



# Public Scoping Report

## Backcountry Access Plan/Environmental Impact Statement



August 2014

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## Summary

Big Cypress National Preserve first initiated public scoping for the Backcountry Access Plan / Environmental Impact Statement in the fall of 2013 through press releases, posts to the preserve website, and an announcement on the National Park Service (NPS) Planning, Environment, and Public Comment (PEPC) website. In the spring of 2014, a notice of intent was also announced by publication in the *Federal Register*. As directed by the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), public scoping for environmental impact statements typically takes place over a 30-day period. Due to overlap with the holiday season and requests from the public to extend the initial scoping period, the preserve chose to receive public comments for 102 days following the initial press releases in fall of 2013 (November 18–February 28). Due to a delay in finalizing the notice of intent, the scoping period was re-opened for an additional 60 days (March 11–May 11) following its publication in the *Federal Register*.

During the public scoping period, a total of 232 individual correspondences were received. Of these, 123 were submitted directly to the PEPC website. The remainder were comments e-mailed to staff at the preserve, mailed letters, trail request forms submitted to the preserve, or map markups from the public scoping open house. These correspondences were entered into PEPC.

Approximately 70 people attended two public open house events on Monday, April 7 and Tuesday, April 8, 2014, in Weston, Florida, and at the Big Cypress Swamp Welcome Center in Ochopee, Florida. During the meetings, approximately 57 comments on maps and 6 comment cards were received. Comment cards were transcribed and entered into PEPC and map markup comments were entered into the project geographic information system (GIS).

To inform the public of the scoping process, a newsletter describing the context for the plan and how to comment was posted to the PEPC website and made available in hardcopy at the public open house events. This newsletter provided a general overview of the planning schedule, background on issues anticipated to be addressed in the plan, provided maps giving an overview of the preserve's trail network, and described the foundational elements that will guide planning and management.

The National Park Service collected public comments during this scoping phase of the planning process to understand the public's perspectives on key issues and management options related to the backcountry of Big Cypress National Preserve. Within this NEPA process, thoughts and ideas from individuals, organizations, and agencies are analyzed and considered equally. For this reason, the unique content of comments, rather than the number of times a comment was received, will be used to guide the development of a range of reasonable management alternatives for the plan. This scoping report summarizes all public comments received during the public scoping period.

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## Comment Distribution

The following table provides the distribution figures of public comments that were submitted directly to PEPC. The map on the next page depicts the distribution of these public comments by zip code.

**Distribution of Public Comments Submitted Directly to PEPC by State**

State	Percentage	Number of Correspondence
Florida	90.3%	112
District of Columbia	2.4%	3
Texas	0.8%	1
Illinois	0.8%	1
New York	0.8%	1
Unknown	4.0%	5

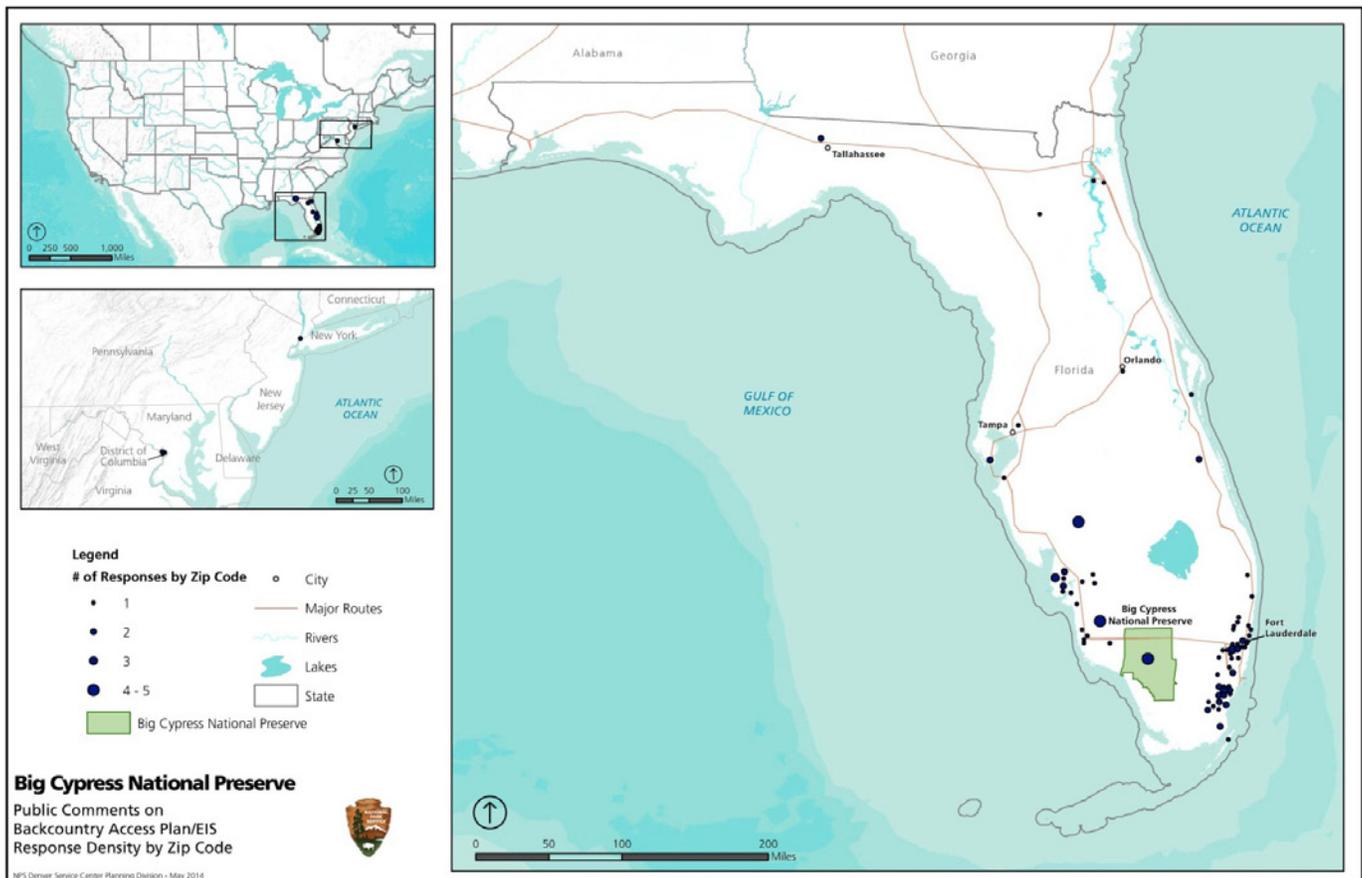
**Distribution by Zip Code of Public Comments Submitted Directly to PEPC**

In addition to general public comments, the National Park Service received letters from official representatives of the following agencies and organizations:

- Big Cypress Sportsmen's Alliance
- Center for Biological Diversity
- The Everglades Coordinating Council
- Florida Division of Historic Resources and State Historic Preservation Office
- Florida Trail Association
- Florida Wildlife Federation
- National Parks Conservation Association
- Sierra Club
- South Florida Wildlands Association
- WildEarth Guardians
- US Forest Service

Members of the following organizations also submitted comments:

- Alligator Amblers Chapter of Florida Trail Association
- Broward County Airboat, Halftrack and Conservation Club
- Caloosa Jeepers of Southwest Florida, Inc.
- Collier Sportsmen's and Conservation Club
- Florida Trail Happy Hoofers
- Off-Road Vehicle Advisory Committee
- Onita M. Larkins Family Trust
- Recreational Aviation Foundation



## Definition of Terms

### Correspondence

A correspondence is the entire document received from a commenter. It can be in the form of a letter, written comment form, note card, or open house transcript.

### Comment

A comment is a portion of the text within a correspondence that addresses a single subject or issue. It could include such information as an expression of support or opposition to the use of a potential management tool, additional data regarding the existing condition, or an opinion debating the adequacy of an analysis.

### Comment Summary

A grouping that is centered on a common subject. Comment summaries combine similar comments. Representative quotes from the comments used to create a comment summary may also be presented.

### Public Scoping Comments

The following topic questions were posed to commenters to frame and begin the conversation surrounding the future of the backcountry of Big Cypress National Preserve. Within each topic question, comment summaries are listed, and in most cases representative quotes have been provided from individual comments to further illustrate public concerns.

1. What characteristics of the backcountry within Big Cypress National Preserve are special to you and why?
2. When you are recreating in the backcountry of Big Cypress National Preserve, what kind of activities do you value?
3. This plan will provide guidance on secondary trails, campsites, and camping areas within Big Cypress National Preserve. Do you have comments or suggestions about the placement of secondary trails, campsites, or camping areas? If you have suggestions for secondary trail locations, please describe the specific destination you would like your suggested secondary trail to lead.
4. What are the most important issues affecting Big Cypress National Preserve? Issues can be concerns, opportunities, or topics needing further discussion.
5. Imagine you are visiting the preserve 20 years from now. What aspects of the preserve do you hope will continue into the future? What would you like to be different about the preserve in the future?
6. Do you have any other comments related to the Backcountry Access Plan / Environmental Impact Statement in Big Cypress National Preserve?

