

# The Pelican

The Official Newsletter of Sierra Club Florida



## IN THIS ISSUE

**OUTINGS TO RESISTANCE:  
PARKS NOT PRISONS**

**SCFL'S QUARTERLY MTG.  
AND LOBBY DAY**

**2026 LEGISLATIVE SESSION**

**GET INVOLVED WITH SCFL!**

**RAILROAD TIES IN DUNNELLON:  
PROMISES MADE, TIME WASTED,  
AND A PREVENTABLE DISASTER**

**GREEN SCHOOLS INITIATIVE:  
GROWING SUSTAINABILITY  
ACROSS FLORIDA**

**BEYOND READY: JOIN THE  
RACE TO CLEAN ENERGY WITH  
YOUR #STORYOFRENEWAL**

**WINNERS OF THE 2025  
FLORIDA CHAPTER AWARDS**

**MARCHING WITH A MESSAGE  
AT GAINESVILLE'S FLYING  
PIGS PARADE**

**PROTECTING A WILD FLORIDA  
TREASURE**

## From the Chair

by Kristine Cunningham, Chair, Sierra Club Florida Executive Committee

The Florida Chapter has been on the front lines of environmental activism for decades, grounded in a true grassroots approach.

Grassroots organizing is powered by everyday people: community members, not elites or top-down institutions. It centers local action, collective power, and direct engagement to advance social and environmental justice.

Our volunteers, staff, and local groups are the Florida Chapter's superpower.

Every region of Florida is facing an environmental crisis. The Everglades. Incinerators. Polluted water. Land grabs. Wetland destruction. Vanishing wildlife habitat. Runaway sprawl. The list is long, and it grows by the day.

So how do we build grassroots power?

We start with the people most impacted. We listen. We connect. We show up. And we bring the full strength of our volunteers, staff, and resources alongside them.

That might mean standing with residents whose homes now flood because wooded areas that once absorbed water have been cleared. It could mean fighting inadequate infrastructure that leads to sewage overflows and contaminated water. Or responding to a fire that fills the air with toxic particles, threatening community health, water sources, and soil.

Earlier this month in Dunnellon, a hazardous fire erupted in a massive pile of creosote-soaked railroad ties – highly toxic material stored in open air.

(continued on next page)

## From the Chair (continued)

Before the fire, the Sierra Club Florida Chapter and its Environmental Justice Committee had already been working with residents, local officials, property owners, and the wood-chipping company to address the danger. The company agreed to move the ties out of state, but the relocation did not happen in time.

When the pile ignited, toxic smoke and particulate matter spread across the neighborhood and into surrounding areas. Residents' health, including their children and pets, was put at risk.

Within hours of the fire starting, grassroots action was underway because of the relationships and networks our members have built in this community. The emergency response will be evaluated, and we will continue pushing for stronger safeguards and accountability.

That is what grassroots power looks like.

When we activate the many connections within our organization, we see trust grow. We see the impact deepen. We see communities stand stronger.

Connection and community are the lifeblood of the Florida Chapter. We are deeply grateful for our volunteers, our dedicated committees, and our professional staff. We are stronger – and more effective – because of you.

Stay safe. Stay connected. And thank you for being the power behind this work.



## Outings to Resistance: Parks Not Prisons

by Marcelo Balladares, Everglades Organizer, Sierra Club Florida

A few weeks ago, Sierra Club activists, environmental justice organizers, and immigrant rights advocates from across the country journeyed into the heart of the Everglades for our first ever Outings to Resistance.

We gathered in Big Cypress National Preserve to experience the beauty of one of the world's most iconic landscapes – a place of life, resilience, and belonging – and to challenge the harmful narrative behind “Alligator Alcatraz,” an inhumane and indefensible prison camp that seeks to use this wild and sacred place as a backdrop for fear and punishment.

## Outings to Resistance: Parks Not Prisons (continued)

Together we explored the deep connections between environmental protection, racial justice, and immigrant rights. Speakers underscored a fundamental truth: there can be no environmental justice without racial justice.

The same systems that exploit and pollute our lands too often harm Black, Brown, Indigenous, and immigrant communities first and worst, and our movement must stand in solidarity to confront these injustices.

