

Sue Legg: Florida parks need renewed protection

By Sue Legg

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In 1916, 168 cars filled with members of the Federation of Women's Clubs lined up to celebrate the dedication of Royal Palm State Park. They had lobbied hard to create the park, which was Florida's first state park and later formed the nucleus of Everglades National Park. One-hundred years later, Florida's state parks have grown to include the world's finest springs.



Brad McClenny/Staff photographer

A young wild horse walks with two adults, part of a group that was hanging around the observation tower at the La Chua Trail on Paynes Prairie Preserve State Park.

Since women won the right to vote in 1920, the League of Women Voters has promoted the protection and wise management of natural resources in the public interest. At that time, the League undertook a study of flood control, erosion and the creation of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Water resources were the focus in 1950s. The protection and management of our natural resources was the focus in the 1970s.

Since then, the League has been in the forefront of the environmental protection movement. As such, the League promotes resource conservation, stewardship and long-range planning with the responsibility for managing natural resources at all levels of government.

The League supports the protection of Payne's Prairie State Preserve, which was acquired by the state of Florida in 1970. It became the state's first preserve in 1971; so classified because of its significant natural values. It was designated a Natural National Landmark in 1974.

The governor and Florida Cabinet appointed a special committee to draft a plan for management of the prairie. For reasons of natural resource protection, the committee recommended that cattle be removed from the park. In 1975, 10 young bison were introduced onto the prairie because they had once inhabited the land. In recent years, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has reduced the herd to 45-50 females and geldings from about 70.

Around 1979, a few surplus Cracker cattle from the living history Cow Camp at Lake Kissimmee State Park were transferred to the park. A few Cracker horses were released onto the prairie in 1985. The cattle are kept at the old Hickory Ranch, where there is historic improved pasture, and do not roam the prairie. It is a small herd and is used for educational purposes about the park and Florida.

Now, Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Jon Steverson wants to make parks "self sustaining" by giving private interests the right to graze cattle, log and hunt in Paynes Prairie and other state parks.

Currently, these consumptive activities are not allowed in most parks. Cattle are allowed in the historic Kissimmee Cow Camp and three parks where, in order for the

state to purchase the land, the sellers were given the right to keep cattle in part of the parks.

Payne's Prairie is one of Florida's premier observation sites to see sandhill cranes, bald eagles, alligators and other wildlife. If hunting were to occur, would this still be possible? The park provides numerous other non-consumptive uses such as hiking, camping, biking and fishing. It is a unique place in all of Florida.

In 2014, Florida's state parks produced \$2.9 billion for the economy and paid for 75 percent of their operating and management costs. Throughout the years, funding for the parks has been cut.

State parks were established for the benefit of the people of Florida by preserving the state's natural resources and to provide passive, non-consumptive public uses. From the natural springs to the coral reefs in the Florida Keys, our state parks protect and showcase the natural beauty of Florida.

The value to citizens' enjoyment through the various passive recreational opportunities and the protection of natural resources, wildlife and Florida as it once was, cannot be estimated in dollars.

In accordance with the League of Women Voters' natural resources position to promote public understanding and participation in decision-making as essential elements of responsible and responsive management of our natural resources, we endeavor to inform the public and help promote policies that manage land as a finite resource.

— *Sue Legg is president of the Alachua County League of Women Voters.*

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