### Summary of Public Comments

This section summarizes the responses to questions 1 and 2. The responses for these two questions were combined due to a high degree of similarity and overlap.

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#### **Topic Question 1: What characteristics of the backcountry within Big Cypress National Preserve are special to you and why?**

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#### **Topic Question 2: When you are recreating in the backcountry of Big Cypress National Preserve, what kind of activities do you value?**

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**A place to explore and connect to nature.** A large number of commenters emphasized that Big Cypress National Preserve is special because it is a place where people can escape into wilderness, explore and connect with nature, relax, and enjoy peace and quiet. This theme was one of the most frequently mentioned. Commenters used words such as raw wilderness, solitude, serenity, natural sounds, and fresh air when describing their attraction to the area. A number of commenters discussed their experiences exploring the preserve, and the thrill they got from seeking the unknown.

Many people referenced the contrast between the remote, tranquil environment of Big Cypress and the noise and stress of city life. A few mentioned the satisfaction they derived from being able to unplug from their daily routines and how there were no substitutes for relaxation in a scenic and wild place. Some commenters focused on the splendor of certain areas; for example, the Corn Dance unit was described as remote and beautiful, especially during transitions between seasons.

Quote: *“A place where someone can get away from traffic and city noise, and really see Florida.”*

**Close to cities.** A few people liked that Big Cypress provides close-to-home recreation opportunities. Several individuals stated that Big Cypress is close to several major urban areas, and thus provides urban residents with a large, easily accessible natural area for recreation where they can escape from the bustle and crowds of the city.

**Diverse recreation activities.** Many commenters engaged in a wide variety of recreation opportunities. For example, some described using a motorized vehicle simply for exploring and photography. Others stated that they enjoyed both hunting and wildlife viewing. Many people also discussed their enjoyment of both driving vehicles and hiking. A large number of commenters enjoyed camping in Big Cypress. A few commenters distinguished camping opportunities in Big Cypress from other types of national park campgrounds, saying they enjoyed the nonregulated, dispersed camping approach of Big Cypress.

**Motorized recreation, hunting, and fishing.** A large number of commenters emphasized the importance of motorized recreation and discussed their enjoyment of various forms of hunting and fishing. Many commenters talked about the necessity of motor vehicles for recreating in Big Cypress, including ATV’s, swamp-buggies, airboats, and jeeps; one commenter emphasized the importance of being able to land small aircraft. Many noted that these vehicles were essential for access, travel, and exploration in more remote parts of the preserve because muscle-powered forms of travel were not practical in many areas due to terrain, water, and distances. Some also discussed the importance of motor vehicles for bringing along older and younger members of their family.

Quote: *“Remote wilderness is useless unless it can be accessed in some method.”*

Hunting (namely deer and turkey), fishing, and frogging, respectively, were commonly cited as important recreation activities. A few commenters classified these activities as “traditional uses” of the preserve, which they felt legislation was written to protect. Lastly, a few commenters described the deep gratification they received from engaging in these types of recreation activities.

**Natural scenery.** Many commenters valued Big Cypress as a place to view animals, plants, ecosystems, and to see unspoiled natural beauty. Some commenters cited the beauty and vastness of the area, and then focused on specific natural features and habitat types such as grass prairie, hardwood hammocks, and cypress swamps. Many people discussed wildlife viewing as a favorite activity; others mentioned the sheer variety

of animals, while some called out specific species such as deer, alligator, and owls. Other commenters focused on the unspoiled qualities of the area, using words such as untrammled, unpolluted, pristine, and nature at its finest.

Quote: *“It’s a lovely, quiet wilderness.”*

**Nonmotorized recreation.** A number of commenters focused on the importance of specific forms of nonmotorized recreation. Specifically, a number of commenters believe Big Cypress is special because it is an ideal place for activities such as hiking, kayaking, canoeing, photography, backpacking, bird-watching, bicycling, stargazing, and camping. Some people traveled from nearby cities to engage in these activities in the preserve. One commenter especially valued the Florida National Scenic Trail. A few commenters stated that the sounds of gunfire and motors detract from their backcountry experience in the preserve.

**Social aspects.** Some commenters emphasized the social aspects of their recreation in the preserve. They described their profound enjoyment of family outings and taking their kids through the preserve. Several people noted the joy of sharing the preserve with others who were seeing it for the first time, and some recalled fond memories of visiting the area in their youth. A few commenters stressed the importance of fellowship with other camp owners, and stressed that trail closures had disrupted their ability to reach certain camps. One commenter mentioned the importance of the rich “gladesmen” culture in the area.

Quote: *“sharing the outdoors with family and friends” and “taking the grandchildren to see it all.”*

**Unrestricted access.** Many commenters value unrestricted access and the ability to move about and camp freely. Many who expressed this viewpoint felt that recent changes in management and regulation did not reflect historic uses of the area. Many commenters valued a sense of freedom when discussing their visits to the preserve—meaning, recreationalists can camp where they want, travel where they want, engage in a variety of activities, and not worry about restrictions. A few commenters discussed restrictions as effectively shutting down entire parts of the national preserve to access, since nonmotorized travel to those areas was difficult.

Quote: *“Unfortunately, the current restrictions that were put in place illegally by others have made exploring new areas impossible.”*

Other commenters focused on the transition of the area into NPS control and cited this change as negative because the National Park Service seemed resolved to put up “red-tape” and too eager to “manage” everything—particularly trails, campsites, and motorized vehicles. Others described the closures of specific areas, and the negative impact those closures had on them. Commenters also discussed traditional uses of the preserve, such as hunting, fishing, and motorized use, and how those traditional uses were now being impeded. Several mentioned the traditional use clause in the preserve’s enabling legislation as rationale for protection of certain uses.

**Topic Question 3: This plan will provide guidance on secondary trails, campsites, and camping areas within the preserve. Do you have comments or suggestions about the placement of secondary trails, campsites, or camping areas? If you have suggestions for secondary trail locations, please describe the specific destination you would like your suggested secondary trail to lead.**

Many commenters provided thoughts on access to specific areas in the backcountry of Big Cypress National Preserve. These suggestions were most often provided within topic questions 3, and through the map markup sessions held during the public scoping workshop. Topic question 3 summarizes the general types of destinations, trails, and backcountry access considerations mentioned by commenters. The geospatial comment summary found at the end of this report provides detailed information on specific backcountry trails and destinations requested by the public during this scoping period.

**Access is limited by existing off-road vehicle (ORV) trail network.** Many commenters felt that access to the backcountry was significantly limited due to the closure of much of the secondary trail network during the summer of 2013. Commenters often requested that most or all closed trails be re-opened for public use. Commenters noted that because of relatively recent requirements that ORV travel be on designated trails, there is a need for an extensive trail network to reach a variety of destinations that they have traditionally had access to. The Bear Island unit was mentioned specifically by some commenters as needing an expanded secondary trail network. Commenters noted that without this secondary trail network their access to much of the preserve is essentially cut off. Some commenters also noted that they are not physically able to access many areas of the preserve because of the difficulties presented by the challenging terrain.

Quote: *“I would like to see every established ORV trail that exists, be usable by those that wish to use them, period.”*

Quote: *“If we are to be stuck with traveling on designated trails, which are guaranteed to leave a permanent scar, than we are in need of many, many secondary trails.”*

Quote: *“I would like to see more Secondary trails that lead deeper into the preserve (throughout the preserve) due to the lack of access. There are many areas of the preserve that can only be reached by foot and is not feasible or possible for most people.”*

**Campsite location and Design.** Many commenters noted that dispersed camping has been the traditional means of camping in the preserve, and that they are opposed to concentrated and designated camping, as is the case in the Bear Island unit. Some commenters expressed concern that limiting camping to designated areas is contrary to the traditional use language in the preserve’s enabling legislation. Comments related to camping often cited the need to be provided access to higher terrain within the preserve, which provides the most suitable areas for camping. Commenters commonly expressed frustration that the current secondary trail network and camping regulations do not allow them access to camping areas on higher ground, including many areas where they have traditionally camped.

Quote: *“The biggest issue for campers is that the designated trails do not run through the high and dry locations. I think some thought should go into allowing campers to drive 50 yards off the road onto a pine island in order to establish a camping site.”*

Quote: *“I think camping should be allowed anywhere a dry spot can be found. I see people camping almost in the road because they cannot drive off the trail to set up. Something should be set in place so ORVs can drive off the trail to a dry area to camp.”*

Quote: *“Campsites at designated locations are ok for the seldom visitor that doesn’t know the backcountry or is handicapped and needs this, but I must stress that tent camping anywhere one wishes is awesome and is a traditional use.”*

**Desire other types of backcountry opportunities.** Some commenters asked for the preserve to consider providing a wider range of backcountry opportunities, including hiking, and access by street-legal vehicles. Commenters requested that access for street-legal vehicles specifically be given to allow those without ORVs to access primitive camping areas. One commenter also requested access to the airstrip at the Oasis Visitor Center to support recreational aviators.

Quote: *“It would be nice to provide more trails free of ORVs to provide for backpacking. It would also be nice to have street legal vehicle road access to primitive camping areas for other than ORVs.”*

**Desire to visit destinations with traditional, cultural, or family ties.** Commenters often referenced a desire to access destinations they have traditionally traveled to including historic camps, traditional camping areas on higher terrain, areas where they have traditionally hunted, or areas with outstanding hiking and wildlife viewing opportunities.