We hiked through sawgrass prairies and cypress domes, paddled along winding mangroves, took in the other-worldly vastness of the Everglades by airboat, and camped under the stars – building community and deepening our connection to this extraordinary place.



As the overnight temperature dropped to a freezing chill, and we were surrounded by friends and family around the glowing warmth of our campfire, we did not forget that those imprisoned in Alligator Alcatraz – a mere six miles away – were enduring the harshest of conditions.



Many of us were visiting the Everglades for the first time, and left with a renewed sense of purpose to protect this extraordinary ecosystem and the communities connected to it.

This is the heart of the Sierra Club: building a people-powered movement rooted in solidarity, justice, and a shared love for our wild places.

[Now, we invite you to be part of this movement.](#)

Join an outing. Raise your voice. Stand with communities on the frontlines. Resist.

Together, we can protect the Everglades, defend human dignity, and build a more just and sustainable future for all.



# SCFL's Quarterly Meeting & Lobby Day

by Susannah Randolph, Chapter Director, Sierra Club Florida



The Sierra Club Florida Chapter kicked off the year with a fun and successful quarterly meeting weekend from February 20–22 in Tallahassee.

The event brought together dedicated volunteers and staff to strategize, connect, and strengthen our shared commitment to protecting Florida's environment.

We are deeply grateful to our friends at the Miccosukee Land Cooperative for opening their community and homes to our members. As many of the community are also members of Sierra Club, they are not only hosts, they are family, too!

## Weekend Highlights:

### Lobby Day at the Capitol

The weekend began with a Lobby Day at the State Capitol, where more than 20 members and staff advocated for the Chapter's legislative priorities. Our volunteers visited more than 50 legislative offices, meeting directly with lawmakers and staff to discuss priority bills and push back against legislation threatening Florida's unique environment and natural resources.



### Quarterly Meeting

The heart of the weekend took place Saturday, as volunteers and staff gathered for our first quarterly meeting of the year. Together, we tackled the major issues facing Florida and mapped out strategies to protect our wildlife and wild places.



### Sessions included:

- Updates on a key environmental justice campaign in the Dunnellon/Chatmire area
- Trainings on how local groups can better leverage tools and resources to strengthen their impact
- Breakout discussions on priority campaigns, including efforts to end "Alligator Alcatraz" and oppose the expansion of AI data centers proposed across Florida

### Socials and Fellowship

Friday night kicked off with a welcome campfire, a joyful jam session under the stars, and an energetic (and competitive!) trivia contest. On Saturday evening, members gathered for a shared dinner featuring authentic Italian pizza from the Miccosukee Land Co-op, followed by dancing to live music from Two Foot Level.

### Leadership Meeting

The weekend concluded with the Chapter Executive Committee meeting on Sunday, followed by a farewell breakfast filled with renewed energy and clear commitments to turn ideas into action for Florida's future.

Thank you to everyone who traveled to Tallahassee and those who joined virtually! For questions or to learn more about how to get involved, please [visit our website](#) or reach out to me at [susannah.randolph@sierraclub.org](mailto:susannah.randolph@sierraclub.org).

## 2026 Legislative Session: Recap & Next Steps



The work of passing general bills this legislative session is finished! While the state budget has yet to be finalized, every general bill we tracked this year has either passed or failed to move forward. But our work doesn't stop here.

As we head into the election cycle, we'll continue bringing our vision of a cleaner, healthier, and more affordable Florida directly to voters.

[Stay engaged. Stay informed. And stay in this fight with us](#) – because we're just getting started.

---

## Get Involved with Sierra Club Florida!



### Save the Dates: SCFL Quarterly Meetings

- Q2: June 12-14, Wekiva Island, FL - Register [HERE](#)
- Q3: August 28-30, DeLand, FL
- Q4: December 11-13, Cedar Key, FL



### Interested in joining our Executive Committee?

Email [Kris Cunningham](#), Executive Committee Chair, for more information.



