

2003  
annual report

northwest florida program

**The plants, animals and natural communities found in the Panhandle face multiple threats.** Human population pressures, upstream water use, altered fire regimes, and invasive species threaten the region's scenic lands and waters and our way of life.

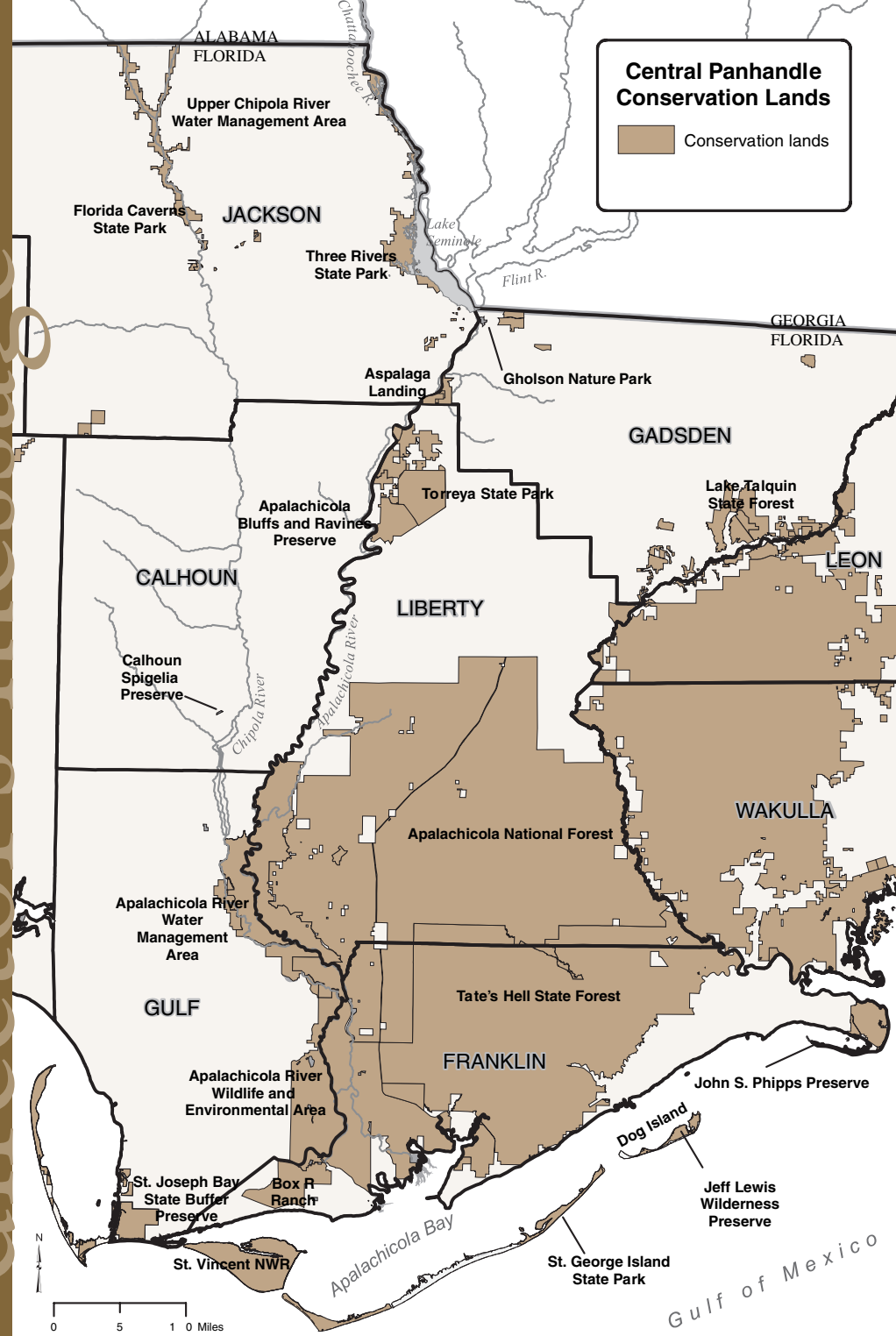
As development pressures continue to grow in the Panhandle, our work takes on new breadth and urgency. To preserve one of the most ecologically rich regions of our country we have embarked on a large-scale conservation process that is enabling us to save vast areas.