Quote: *“...adequate secondary trails must be provided to meet the needed and required access off of primary trails to camping, cultural sites, hunting areas and other important recreation sites.”*

**Feel that the current trail system is adequate.** Some commenters felt that the existing trail network, with the exception of Bear Island, was adequate.

Quote: *“I believe the current trails (with the exception of the closure at Bear Island) allow access via main and secondary trails then by foot to almost all areas of the preserve (WMA) in the same day.”*

**Separate Uses to Improve Visitor Experience.** Commenters often expressed a desire for the National Park Service to separate hiking, biking, and backpacking opportunities from ORV use and in some cases hunting. Reasons cited include a feeling of safety, a desire to enjoy natural quiet without the presence of ORVs, a need to maintain more desirable trail conditions for hiking, and concern that ORV’s damage vegetation and scare wildlife adjacent to the trails. Many commenters specifically mentioned a desire for the Florida National Scenic Trail to be separated from ORV use.

Quote: *“My suggestion is to keep adequate separation between areas for primitive camping and hiking and areas permitting ORV and hunting activity. The noise, smell and gouged trails associated with ORV and hunting activities detracts greatly from the enjoyment of the wilderness for the hiker seeking a peaceful, quiet atmosphere.”*

Quote: *“We should ensure that we have a continuous foot trail across the preserve off of the main trails. This can be stitched together from secondary trails and some unknown or forgotten trails. There’s many good locations for campsites. The present Florida trail is a road walk.”*

**Should incorporate previous trail requests into this planning effort.** Many commenters felt that the information received from previous efforts by the National Park Service to collect information on desired trail locations should be used to inform this planning effort. Similarly, some commenters felt that it was difficult for them to describe in detail all the trails and destinations that are important to them within the relatively short public scoping period. Some commenters recommended that trail identification and designation be an iterative process based on public input and/or the Off-Road Vehicle Advisory Committee.

Quote: *“I have submitted many times over the years my recommendations for needed secondary trails and formally request that you use these recommendations to establish a reasonable ORV trail system.”*

**Trail Design.** Some commenters mentioned a need for secondary trails to branch, loop, or connect to adjacent trails, campsites, or other destinations to create a more efficient trail system, while reducing the overall mileage of the trail network. A number of commenters also requested that trails not be stabilized with rock or by other means because swamp buggies were designed to handle rough unstabilized trail surfaces, and doing so negatively impacts their backcountry experience.

Quote: *“I understand we simply cannot drive anywhere we desire and there is no valid reason to do so. I also see no reason why secondary trails cannot loop back into primary trails as allowing this saves wear and tear on the existing roads. Additionally, I think secondary trails can have other secondary trails that branch off of them. Kind of like the interstate system that leads to state highways all the way down to local roads. While this might sound like I am asking for lots of additional roads to be opened, it is not.”*

Quote: *“The NPS is not to put rock on ORV trails, except in very specific situations for very short distances. Swamp buggies are designed to travel through the swamps and do not require “rocked” roads to travel.”*

**Travel between Units of Big Cypress National Preserve.** Commenters often cited a desire to be provided access between various units of the preserve, including the addition.

**Travel between Private Camps.** Some commenters expressed a need to have connecting trails between private camps. Commenters referenced a need to check on each other's property, ease of access in case of emergency, and for social visits as was their tradition prior to the establishment of the current secondary trail network. Commenters felt that closing trails between camps forces them to travel much greater distances across the designated trail network to reach the same destinations, and that if trails were provided between camps it would greatly reduce their travel time. Similarly, some private camp owners commented that access to their camp through a single trail is overly restrictive and limits their ability to recreate and be provided access to and from their property.

Quote: *"The new trail system has made travel from neighbors to neighbors completely unreasonable (sometimes adding several miles to a 1/2 mile trip)"*

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**Topic Question 4: What are the most important issues affecting Big Cypress National Preserve? Issues can be concerns, opportunities, or topics needing further discussion.**

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**Access (General).** Many commenters would like to see access to various areas of the preserve, and the preserve in general opened up. Some of these commenters would like to be able to hunt, fish, and camp in more areas of the preserve and would like additional access to secondary trails. Some feel that the public has been left out of too much of the preserve and express concerns that every year access becomes more constrained. Many commenters would like this planning effort to ensure that their traditional uses of the preserve be allowed into the future. Other commenters expressed that it is important to ensure resources are protected while still maintaining the same level of access that has been allowed previously. Access issues that are more specific in nature are outlined in their own category.

Quote: *"I feel a grave injustice has been given the residents of Florida by the NPS by locking the public out of entirely too much of the park and in particular, eliminating much of the traditional public use of the area such as hunting, airboating, buggy riding and general recreation."*

**Camping.** Commenters would like to see the preservation of established private camps and would like to see the continuation of dispersed camping. One commenter noted they would prefer dispersed camping over designated campsites with improvements. Commenters articulate that campers should be allowed to drive their ORV off road to camp. Additionally, they would like to see this use be allowed at all times with no fees or additional regulations associated with it.

Quote: *"The Back Country plan must allow for the continuation of dispersed use camping wherever a person wishes without fees."*

**Commercial Activity.** Some commenters are concerned about activities in the preserve that could become commercialized. They are concerned that commercial activities, if authorized, will begin to direct management decisions and will draw additional visitation to this unit. Other commenter(s) noted that they are concerned about the financial viability of their business.

Quote: *“Historically, it has been shown that when this action starts it is small but before long these commercial ventures become the driving force to direct all management actions in the future.”*

**Communication.** One commenter noted that programs that have good relationships with ORV recreationists will benefit the environment.

Quote: *“With a program that has better relations involving ORV recreationists, you would be surprised at the benefits to the environment.”*

**Environmentalism.** Some commenters felt that environmentalist groups were the biggest issue facing the preserve. These commenters articulated that they feel these groups are unfairly being catered to by preserve managers. They feel that the concerns of environmental groups are overriding the concerns of others to maintain traditional uses and cultural practices.

Quote: *“The need to stop allowing out of state environmental from running the show. I understand the need to preserve what is there. But what about the people who have lived here and fished, hunted and camped a good portion of their lives in this area.”*

**Extractive industry.** Some commenters are concerned about the return or continuation of commercial extractive industries in the preserve, specifically oil wells. Commenters believe that these commercial interests do more damage to the preserve than other uses.

Quote: *“In just the past 7 years swamp buggy “scars” in closed trails have all healed and are unrecognized as “scars”, yet there are still signs of past logging, reclaimed roads, reclaimed oil wells and farm fields as far south as New River Strand.”*

**Fees.** Commenters would like to see fees either maintained at their current level or reduced. Those who would like to see the fees reduced feel that the high price of fees unnecessarily prohibit low income visitors as well as young visitors.

**Increase Access for ORV use.** Many comments articulated a desire to have additional trails opened specifically for ORV use or to have secondary trails reopened for ORV use. These commenters would like as many areas opened to ORV use as possible. The reasons cited for why these trails should be opened were varied and summaries of the most prevalent rationales are included below.

**Accessibility.** Commenters noted that the trail system should consider providing adequate secondary trails so that those visitors with mobility impairments and elders can still access areas that have been traditionally used for hunting. As some visitors cannot carry hunting equipment, secondary trails should be provided for them to use with ORVs to help transport themselves and equipment to and from hunting sites.

Quote: *“The Back Country plan must allow a plan for our disabled, mobility impaired and elders the ability to use motorized vehicles off the designated trails in order to continue to practice the traditional uses.”*

**Safety.** With the elimination of some secondary trails, some commenters are concerned that if there were to be an emergency, neighbors would have to travel greater distances to provide emergency assistance.

Quote: *“As it is now, some land owners must travel twice the distance between camps and this would not be a good situation if there was a real emergency. I believe this safety issue could be eliminated with the addition of secondary trails.”*

**Infrastructure.** A few commenters had issues related to infrastructure issues in the preserve. The issue of needing access to potable water was raised and it was suggested that pitcher pumps be maintained or reinstalled. Also, some commenters noted that they would like additional signage at trailheads to alert hikers to potential risks along the trail.

**Invasive Species.** Many commenters are concerned about nonnative and invasive species that are appearing in the preserve. These commenters are concerned that these invasive species will change the landscape of the preserve if something is not done to control or remove them.

Quote: *“I think invasive, non native plants can quickly become a serious problem if we don’t keep on top the situation.”*

**Litigation.** Many commenters believe that the biggest threat to the preserve is litigation. Most of these commenters believe that litigation regarding the preserve intends to change the preserve in ways that are inconsistent with its enabling legislation. Many of these commenters believe that the interests represented by legal challenges come from citizens who are from other areas of the country and are unfamiliar with the purpose and issues relevant to the preserve. These commenters believe that litigation has consumed NPS managers in this area and as a result has led to over-regulation of the preserve. These commenters also believe that litigation comes from “anti-hunting” and “anti-off road use” advocates and is aimed at eliminating traditional uses such as ORV riding and hunting.