## Railroad Ties in Dunnellon: Promises Made, Time Wasted, and a Preventable Disaster

by Cliff Thael, Vice Chair, Sierra Club Florida  
Executive Committee; Jyoti Parmar, Sierra Club Florida  
Organizing Representative

In the summer of 2025, residents of Dunnellon and Chatmire raised alarms after thousands of creosote-treated railroad ties were dumped near their homes and close to the Rainbow River, a protected aquatic preserve. Creosote, a human carcinogen, is known to persist in soil and water, posing long-term health and environmental risks. From the start, this was an urgent public health crisis.

In December 2025, after sustained efforts by the Sierra Club's Environmental Justice Committee, Rainbow River Conservation, and local residents, State Representative JJ Grow announced that CSX Transportation would remove the ties. This victory, however, quickly turned into a pattern of inaction. Despite the agreement, removal efforts proceeded slowly and without transparency. Two months later, large volumes of creosote-soaked ties still remained near neighborhoods and within the Rainbow River watershed, despite repeated calls for urgency.

Concerns mounted over zoning violations, the absence of a clear removal timeline, and the escalating risk of prolonged storage of hazardous materials. At a January 21, 2026 community meeting, residents and advocates demanded accountability, but their calls were ignored.

On February 1, 2026, the consequences of inaction were undeniable. A massive fire broke out in the stockpile of railroad ties, burning for hours and releasing toxic smoke over nearby neighborhoods. Despite the known dangers of burning creosote-treated wood, no evacuation was ordered. While officials claimed no acute contamination had been detected, no testing for particulate matter—hazardous ash from the fire—was conducted. Nearly a million gallons of water were used to extinguish the blaze, raising concerns about runoff and contamination of nearby waterways, including the Rainbow River.

In response, both the City of Dunnellon and Marion County declared states of emergency, acknowledging that voluntary compliance had failed and the risk was real. The Marion County Board of County Commissioners unanimously voted to pursue an injunction against CSX and Track Line Rail LLC to ensure the removal of the remaining ties and hold the companies accountable.

A special joint meeting of the City and County, followed by a magistrate hearing, is set to determine the legal and enforcement path forward. These proceedings will influence how environmental justice advocates engage with CSX, Track Line, and local governments in the future.

This situation highlights a critical environmental justice issue: how many warnings must be ignored before action is taken? The Sierra Club Florida Chapter, Rainbow River Conservation, and local residents remain committed to demanding complete removal, independent environmental monitoring, and accountability.

Protecting both people and the environment requires more than promises—it demands immediate and decisive action.

# Green Schools Initiative: Growing Sustainability Across Florida

by Eman Sadig, Green Schools Intern,  
Sierra Club Florida

At Sierra Club Florida's winter 2025 quarterly meeting in South Bay, Eman Sadig and Andrew Harris shared an update on the Green Schools Program. The presentation highlighted the program's growth and its broader impact on school communities.



The presentation highlighted the program's commitment to student leadership. Mackanna, a Tampa Bay Technical High School graduate, earned a Sierra Club scholarship and now studies Urban Planning at the University of Florida, while Leto High School student Leo was invited to the state capital for Lobby Day as a young climate activist after expanding student involvement with Sierra programs. Both have attended the Green Schools Conference, continuing their development as sustainability leaders.

The Green Schools Program works directly with public school districts to integrate sustainability into everyday school operations and culture. Supporting school gardens is a major focus of the program, providing hands-on environmental education. These efforts, along with improving building efficiency and reducing cafeteria waste, support healthier learning environments while helping students develop a sense of environmental responsibility. Just as importantly, the program introduces students and families to the Sierra Club and encourages long-term community involvement.

Parent and student engagement remains central to this work. Green Schools continues to partner with local organizations, Green Schools PTSA groups and local PTAs while developing a model that other counties in the state can adapt to grow similar programs. We are also working to revive the Green Apple Designation, a former statewide sustainability recognition that has been largely overlooked in recent years. After a long wait, South Plantation High School recently received its certification, signaling renewed progress in sustainable infrastructure and environmental curriculum.

As the Green Schools Program grows, it supports the Sierra Club by supporting education and the adoption of sustainable practices that strengthens the connection between students and the environment. This work ultimately helps prepare the next generation for climate and conservation efforts.