**By identifying ecologically valuable areas, we can help guide the protection of our remaining lands and waters.** We use a science-based approach to conservation that is guiding the creation of plans for the Northwest Florida Greenway – a natural corridor that connects the Apalachicola River with the western Panhandle. This conservation approach also guides our work to protect the natural flows of the Apalachicola River and enables us to influence land management and restoration on tens of thousands of acres of public lands.

**With your support, we look forward to continuing our work ready to meet the challenges head on.**



Jon Blanchard  
Director, Northwest Florida Program





## Apalachicola River and Bay

Through its Freshwater Initiative, the Conservancy has been providing scientific advice during the water-sharing negotiations of the Apalachicola-Chattahoochee-Flint River Compact between Georgia, Florida and Alabama. Although the compact expired in July 2003, we continue to provide valuable assistance and are ready if the case goes to the Supreme Court. In the meantime, we turn our attention to the minimum flows and levels needed to sustain the tri-state area and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Water Control Plan.

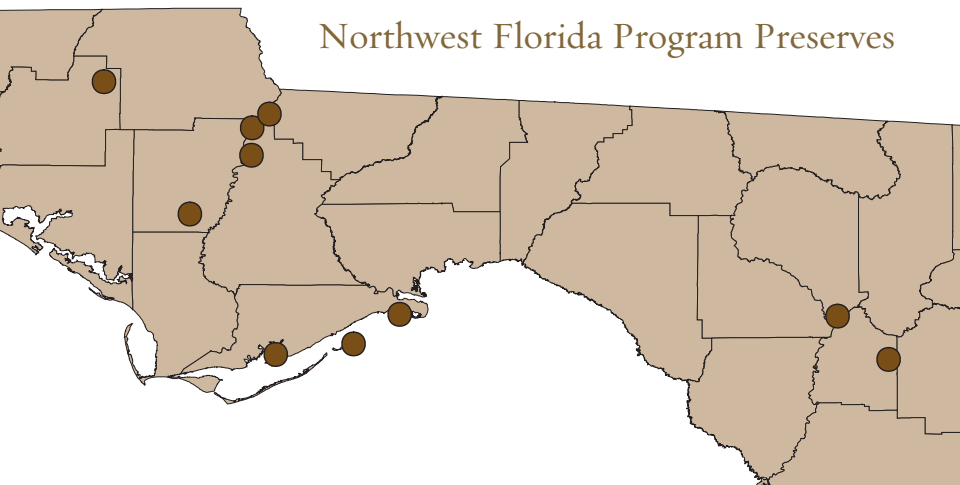
Dredging is harmful to the river system. The Conservancy is working with local representatives to encourage Congress to de-authorize navigational dredging and reallocate federal funds to river restoration projects. To that end, we helped write policy language of the RARE Act (Restore the Apalachicola River Ecosystem), which we hope the Senate approves in 2004. We are also currently working with state permitting agencies to add restoration and dredging modifications to the Army Corps of Engineers' permit.

The Conservancy is partnering with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Army Corps of Engineers on a lock modification study to develop a fish passage at Jim Woodruff Dam that will help the river's endangered Gulf sturgeon and other migratory fish. The Conservancy is bringing together key partners to acquire funding for this critical project. If approved by Congress, this would be the largest project of its kind in the Southeast.