Quote: *“My biggest concern is the continued, culturally destructive litigations constantly being filed by groups who would like to turn Big Cypress National Preserve into something other than intended. These groups seem determined to stop all traditional uses such as hunting, fishing, frogging and ORV use in the preserve.”*

Quote: *“[Big Cyprus] has been inundated with lawsuits and litigation from groups of people who have never even stepped foot inside the preserve. The suits are trying to change the use of the land to something it wasn’t intended to be. South Florida has a very unique wilderness and access to this land is not like other preserves in the country.”*

**NPS Management.** Some commenters articulated concerns with the way the preserve is being managed by the National Park Service. More specifically, their comments state that the National Park Service is “over regulating” the area and as a result is systematically placing more restrictions on traditional uses over environmental concerns. Some of these commenters suggest turning over management of the preserve to the State of Florida.

Quote: *“The biggest issue facing users of the Big Cypress is the federal government not following the intent of the legislation that created the preserve and allowing traditional activities to continue. Over restrictive rules are taking away the enjoyment of traditional use”*

Quote: “NPS staff has tried their best for many years but neither the staff or those they consult with have shown the ability so far to beat the bigots that continually use Federal laws to entangle management decisions in the sticky web of Federalism and those who are expert at exploiting its imperfections for their own gain”

**ORV Regulations and Closures.** Some commenters feel that excessive restrictions are being placed on ORV use within the preserve. Some commenters feel that the regulations and closures are arbitrary in nature and that such regulations should be based on science and common sense. More specifically, commenters would like this planning process to re-evaluate the current hours of operation and the 60-day closure. They argue that these regulations restrict rather than enhance recreational values and make it difficult to start weekend recreational outings after working hours on Fridays.

Quote: “The unreasonable 10:00 P.M. to 5:00 A.M. ORV operating ban should be eliminated. This is a restricting impossible hardship for people to reach there camp or camping destinations after work, in many cases there is a 5 or 6 hour ride coming or going, also 5:00 AM ORV ban discriminates and discourages hunters. As a hunter myself, I can tell you there is no way to leave camp in most situations, ride only 1 or 2 hours, then walk in 1/2 mile or more and be in a tree stand by daylight. NPS had no public input for this policy.”

**Parking.** Inadequate parking for a variety of types of vehicles (ORVs, personal vehicles, vehicles with trailers) at some locations in the preserve has been noted. Also, commenters noted potential traffic and congestion issues that could result in changes to parking locations/allocations.

Quote: “I have tried to park at Burns Lake in the past only to be told there are no more available ORV parking places. BICY has 2000 ORV users and only built 6 parking places at said location and only a couple more at Skillet. . .”

**Pollution.** Some commenters said that the biggest threat to the preserve is pollution. Most of these commenters cited noise pollution from ORV use as being their primary concern; however, others included farm runoff and the proximity of urbanization. Other commenters refuted this notion by noting that there is more noise and chemical pollution that comes from vehicles on roads adjacent to the preserve than comes from ORVs.

Quote: “There need to be areas preserved that are free from noise pollution and machines, and that are safe to visit.”

Quote: “. . .trucks (fuel, oil, chemicals etc) cars, and busses travel these 3 roads that cut through and surround the preserve spilling oils, fluids and any other harmful chemicals that travel directly into the preserve. There is no barrier, no filtration system nothing. All day everyday this occurs with not a word from any groups on how this effects [sic] the preserve. This is why all of the so called environmental issues that have been brought up against the use of ORVS needs to be dismissed. I am not a scientist by any means, but I have enough common sense to know what’s going to pollute the Big Cypress and it’s not an ORV.”

**Prescribed Burning.** Commenters agreed that the prescribed burning program should be increased to help reduce fuel loads.

Quote: *“I believe that the burning program should be increased to help reduce the amount of fuel that is building up in most grass prairies in our area.”*

**Reducing or Eliminating ORV Use.** Some commenters expressed that ORV use should be reduced or eliminated from the preserve. These commenters feel that ORVs cause damage to forests and swamps that are not able to recover. Additionally, commenters noted that ORVs often disturb wildlife by interrupting natural patterns of behavior. Finally, some commenters noted that ORVs cause damage to trails that leads to significant trail erosion. Specifically it was noted that ORVs should be limited at Bear Island.

Quote: *“If activities such as hunting and utilizing motorized vehicles are permitted [sic], this beautiful and pristine area will suffer erosion and other grave environmental implications. I urgently ask you to please reverse the decision to open Big Cypress Reserve to public use. Please keep the safety and continuation of the Big Cypress Reserve assured.”*

**Traditional Use and Gladesmen Culture.** Some commenters expressed that the closure of secondary trails has restricted their ability to access areas of the preserve that have been traditionally used for hunting, camping, and other activities. They articulate that this “assault on traditional users” is the most important issue facing the preserve. Those in favor of reopening the secondary trails articulate that the ability to access these areas via secondary trails is necessary to pass on the Gladesmen culture. These commenters are concerned that the Gladesmen culture is not being recognized as an ethnographic community when it comes to planning efforts. Other commenters commend the NPS on supporting Gladesmen through the Annual Swamp Heritage Festival.

Quote: *“These activities are legitimate uses of both secondary and primary trails. Events have occurred in our lives that have had great impacts and make all the requested destinations of the secondary trails special and necessary to pass on the opportunity for our future Gladesmen and outdoor enthusiasts to experience. The survival of our culture depends on whether or not the NPS will support the enabling legislation.”*

Quote: *“I commend the NPS for their Annual Swamp Heritage Festival. The festival recognizes and celebrates the longtime local gladesmen, gladeswomen, outdoorsmen and their cultural heritage.”*

**Trails.** Many commenters expressed that the limited number of trails currently open is the biggest issue confronting the preserve. More specifically, commenters would like to see more trails opened for ORV use, and they argue that the trail system as a whole needs to be overhauled. Commenters suggested that the evaluation of the trail system should consider whether or not street-legal vehicles could be allowed on some sections of some trails to access property. Others commented that the ORV trails are an issue as they interrupt a true wilderness experience. Trail maintenance should also be addressed.

Quote: *“The limited number 400 miles of primary ORV trails in the BICY is in no way enough mileage to have a reasonable trail system, this was done without science and to discourage ORV users of the BICY. The primary trail mileage must be increased to insure [sic] there will be a reasonable primary trail system complying with ORV general managment [sic] plan.”*

*Florida Trail.* Commenters would like more information on how the Florida Trail would be rerouted. Another commenter would like to see the Florida Trail managed as a corridor.

*Secondary Trails.* A number of commenters would like to see all the secondary trails reopened and made available for use again. In addition to this, they would like to see the secondary trails looped into primary trails. A commenter suggested that old tram roads and trails could be reopened as secondary trails to increase the trail network. Additionally, other comments suggest that the definitions of what is considered a “destination” should be revisited to ensure that the definition is inclusive of special places where events have occurred and places of historical and traditional use. Some of these may include places where visitors ride, park, walk, hunt, view wildlife, fish, and frog.

Quote: *“To increase secondary trails to provide more dispersed use that would greatly lessen [sic] the impact associated with the environmental areas as well as provide more freedom and access to areas of the Preserve to engage in traditional use activities.”*

**Wilderness Designation.** Commenters expressed split views on whether or not portions of the preserve should be designated as wilderness. While there is some support for this issue, other commenters expressed that there does not seem to be much benefit to wildlife through this designation as these are previously disturbed lands where little wildlife is observed even though there has been little human presence in these areas for many years.

Quote: *“The opportunity to officially designate a portion of the Preserve as Congressionally recognized Wilderness would be one my top priorities.”*

Quote: *“These areas have already been logged, grazed by cattle, and have been trafficked by ORVs. These are not undisturbed lands. . . . This is an area with no human presence since the 1940s, with the exception of a few NPS airboats. This area should be overrun with wildlife. Therefore, creating Wilderness Areas in the BCNP is of no benefit to the wildlife.”*

**Wildlife.** Many commenters stated that the biggest issue for the preserve regards the abundance and health of wildlife. Some commenters feel that it is important to maintain habitat for the Florida panther. Other commenters noted that there is a need to protect wildlife from overpopulation of the panther and black bear. Some commenters feel that there has been a decline in the small animal populations (raccoons, possums, armadillos, etc.) as well as the deer herd. Others believe that there are more animals in the preserve now than there had been previously and that the wildlife populations have not been affected by secondary trails, but rather use the secondary trails along with visitors. Another commenter would like to see wild hogs reintroduced (rather than eradicated) as they eat snakes and provide a good food source for panthers.

Quote: *“There is no question that today there are more deer, turkeys, bears, and panthers than at any other time that I can recall so it is difficult to believe that trails are somehow a threat to the environment.”*

Quote: *“Protection of wildlife from over population of the Florida panther and black bears. I no longer see any raccoons, possums or armadillos in the areas where they were once abundant and the deer herd has been greatly affected.”*

**Youth Access.** A few commenters noted that current regulations on ORV use restricts use for youth visitors. Concerns have been expressed about the viability of continuing traditions if youth are not included in these activities.