For more information about the Green Schools Program or to explore partnership opportunities, contact volunteer Andrew Harris 813-340-7787 or [tampa6@gmail.com](mailto:tampa6@gmail.com).





## Beyond Ready: Join the RACE to Clean Energy with your #StoryOfRenewal

by Lisa Hinton, Suncoast Group

Ten years ago, Sierra Club volunteers helped launch Ready for 100% Clean Energy, a bold initiative that encouraged cities to commit to a clean energy future.

In the Suncoast Group and around Florida, those commitments sparked lasting change—leading cities to create sustainability departments, adopt climate, sustainability, and resilience action plans, and invest in solar energy, cleaner transportation, and energy efficiency. Just as importantly, these efforts strengthened partnerships among residents, faith communities, schools, and local governments, turning vision into action.

Today, we are Beyond Ready. We're entering a RACE to Clean Energy—not as a sprint toward a single finish line, but as a shared journey marked by steady momentum, collaboration, and persistence. This race is about carrying commitments forward and ensuring clean energy works alongside sustainability, resilience, and strong community engagement.

Clean energy succeeds when it is woven into everyday life. That means planning neighborhoods that can withstand climate impacts, lowering long-term energy costs, improving public health, and creating local economic opportunities. It also means building solutions with community members at the center, so benefits are shared broadly and equitably. When sustainability, resilience, and community are integrated, clean energy becomes the foundation for thriving, future-ready communities.

As part of this next chapter, we are launching Story of Renewal, a community storytelling project that highlights the human side of the clean energy journey. These stories go beyond technology. They capture moments of change – churches going solar, volunteers advocating for cleaner air, students imagining resilient futures, and neighbors working together to strengthen their communities.

Your story matters. Whether it's a short video filmed on your phone, a few photos, or a brief quote, Story of Renewal invites you to share how sustainability, resilience, and community have shaped your path forward. Together, these stories will inspire others, celebrate progress, and remind us why this work matters.

The RACE to Clean Energy is built by people – by Sierra Club members who show up, speak out, and help move their communities forward. We invite you to share your Story of Renewal and join us as we continue this journey toward a cleaner, stronger, and more just future. Either email your story to [Info@SuncoastSierra.org](mailto:Info@SuncoastSierra.org) or post it on your own group's social media with #StoryOfRenewal and tag @SuncoastSierra.

**Join the RACE to Clean Energy**  
Clean energy works when communities are built together  
— thoughtfully, with resilience and for the long term.  
We're beyond ready. Join us in the race.

**SIERRA CLUB**  
Suncoast Group

**100% CLEAN POWER**

**Sprint Challenges**  
An energizing youth experience that brings diverse minds together to rapidly explore, envision and articulate their vision of 2050 with creativity and purpose.

**#StoryOfRenewal**  
Shares personal journeys of sustainability, resilience, and community—showing how people are building a more just, thriving future on the path to clean energy.

**Podcast**  
Local Ready for 100 co-founder James Scott shares success stories, progress updates, and examines challenges and solutions in the transition to a cleaner more sustainable future.

**What is the RACE ?**  
We call it a RACE to Clean Energy because progress depends on momentum, participation, and persistence, with success measured across many milestones—building stronger, more resilient and affordable communities together as we move steadily toward a cleaner, more sustainable future powered by clean energy.

**PARTY!**  
In late 2026, a celebration will mark ten years since the launch of Ready for 100, during which time 5 local cities committed to move to clean energy. We aim to celebrate, bring communities together and affirm our dedication to a sustainable, resilient future powered by clean energy.

Lisa Hinton  
727.242.3184  
Lisa@SuncoastSierra.org

Visit Our Website  
[www.SuncoastSierra.org](http://www.SuncoastSierra.org)

Search: Suncoast Sierra

# Presenting the Winners of the 2025 Florida Chapter Awards

by Janet Larson, Mary-Slater Linn, Marcia Biggs,  
Sierra Club Florida Awards Committee

Every year, Sierra Club Florida solicits nominations to recognize deserving members, supporters, and community organizations for their outstanding work advancing the mission and goals of the Sierra Club.