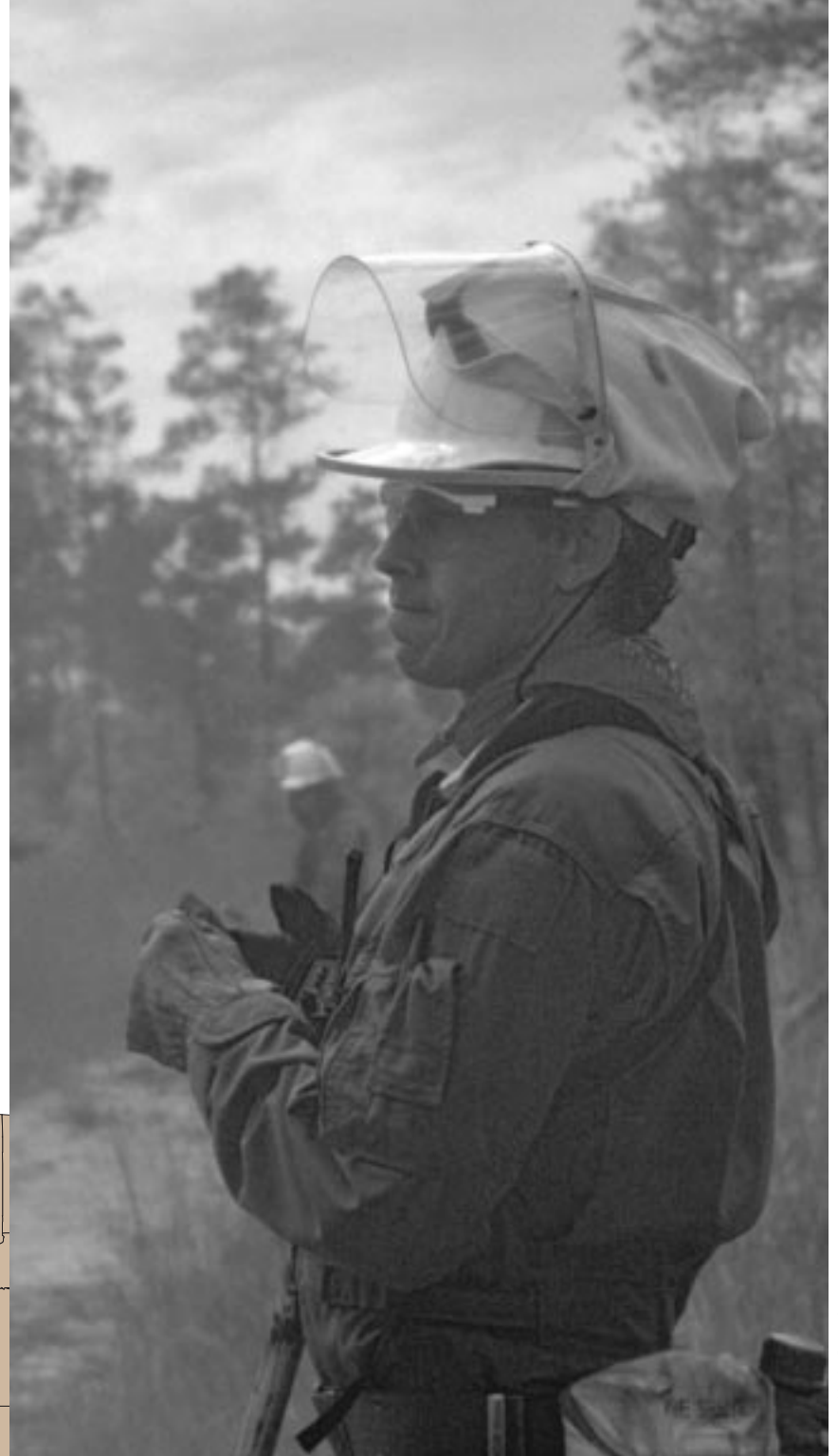
## Land Management and Restoration

The Conservancy manages nine preserves between Washington and Gilchrist counties. Sandhill restoration at Apalachicola Bluffs and Ravines Preserve progressed last year thanks to many volunteers, financial support from Gulf Power, a community work squad from Liberty Correctional Institution and Alternative Spring Break students. We planted 50,000 longleaf pines, seeded 90,000 native grass plugs and sowed 2,600 pounds of groundcover mix. In addition, a grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Partners for Wildlife allowed us to level 50 acres of plantation windrows by bulldozer. To date, more than 1.4 million longleaf pines have been planted on more than 2,700 acres. Topography has also been restored, and groundcover has been planted on nearly 1,100 acres.

With drought relief, we were able to catch up on a backlog of prescribed fire projects. Conservancy staff burned 1,798 acres in 19 burns at Apalachicola Bluffs and Ravines, Calhoun Spigelia and Davidson Ranch preserves. Partners from Torreya State Park, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), U.S. Forest Service (USFS) and Interagency Prescribed Fire Training Center in Tallahassee provided assistance with the burns. Conservancy staff helped burn at Apalachicola National Forest, Withlacoochee State Forest, Conecuh National Forest, Camp Blanding Florida National Guard and Auburn University's Solon Dixon Center, and taught fire courses in Florida and Alabama.



Northwest Florida Program Preserves



## Partnerships

Gulf Power has been an invaluable partner in restoration work at Apalachicola Bluffs and Ravines Preserve. Not only has the company funded purchase of longleaf pine trees, many employees pitched in last year to help collect wiregrass seed. Employees also volunteered to help with our rare plant census at Rock Hill Preserve.