Quote: *“The ORV plan has excluded our youth the past 14 years. That is enough time to decimate the culture by losing a generation of our youth. The Back Country plan must revise the ban on unlicensed minors and allow our youth to participate as we have done for generations.’ This is considered a rite of passage among us.”*

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**Topic Question 5: Imagine you are visiting the preserve 20 years from now. What aspects of the preserve do you hope will continue into the future? What would you like to be different about the preserve in the future?**

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**Access.** Many commenters expressed that 20 years from now they would like to see the preserve remain as it is today but with more accessibility and availability for people to continue enjoying the preserve. Many commenters valued the opportunity to continue enjoying hunting, fishing, dispersed backcountry camping, bird-watching, among other activities. Some commenters expressed concern that overly restrictive regulations and an inadequate number of ORVs will hinder current and future generations from seeing and experiencing Big Cypress’s wild lands and backcountry. Commenters expressed a desire to see more ORV trails that connect all units in the preserve. One commenter would like to see more secondary trails and less people. A few commenters expressed skepticism that any of the activities they currently enjoyed will be accessible in the future.

Quote: *“I would like to see it much as it is now, with access to all sections via the road system.”*

Quote: *“I certainly would like to see traditional use back in full effect into the future to include buggies, airboats, and hunting. I would prefer much less regulation throughout the entire park.”*

**Improved condition from today.** A few commenters would like 20 years from now to see the preserve as it was 30 years ago. One commenter noted a desire to see the watershed of Big Cypress “intact and restored” and the different groups collaborating for the protection and enjoyment of the preserve. A few commenters suggested expansion of educational programs to help achieve this.

Quote: *“20 years from now I would wish to see the watershed of Big Cypress intact and restored. I would wish to see swamp buggies, airboats, hunters, naturalists, camp owners, birders and hikers enjoying the Big Cypress and respecting each other and continuing to work with the Preserve and its staff.”*

**Infrastructure.** A couple commenters noted a desire for additional infrastructure including a platform campground for amateur astronomers, airstrip for aviator access, and wells with hand pumps at established campsites.

**Management of Preserve.** Multiple commenters expressed concern with the way the National Park Service manages the preserve including the “many restrictions, gates, rules put in place,” deference to nonlocal users on management issues, and building unnecessary infrastructure. A couple of commenters suggested turning over management of the preserve to the state. One commenter noted that the National Park Service is doing a “great job” managing the preserve. A few commenters would like to see “better land management” including better burn programs, nonnative plant control and removal, and wildlife management.

Quote: *“I can only hope my family and I are able to enjoy the Big Cypress in 20 years. In my short time of 28 years enjoying [sic] these lands I have seen so many restrictions, gates, rules put in place that it makes it difficult to see a future in the Big Cypress. In the future I would like the park to be govern by the people that acutally [sic] use the lands instead of a national park system. More access to the woods and free uses of the lands to ride our ORV.”*

Quote: *“Quit builing [sic] roads, Loop Road comes to mind, that are not meant to be in the backcountry[sic].”*

**Traditional use of the preserve continued.** Commenters emphasized the importance of maintaining the historic recreational usage in the preserve including hunting, fishing, hiking, and ORV use. Many commenters stated they would like future generations to have the same opportunities to enjoy and explore Big Cypress in the same way they have done before the National Park Service “over restricted these pleasures.” Commenters expressed concern with the viability of continuing and passing down recreational historical usage without appropriate ORV access.

Quote: *“Hopefully all of the existing trails from the last 20 yrs will be open and our tradition of hunting the glades is still alive and well for future generations.”*

Quote: *“Preservation of the Big Cypress culture of the Gladesmen that started the initiative to create the Preserve.”*

**Wilderness.** Many commenters expressed support for continued protection of wilderness characteristics of the backcountry. Commenters felt that it is important to maintain some of the pristine nature of the preserve where visitors can escape city life and enjoy peace and quiet with friends and family. A few commenters would like to see less motorized recreation, decreased ORV and airboat scars, and a stop to the expansion of exploratory drilling. One commenter also expressed opposition to designating wilderness in the preserve.

Quote: *“I hope that we could retain some of the pristine nature of the preserve.”*

Quote: *“I am hoping the park is not further opened up for exploratory drilling.”*

Quote: *“I would like to see that MAN is part of nature. In my opinion NPS is doing everything possible to make this place a “wilderness area”, something that congress never intended and they are the only one’s by law that can do this.”*

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**Topic Question 6: Do you have any other comments related to the Backcountry Access Plan / Environmental Impact Statement in Big Cypress National Preserve?**

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Commenters used question six to reiterate many of the comments made in response to the first five questions. The following summary includes comments not previously covered by the preceding summaries.

**Bureaucracy.** A few commenters expressed concern and disapproval of creating more rules and bureaucracy for the preserve. One commenter believes there is sufficient room for the different recreational groups including hunters, bikers, and hikers, while another commenter cited that part of escaping from the city also means escaping “all of the rules, forms, and processes.”

*Quote: “Please don’t create more rules and bureaucracy for the people who want to enjoy nature. Part of escaping the urban jungle is escaping all of the rules, forms, and processes. Let’s keep it more “Florida” than “California”.”*

**Compliance with the National Historic Preservation Act.** The Florida state historic preservation officer (SHPO) stated that the proposed plan will need to comply with section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966. The SHPO recommended an inventory of possible impacts to cultural resources under each alternative in the draft environmental impact statement. The SHPO also stated, “in order to prevent impacts to cultural resources, recorded archeological sites should be avoided and a phase I archeological survey should be conducted in areas that have not been subjected to systematic archeological survey, if those areas could be disturbed or impacted as a result of the proposed action.”

**Conservation organizations cosigned letter [Center for Biological Diversity, Sierra Club, South Florida Wildlands Association, and WildEarth Guardians].** These organizations along with two individuals submitted the following scoping comments and recommendations: (1) this planning effort is “completely unnecessary and exorbitantly expensive,” threatens to violate the substantive legal mandates that apply to the preserve, and is in violation of NEPA; (2) requested the preserve to conduct a wilderness study for the original preserve to guide the agency’s decision-making process concerning backcountry access; (3) while working on the proposed plan, close all recreational ORV trails in excess of the 2000 ORV Plan’s limitations to avoid ongoing violations of binding NEPA regulations; (4) adhere to the definitions, standards, and prohibitions implemented by the National Park Service in the 2000 ORV Plan; and (5) analyze various alternatives to the proposed action that would result in lesser environmental impacts than the current status quo.

**Human presence.** A few commenters expressed that the use of ORVs and human presence help with resource management as hunting allows control of invasive species. More specifically, one commenter stated that the preserve’s wildlife and habitat would be healthier if “the privileges of buggy, airboat, and hunting access” were allowed.

*Quote: “Many of these issues today could have been avoided with increased human presence. For example, exotic reptiles would have been stopped in their tracks had residents been allowed the privileges of buggy, airboat, and hunting access.”*

**Local input.** A handful of commenters emphasized that in order for the ORV trail system to be successful, local knowledge including property owners, ORV Advisory Committee, and Florida Game Commission, should be used to choose trails more wisely. One commenter added that public education of responsible usage should be increased. Another commenter suggested holding annual landowners meetings to address concerns, suggestions, and questions.

Quote: *“If the trail system is to be a success in the BCNP, it needs use the local knowledge of the people that are acuatlly [sic] in the woods. This would allow the NPS to choose trails more wisely and open more secondary trails which have destinations.”*

**Management suggestions.** One commenter suggested affixing numbers to the top of buggies to improve law enforcement. Other commenters suggested keeping a log of all agencies or contractors that use ORVs off designated trails to help when litigation issues arise.

**Miscellaneous.** One commenter would like to see additional designated backpacking campsites and access from I-75 for foot traffic. Another commenter would like the preserve to study the impact of tracked vehicles, PSI, and weight limitations of ORVs on topography. A commenter noted that oil drillers ought to put up noise suppression walls. Another commenter noted that the panthers in South Florida are not true “Florida panthers” and therefore the Endangered Species Act protections should not apply.

**National Parks Conservation Association letter.** The NPCA submitted the following comments: (1) conduct a new Wilderness Eligibility Determination for the original preserve and likely the addition as well; (2) the purpose and significance of the proposed plan misleads commenters as to the governing standards of the planning effort as governing laws are incorrectly interpreted; (3) the planning effort is likely to create more disputes if its intent is to expand the original preserve’s primary trail system under the 2000 ORV plan; (4) NPCA encourages the preserve to increase outreach and engagement with the nonmotorized and nonhunting visitor community to enhance opportunities for such activities.

**Revisit definitions.** A couple of commenters noted that the definitions of destination and campsites should be reconsidered for broader and inclusive terms.

Quote: *“Reconsider the definitions of primary, secondary trails. Destination is the place I am traveling to, by any mode of travel. Flora and fauna viewing, historical memories, there are a multitude of reasons for my destination.”*

**Support effort.** Members of the Florida Wildlife Federation and the Florida Trail Association expressed support to the preserve in their effort to create a Backcountry Access Plan / Environmental Impact Statement, acknowledging the “need to balance recreational use with the protection and preservation of the natural and cultural resources” of Big Cypress.

