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New National Website to Feature Florida's Apalachicola River

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. – The Apalachicola River Basin will be one of the spotlights on LandScope America, a new website designed to promote conservation by changing how citizens look at natural places in their backyard and across the nation. The Florida Natural Areas Inventory, a conservation organization housed within the Florida State University, is one of only five state programs selected nationwide to help NatureServe and National Geographic Society build this online guide to America's natural places.

To help viewers understand conservation and the need to take action, LandScope America will integrate detailed digital maps, reliable scientific and conservation data, and multimedia stories about people and places such as the Apalachicola River. LandScope Florida, the state-level component of the larger project, will let viewers explore Florida's natural places and dig into detailed information about biodiversity, ecological assessments, and conservation priorities, leveraging FNAI's critical research about the state's plants, animals, and wild habitats. Backed by a \$5 million grant, the website will launch in late 2008.

One of the Southeast's most precious waters, the Apalachicola River Basin is a nationally important hotbed of biodiversity. Formed by the Chattahoochee and Flint rivers, which flow south from the Appalachian foothills into Apalachicola Bay, the Apalachicola River has the highest diversity of freshwater fish species in the state and holds the second-highest concentration of amphibian and reptile species in North America. As one of the most productive and pristine estuaries in North America, the river plays an important role in the economy of Florida, Alabama and Georgia.

“The Apalachicola River basin is the right place to kick-off LandScope in Florida. In spite of being recognized by experts as one of the most important natural areas in Florida, the Apalachicola does not enjoy popular recognition and the support it deserves,” said Gary Knight, director of FNAI. “We're excited to collaborate with NatureServe and National Geographic in creating a website that offers a compelling new presentation of information that will help inspire even greater conservation in our region.”

The Apalachicola River basin harbors approximately 1300 species of plants and 60 species of trees, including the Florida torreya and Florida yew, two of the world's rarest evergreens. The river's relatively clean waters are also home to about 33 species of mussels and 131 fish species, such as the threatened Gulf sturgeon.

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Exceptional efforts by conservation organizations and Florida state agencies have yielded significant conservation successes in the region — hundreds of thousands of acres are permanently protected in conservation stewardship — but considerable work remains ahead.

A change in the river's natural flow caused by reservoir operations and water withdrawals from the Flint and Chattahoochee rivers has become a threat to native and rare species. Other threats to the basin's biodiversity include forest destruction, land conversion and fragmentation.

Jon Oetting, conservation planner for FNAI, explained that the conservation issues Florida faces are all reflected in the Apalachicola. The river's water quality and quantity are crucial both to the survival of a host of rare aquatic species and to the commercial fishing economy in the Apalachicola Bay. But the region is beginning to experience rapid population growth and development.

“Soon the largely forested landscape that today harbors a wealth of biodiversity may be converted into a more fragmented pattern already seen in other regions of the state,” said Oetting. “The time is now to bring good information to bear in making smart conservation, land use, and economic decisions about this region's future.”

FNAI has over 25 years of experience in identifying and managing the state's natural heritage information. A key partner in Florida Forever, the nation's largest conservation land-buying program, FNAI provides scientific review of newly proposed land acquisition projects, and comprehensive natural resource analysis and scoring of all Florida Forever projects.

Other pilot state partners in the LandScope America initiative are Washington, Colorado, Virginia and Maine. A preview website for LandScope America is available at www.landscape.org.

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NatureServe is a non-profit conservation group dedicated to providing the scientific basis for effective conservation action. Representing a network of 80 natural heritage programs and conservation data centers in the United States, Canada, and Latin America, NatureServe is a leading source for detailed scientific information about threatened plants, animals, and ecosystems. Visit us online at www.natureserve.org.