In a unique arrangement funded by the USFS, the Conservancy and Apalachicola National Forest shared three staff positions. This partnership, which will continue in 2004, helped USFS to identify populations of federally threatened flatwoods salamanders, restore native groundcover and respond to wildfires. It also gave us the opportunity to work cooperatively on forest management and to expand our own capacity to do restoration.

Conservancy staff worked with many state and federal agencies and nonprofits on a range of land and water conservation projects, such as prescribed fire, groundcover restoration, recreational use and volunteer management. For example, we helped the Florida Division of Forestry sow groundcover mix on a restoration site at Lake Talquin State Forest. We recruited volunteers for projects on Florida state parks and worked with Florida State and Florida A & M universities to involve students in service projects. At the end of 2002, we received a grant from the USFWS's Florida Gulf Coastal Program to coordinate a working group of public and private partners to address the threat of invasive species in the Apalachicola basin.

## Science

After review of our biological monitoring program, we made changes to ensure the data we are collecting is relevant to land stewardship decisions. We continued to track progress on our sandhill restoration and to monitor population trends in rare species on all preserves. We also initiated monitoring of feral hog damage and began hog control.

The Conservancy has been spearheading flatwoods salamander research and management in conjunction with the USFS and FWC. From FWC, we secured \$15,000 and the assistance of a FWC wildlife technician, who will help with USFS-funded salamander work. The results of the collaboration will influence management of ephemeral wetlands on nearly 1 million acres of public land.

The Apalachicola ravines continue to hold much scientific interest among researchers due to high species endemism. Last year, we hosted fisheries biologists from FWC, aquatic biologists from Florida Department of Environmental Protection, entomologists from Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services and Florida A & M University, biogeographers from Florida State University, and international parasitic fly and crayfish researchers.

## Land Acquisition

Our many years of work with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and private landowners to create a conservation corridor in the Apalachicola ravines region has continued to bear fruit. The Conservancy acquired 500 acres from The St. Joe Company and an adjoining 827 acres from Soterra LLC at Aspalaga Landing in Gadsden County. Both tracts will be turned over to the state of Florida for management. Aspalaga is home to biologically rich bluffs, ravines, limestone outcrops and important cultural resources.

Within Torreya State Park in Liberty County, the Conservancy acquired a 285-acre inholding from Neal Land and Timber. Known as the Torreya Elbow, this tract has been sought after by the park for 20 years. It also will be transferred to the state.

In Calhoun County, the Conservancy purchased 32 acres from The St. Joe Company to protect one of only two Florida populations of federally endangered gentian pinkroot (*Spigelia gentianoides*). This is the first conservation land acquisition in Calhoun County and will ensure protection of this species.





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contributed

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## Thanks to our Volunteers

A conservation program without volunteers is like a butterfly without wings. In 2003, 127 volunteers contributed more than 2,400 hours to the Northwest Florida Program. Volunteers helped at the program office in Bristol; provided photographs and artwork; and worked in the field doing prescribed burning, sandhill restoration, scientific monitoring, sea turtle patrolling, trail work, preserve stewardship and much more.

Space limitations prevent us from listing all of the kind-hearted people who have helped, but we would like to acknowledge special contributions by Mike Abrams, Bill and Pam Anderson, Vicki Barnett, Bill and Marcia Boothe, Karla Brandt, David Bryan, Shaun Crawford, Nick Dawirs, Patrick Elliott, Grayal Farr, Hal Fravel, Angus Gholson, Elizabeth Ginty, Darroc Goolsby, Al Griffin, Jennifer Griggs, Thomas Gunter, Stephen Hight, Penny Isom, Lois Jones, Alvin Jose, Elizabeth Kamerick, Sherry Kinsey, Pam Lewis, Marilyn Lovell, Helga Mendoza, Gus Nyberg, Sheila Robertson, Mike Shepard, Alyssa Solomon, Cindi Stewart, Dennis Tyus, Mark Uanino, Rich Wages, John Wilpizeski, Karen Wynne, Gulf Power, Emory University and University of Illinois. To become involved, visit our Web site at [nature.org/florida/volunteer](http://nature.org/florida/volunteer) or contact [leigh\\_brooks@tnc.org](mailto:leigh_brooks@tnc.org) to receive our volunteer electronic newsletter.

Our work protecting north Florida's natural heritage would not be possible without the financial support from individuals, corporations, foundations and our partners. We thank you for your generosity.

## donations

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Jon & Margaret Blanchard  
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