Quote: *“The Florida Wildlife Federation which was instrumental in working to establish Big Cypress supports Superintendent Pedro Ramos and his staff in their efforts to create a recreational backcountry use plan.”*

**Text edits.** The Everglades Coordinating Council suggested the following clarifying edits:

*Draft Objectives of the Plan. Quote: “[Evaluate the suitability of all secondary ORV trails and non-motorized trails in the original Preserve to determine if they are suitable and adequate for the purposes for which they are established.] “[The preceding] language as presented appears pre-decisional in stipulating an objective of re-routing the FNST, yet the stated objective of first bullet only indicates a need to evaluate the suitability of existing hiking trails. Has the need already been determined through inter-agency discussions? Perhaps the item can be clarified along the lines of, “Evaluate the need and potential enhancements of re-routing the Florida National Scenic Trail within the Preserve, in collaboration with the U.S. Forest Service.”*

*Quote: “Clarification should be made whether the phrase “entire Preserve” in the Backcountry Access Plan is intended to include front country campgrounds as well. ECC feels there is a need for this plan to address traditional camping opportunities associated with hunting activities, especially in the Bear Island campground and disbursed areas throughout the preserve. For this reason we feel it is shortsighted and inconsistent with the draft need for the plan to omit “hunting, fishing and frogging” from the specific activities listed.”*

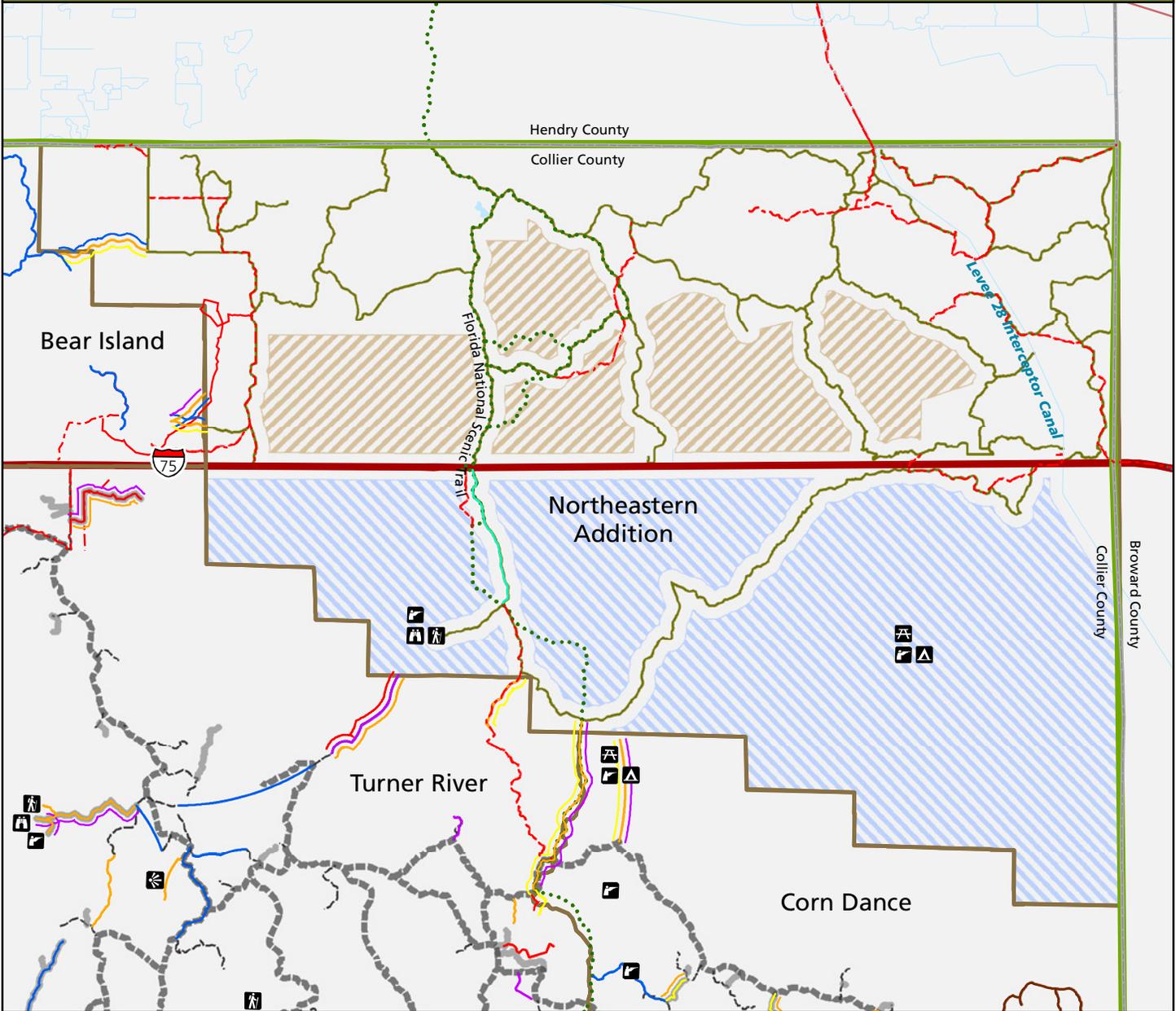
## Geospatial Comment Summary

In response to question three and during the map markup sessions at the public open house events, commenters provided suggestions for a number of trails and destinations that the National Park Service should consider during this planning effort. These suggestions ranged from favorite hiking and backpacking trails, to historic camps or areas of cultural or historic interest in the backcountry that commenters would like access restored. Destinations that commenters commonly requested ORV access to include hunting and hiking areas, areas suitable for camping and picnicking, and areas with exceptional scenic beauty or wildlife viewing opportunities. Some commenters also requested trails providing access to their private camps or between neighboring private camps.

The series of maps below depicts specifically requested destinations, as well as specific trails that commenters were interested in. In many cases commenters specified the types of activities to be found at the terminus of a trail, rather than specifying the destination itself. Therefore trails are symbolized by both the type of travel (hiking or multiuse) and the activities that commenters suggested would take place at the terminus of the trail. Because commenters often suggested several types of activities that would take place at the terminus of a trail, some trails are symbolized more than once to indicate the activities that were suggested.

These maps reflect the complexity of interests expressed by commenters during the public scoping period. The information provided will be used as reference material for the NPS project team during the alternatives development process.

# NORTHEASTERN ADDITION - Public Scoping Comment Summary



## LEGEND

## PRESERVE OVERVIEW

- Secondary Trails
- Primary Trails
- Closed Secondary Trails as of 6/3/13
- Addition Trails
- Florida National Scenic Trail
- County Boundary
- Waterways
- Waterbodies
- Eligible Wilderness
- Proposed Wilderness
- Management Units
- Preserve Boundary

### Recommended Trails and Destinations

- Campsite
- Hiking
- Hunting
- Scenic Viewing
- Wildlife Viewing
- Hiking Trail
- Hunting Access
- Camping Access
- Hiking Access
- ORV Access
- Scenic Area Access
- Wildlife Viewing Access
- Private Camp Access



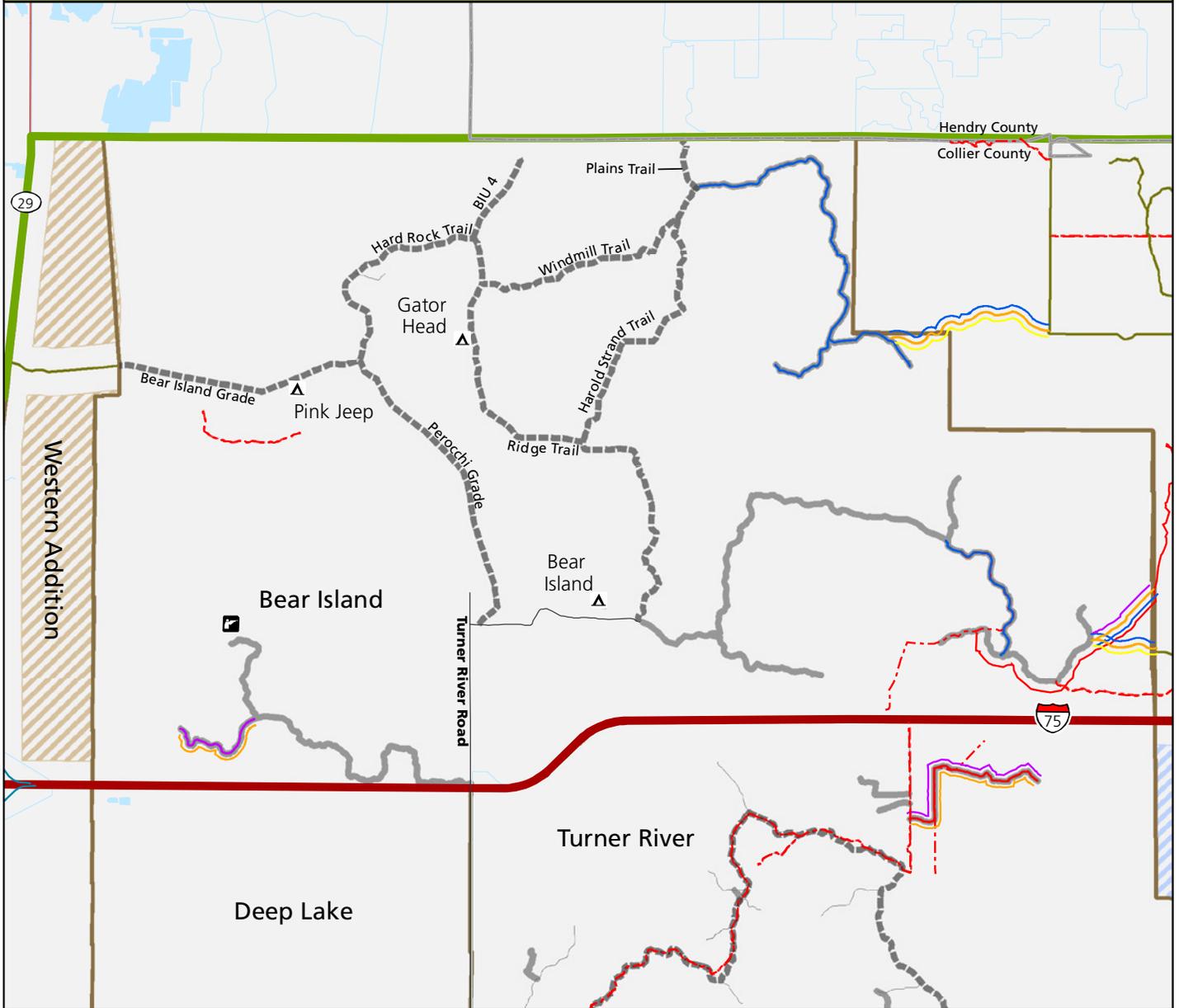
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May 2014



