only works if it stays connected? I feel like that was very rambling. But that was very much a nutshell touch on the idea of corridor compatible communities and how absolutely development is going to happen in Florida. And it's needed, we need to be able to support successful, you know, full human lives in Florida, but we can absolutely do that in a way that is sustainable, and thoughtful towards the other residents of our state, which are our wildlife.

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Phillip Stokes 16:48

Yeah, you know, it's it is interesting. Maybe ironic, I don't know that you mentioned how important roads are for people. I mean, we know how much we rely on them every day to get to work and visit our family and everything else. And yeah, for for animals, they need that because because what you mentioned before was it's not just having some green space in some undeveloped land, maybe that's a part of the corridor, maybe it's not, it's great to have it, you know, where the trees are putting off oxygen and absorbing co2 and things like that. But is it necessarily is that where the black bear is going to travel, to be able to kind of, you know,

expand its terrain, and whatever, whatever the black bear needs to do, for that matter. And I really appreciate Alex, what you said is, you know, taking that positive frame, because you're right, within conservation, we think about the things that have been done, but there's so much that can be done, you know, and, and just being intentional, and, and trying to develop in smart ways, while still, you know, allowing humans to prosper, but also allowing the wildlife to prosper. And so humans can enjoy just this the great state that Florida is right.

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Alex Freeze 18:06

Absolutely. There's so much economic viability, in sustainability and in building and living as people with the environment in mind. As an environmental educator, I try so hard to help people understand how we are all part of this greater ecosystem, we do not exist apart from it. And for us to be able to continue to live our most fulfilling, enriching, healthy lives for, you know, all of the future to come. We have to do that in line and in partnership with the natural world. And that's where the most success comes from. And so much of Florida's prosperity is housed within the Florida wildlife corridor, I mean, absolute millions of acres of agricultural lands, ranch lands, if you if listeners might not know and this is very often not an identity that Florida has. But Florida is either the second or third largest producer of cattle in the entire country. And that that idea is often very dichotomous with like environmental protections and cattle ranching. In a lot of ways for good reasons with how ranching is done around the world. You know, we're all aware of, you know, slash and burn agriculture in South America. absolutely devastating. That is not how we raise cattle here in Florida. cattle ranches, and those working family lands make up a massive part of the Florida wildlife corridor. And those conservationists, those ranchers, who really are what I would consider some of the original conservationists, if you go out with these working men, women and people They know the land and the ebbs and flows and the way that it works seasonally and how to keep their animals healthy on the land as well as wildlife healthy on the land, their knowledge, and their experience is so rich and vast in deep. And it's it's truly a remarkable partnership that we have with so many landowners and the corridor. Ecotourism is a huge thing in Florida, I mean, people flocked to our springs, to our national parks, to our state parks, and that ecotourism brings so much prosperity to you know, our coasts, of course, the beaches, which, again, are not always part of the corridor, but are part of the natural fabric of Florida, which is so important to protect. So it's, again, I'm the type of person who looks at it as the intrinsic value of nature, how it deserves to be here, simply because it exists, but it is so important to comment on how important the corridor connectivity is to the health of all Floridians financially and physically.

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Phillip Stokes 21:11

You know, Alex, like we're talking about all these different groups, you know, that interact with each other. And, you know, humans can get like, like, we're messy, right, relationships are messy. But you know, what I really I genuinely do think that like people are are all like, we're all trying our best, you know, we're all like, putting our best foot forward. We're all trying to make the right decisions, you know, based on the best the information that we have. And so caring more about the connections, and the collaborations you have within the Florida wildlife corridor that's such a vital part into like doing that storytelling, how do you facilitate those connections between different groups, such as developers and landowners and conservationists and people who just work regular jobs and live in big cities in Florida, and everyone else in between?