# BEAR ISLAND - Public Scoping Comment Summary



## LEGEND

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| ▲ Campground                               | <b>Recommended Trails and Destinations</b> |
| — Hiking Trails                            | 🏠 Hunting                                  |
| — Secondary Trails                         | --- Hiking Trail                           |
| --- Primary Trails                         | — Hunting Access                           |
| --- Closed Secondary Trails as of 6/3/2013 | — Picnicing                                |
| — Addition Trails                          | — Public Education                         |
| ... Florida National Scenic Trail          | — Camping Access                           |
| ~ Waterways                                | — Hiking Access                            |
| 🌊 Waterbodies                              | — ORV Access                               |
| 🏞 Eligible Wilderness                      | — Scenic Area Access                       |
| 🏗 Proposed Wilderness                      | — Wildlife Viewing Access                  |
| 🏠 Management Units                         | — Private Camp Access                      |
| 🌿 Preserve Boundary                        |  |



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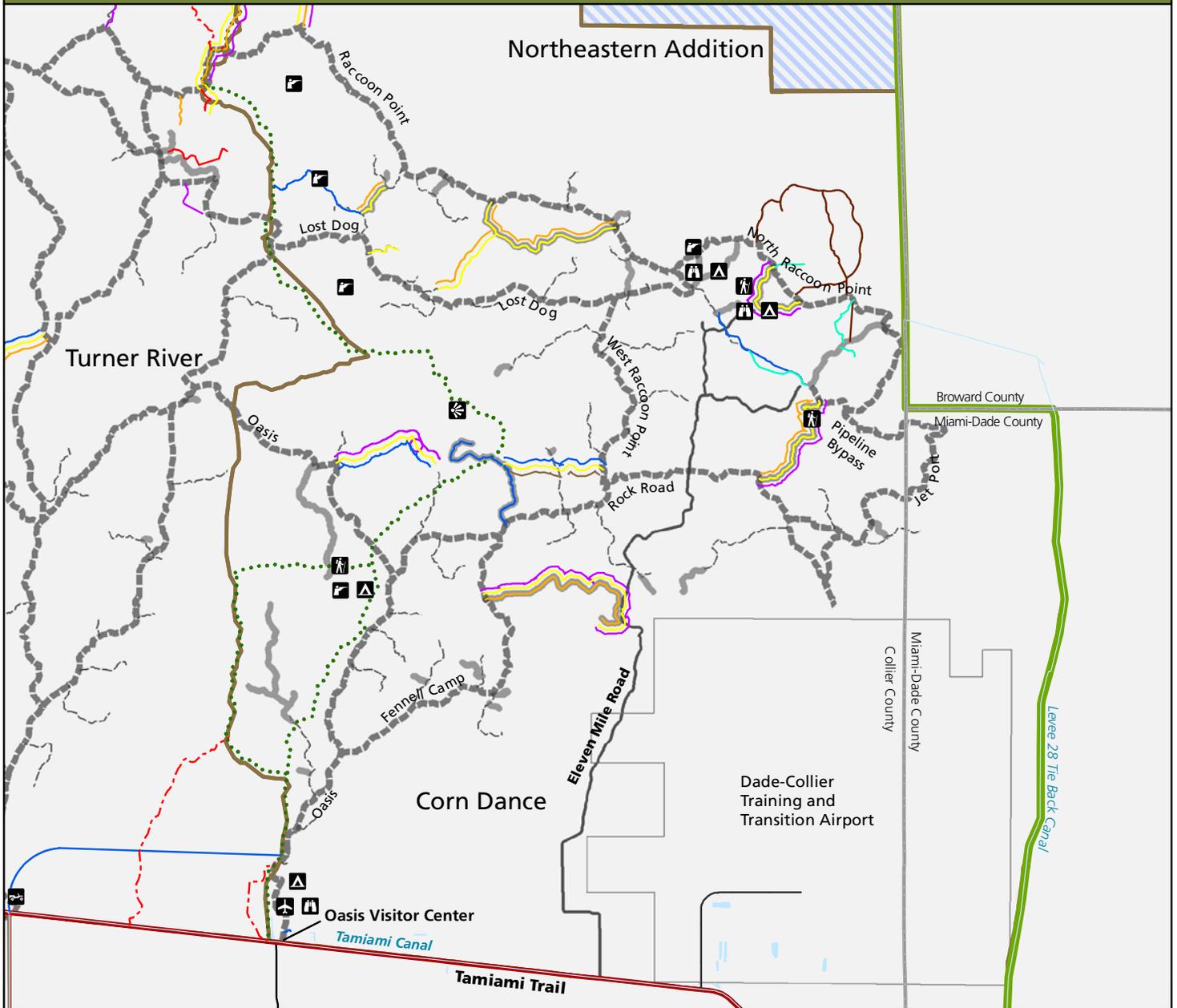
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## PRESERVE OVERVIEW



# CORN DANCE UNIT - Public Scoping Comment Summary



## LEGEND

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>--- Secondary Trails</li> <li>▬ Primary Trails</li> <li>▬ Closed Secondary Trails as of 6/3/2013</li> <li>▬ Florida National Scenic Trail</li> <li>▬ Eleven Mile Road</li> <li>▬ County Boundary</li> <li>▬ Waterways</li> <li>▬ Waterbodies</li> <li>▬ Eligible Wilderness</li> <li>▬ Proposed Wilderness</li> <li>▬ Management Units</li> <li>▬ Preserve Boundary</li> </ul> | <p><b>Recommended Trails and Destinations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✈ Airstrip</li> <li>⚠ Campsite</li> <li>🏕 Hunting</li> <li>🚙 ORV</li> <li>🚶 Hiking Trail</li> <li>🏹 Hunting Access</li> <li>🌳 Picnicing</li> <li>🏠 Camping Access</li> <li>🚶 Hiking Access</li> <li>🚙 ORV Access</li> <li>🌳 Scenic Area Access</li> <li>👁 Wildlife Viewing Access</li> <li>🏠 Private Camp Access</li> </ul> |
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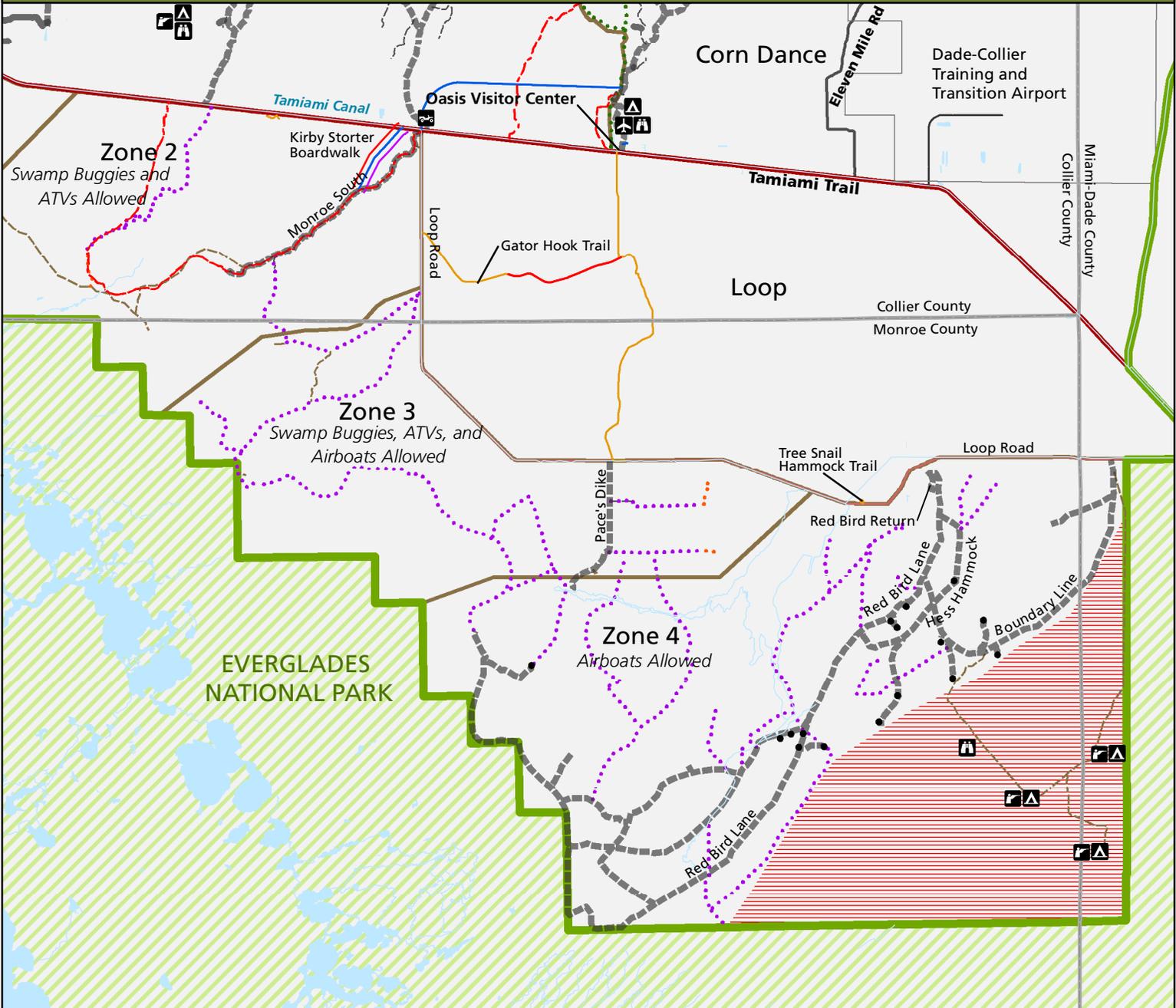
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May 2014

## PRESERVE OVERVIEW



# STAIRSTEPS UNIT - Public Scoping Comment Summary



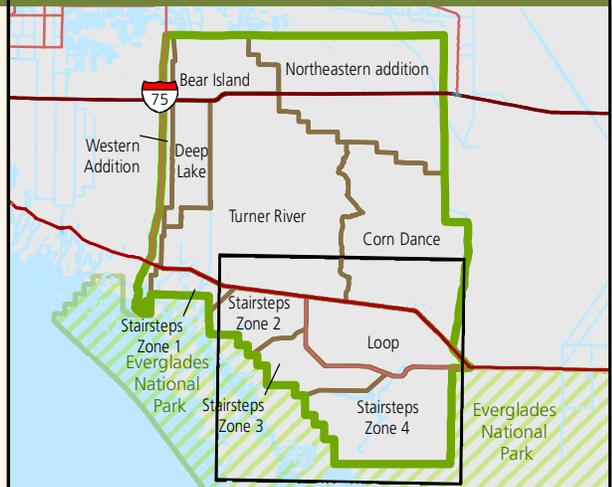
## LEGEND

- Campsite
- ▬ Primary Trails
- ▬ Secondary Trails
- ▬ Closed Secondary Trails as of 6/3/2013
- ▬ Landowner Trails
- ORV AC Recommended Primary Trails
- ORV AC Recommended Secondary Trails
- Hiking Trails
- Florida National Scenic Trail
- Eleven Mile Road
- County Boundary
- Waterways
- Waterbodies
- ▬ Stairsteps Closure Area
- ▬ Management Units
- ▬ Preserve Boundary
- Recommended Trails and Destinations**
- ✈ Airstrip
- ▲ Campsite
- ORV
- 👁 Wildlife Viewing
- ▬ Hiking Trail
- ▬ Hiking Access
- ▬ Scenic Area Access

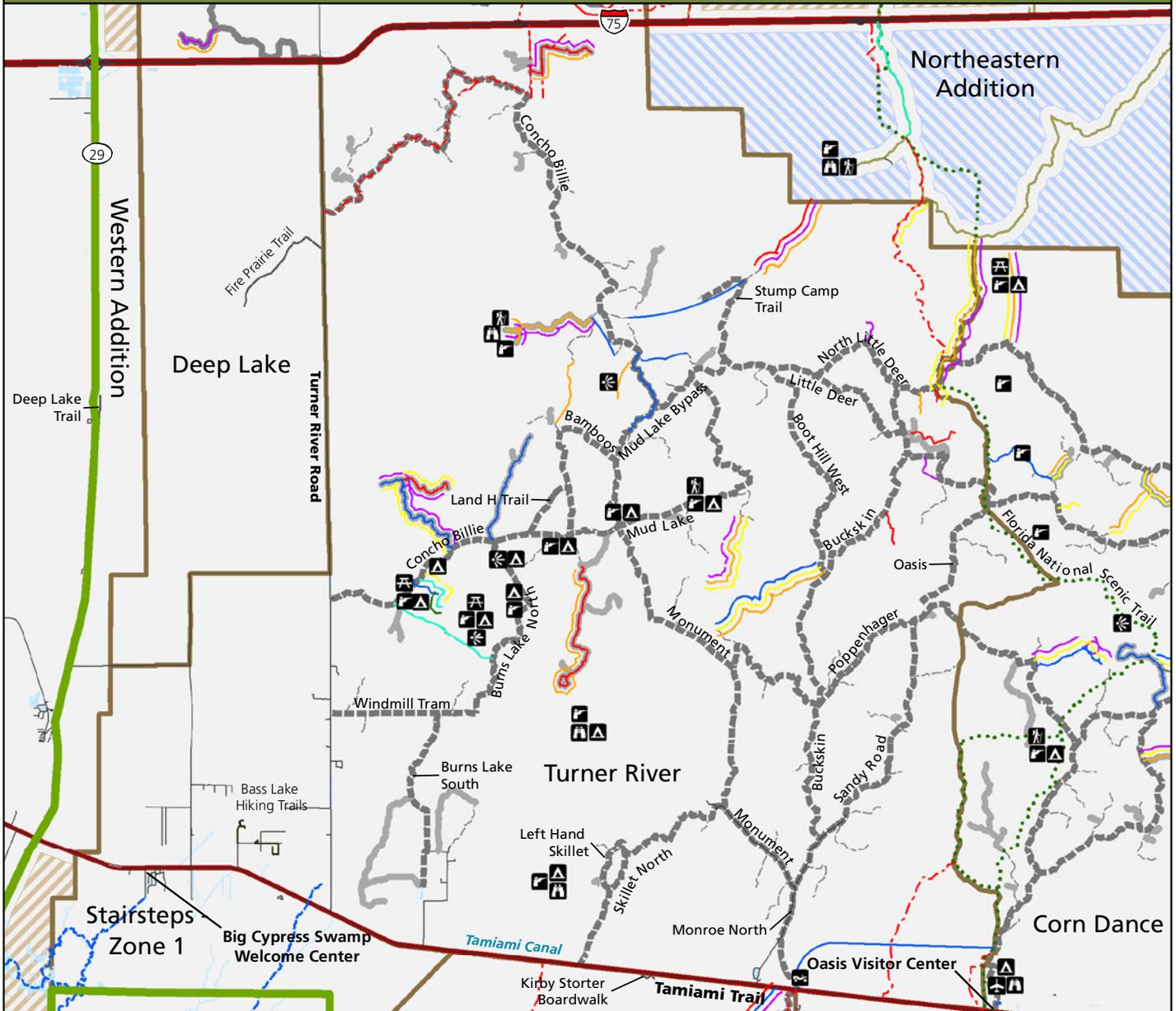


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## PRESERVE OVERVIEW



# TURNER RIVER UNIT - Public Scoping Comment Summary



## LEGEND

## PRESERVE OVERVIEW

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Hiking Trails</li> <li>- - - Secondary Trails</li> <li>— Primary Trails</li> <li>— Closed Secondary Trails as of 6/3/2013</li> <li>- - - Canoe and Watercraft Trails</li> <li>..... Florida National Scenic Trail</li> <li>— Waterways</li> <li>— Waterbodies</li> <li>— Eligible Wilderness</li> <li>— Proposed Wilderness</li> <li>— Management Units</li> <li>— Preserve Boundary</li> </ul>	<p><b>Recommended Trails and Destinations</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li> Airstrip</li> <li> Campsite</li> <li> Hiking</li> <li> Hunting</li> <li> ORV</li> <li> Picnic</li> <li> Scenic Viewing</li> <li> Wildlife Viewing</li> <li>— Hiking Trail</li> <li>— Hunting Access</li> <li>— Picnicing</li> <li>— Public Education</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>— Camping Access</li> <li>— Hiking Access</li> <li>— ORV Access</li> <li>— Scenic Area Access</li> <li>— Wildlife Viewing Access</li> <li>— Private Camp Access</li> </ul>
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