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Alex Freeze 22:04

That is such a great question. And I don't think anybody has like a perfect methodology or a perfect answer, but I'll just share with you what we did, or so we, as a team, and we are an ever expanding team, it's, it's such a fantastic organization to be a part of just because there's so much momentum and energy and passion and in belief in the mission of, you know, keeping the corridor connected, protected, and restoring what needs to be restored. So, so much of what we do is we have, like summit type experiences, conferences where we give open invitations to I mean, every partnership you could possibly imagine from players that I've already mentioned before, you know, The Nature Conservancy of Florida, but also like Florida Fish and Wildlife, politicians, local lawmakers, landowners, artists, conservationists, all people who you know, we're very public organization, we have, you know, very public social media, we've made these films which have, you know, gone on to some of them, you know, be in film festivals all across the world. You know, our message is a very public one. And one of the biggest pieces of publicity that's brought in a lot of partnerships, since 2021, was actually the signing of the Florida wildlife corridor act. So this is not just kind of a conceptual idea of the four wildlife corridor is a designated space under this official, you know, legislative Act that was signed with unanimous bipartisan support, I will say, which are not words that you get to string together very often these days in June of 2021, and that publicity, and the the really groundbreaking nature of that act being signed, you know, people reach out to our team all the time, like, Hey, how can I be part of what you're doing? How can we, you know, work together to protect this particular land, there are land Trust's all across Florida. So the for wildlife corridor Foundation is a nonprofit, we are not a land trust, we do not hold land. We are the advocacy organization who wants to highlight all of the good work that these other organizations are doing. And so, we would work really closely with a land trust organization to you know, make sure that the partnerships between the land owners and the trust are strong, that you know, everything was on the up and up getting done, what needed to get done. But then we have other team members whose specialty is, you know, grassroots community activism and outreach. And we're painting murals all across Florida and bringing artists together to spread the message. We have curriculum and development right now that we have, you know, big hopes of, of reaching young people and going into educational audiences to teach people about the corridor in a unique and engaging way. Our upper leadership, we are led by the absolutely incredible Mallory Dimmitt, who is one of my absolute conservation heroes, and just icons to me. She's such an incredible person. Mallory and our leadership team travel all across the state giving presentations and talks about, you know, different areas that are in need of protection. And then, of course, we do the expeditions fairly frequently, you know, sometimes they're every other year, sometimes there's a couple years in between the foundation had an expedition just last year, that highlighted three veterans and their journey through a really important part of the corridor. And that film is going to be coming out, hopefully in the next year, which is really exciting. So those are really the big ways that we sort of draw in partners and, and have these collaborative experiences. So much of my role specifically, is making sure that those partners are just supported with the tools that the foundation creates our incredible communications team is just cranking out the best communication pieces, left and right, and making sure that the photographs and the video content and the messaging around what's happening in the corridor, you know, what acreage got protected this month, what's being threatened and needs to be focused on, you know, maybe what toll road is being produced, that maybe shouldn't be happening, that needs some advocacy against that messaging is all you know, very important to get out to our partners. Partnerships extend across every area of work that you can imagine. And it's so critical that all of that work, you know, come together and be, you know, aligned to the mission of connecting and protecting the corridor.

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Phillip Stokes 27:44

Alex, you know, I do want to say, you know, it's interesting, because, you know, now, with, with the internet, you know, we have, we can look at, you know, beautiful landscapes from all over the world, you know, and, and it's really interesting to me to kind of look at the uniqueness of each area. But then thinking about Florida, and like, what makes Florida, Florida, you know, and everything we've talked about, like, yeah, it's it's hot, it's swampy. But there are and I should say, and all of that is just very beautiful. And, you know, we didn't pick, you know, the, the land to be the way it is, like you said, I mean, just the fact that it's here, you know, it has it has that value. And so are there any last thoughts you want to say as we're wrapping up today?

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Alex Freeze 28:39

Yeah, I appreciate you making space for that. As somebody who grew up my entire youth and young adult life in Florida, I just, I hope people can maybe take away from this conversation that Florida is so much more than just golf courses, and Daytona and you know, things that are great about Florida. Don't get me wrong, but what you mentioned, our swamps and our wetlands and our coastal habitats. They are some of the most unique natural spaces. Absolutely in the entire country and in the entire world. Everglades National Park is a World Heritage Site. There are so few of those designated globally and the impact that having a space like that, but even more so having a connected corridor as robust as the Florida wildlife corridor that still exists in the third most populated state in the entire country is absolutely incredible. And I don't want people to undervalue how important that is, and how incredible that is. For a state like Florida, Florida has a lot of different identities, a lot of different. You know, we all know Florida man, it gets posted around everywhere. And the identity of Florida is so much richer and deeper and more nuanced than that we have animals in Florida that exists nowhere else in the world. One of my favorites being the Florida Scrub J, I'm a big bird nerd. And having just this wildlife in these wild spaces, that truly exist nowhere else and can't exist anywhere else, because the conditions aren't right for it is so special. And if I could ask any of your listeners anything, it's just to go out even into your backyard communities and experience wild Florida for yourself. I know it can be intimidating. But there are so many great resources out there to help people get connected with their local wilderness spaces and wild spaces. And just go out and see it for yourself. That's, that's really the message that I want to send. Because it's so beautiful. It's just incredible. And I think of wild Florida as sort of like this, this like entity like made up of all of these moving parts. And she's just great. Like, it's it's such a, it's such a special place, and so unique in the in the framework of the rest of the country, and it's so worth protecting.

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Phillip Stokes 31:59

But Alex, I think you summed that up pretty perfectly in a really great way to kind of wrap up today. So I just want to say thank you so much for being on the PI centers podcast. It was an absolute pleasure speaking with you today.

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Alex Freeze 32:11

Thank you, Phillip, thank you so much for having me and highlighting before wildlife corridor.

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Ricky Telg 32:17

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