See the list of 2025 winners (presented in 2026) [here](#).



## Marching with a Message at Gainesville's Flying Pigs Parade

by Tim Martin, Suwannee St. Johns Group

On January 3, members of the Suwannee St. Johns (SSJ) Group brought both energy and purpose to downtown Gainesville by marching in the annual Flying Pigs Parade. Equal parts celebration and civic expression, our entry carried two clear messages rooted in local stewardship and science-based public policy.

Leading the way was a contingent carrying our banner and wearing shirts in support of retaining local control of Gainesville Regional Utilities (GRU).

In 2023, the Florida Legislature passed a law restructuring GRU's governance, replacing the locally elected City Commission's oversight with a new, state-created GRU Authority. All the GRU authority members are appointed by the Governor, a significant shift away from democratic, municipal control of a city-owned utility.

This change came despite clear and repeated signals from the Gainesville community. In two recent local elections, voters overwhelmingly supported candidates and ballot measures favoring continued local oversight of GRU, reinforcing the principle that decisions about rates, energy policy, and long-term planning should remain in the hands of the people who rely on the utility every day.

As we marched, that message came alive. Call-and-response chants of "Whose power? Whose GRU?" rang out along the parade route, met enthusiastically by the crowd's reply, "Our power! Our GRU!" The exchange captured both the spirit of the event and the deeply felt community commitment to local control.

Close behind came a second, hard-to-miss contingent: members dressed in bear costumes to call attention to our opposition to the proposed statewide black bear hunt. Florida's black bear population is still recovering from decades of habitat loss and past overhunting, and we believe that wildlife management decisions should be guided by sound science rather than political pressure. The Sierra Club continues to advocate for non-lethal management strategies, habitat protection, and wildlife corridors that reduce human-bear conflicts without resorting to a hunt.

The Flying Pigs Parade offered a perfect setting to share these messages - joyful, creative, and community-centered. We were proud to represent SSJ, spark conversations along the route, and remind our neighbors that local voices matter, whether the issue is public utilities or wildlife conservation.

# Protecting a Wild Florida Treasure

by Joe Murphy, Adventure Coast Group



When ancient cartographers sought to map remote and foreboding places, when they arrived at an expanse too vast or too wild, they simply labeled the map with “here be dragons.” Florida’s Nature Coast was surely a land of dragons then, and still can be today.

The Nature Coast, stretching from Pasco to Wakulla County along the Gulf, is a place where wild Florida is strong and vibrant. It is one of the longest wild coastlines left in America. You can spend a day and never hear or see another person. It is remote, vast, magnificent, and for the most part does not need to be restored. It needs to be preserved.

Offshore along this coast are some of Florida’s most magnificent Aquatic Preserves. These massive seagrass beds are home to all kinds of marine life, including juvenile sea turtles, and support the open water nurseries essential to the Gulf. They represent incredible Blue Carbon opportunities to sequester carbon and help offset climate change. We don’t need to replant or restore them. We simply need to conserve them.

The Nature Coast represents a tremendous opportunity to conserve and manage vast ecosystems at a landscape scale. This area, in terms of the Florida Chapter, is covered by the Adventure Coast, Suwannee St. Johns, and Big Bend Groups. As the new Co-Conservation Chair (Hernando County) for the Adventure Coast Group my goal is to promote the idea that this represents a chance for a united and comprehensive effort on the part of the three groups and the Chapter, to protect something transcendent and timeless, as it is. As remote and amazing as it is, it still faces significant challenges.

The lack of white sand beaches and barrier islands delayed coastal development pressure, there is only so much waterfront along the Gulf Coast. Soon more bulldozers and dredges will be at the gates of Eden. Effective growth management, learning from the mistakes of other regions, will be essential to protecting the wild heart of this place.

Many also refer to the Nature Coast as the Springs Coast. Numerous springs flow through this coast, and eventually into the Gulf. This is fundamental to the survival of manatees and to the healthy coastal estuaries that support our fisheries. Springs in Florida are in trouble, and in the Nature Coast we all live downstream.

The Suwannee River, the mighty river that is one of the last undammed rivers left in the Gulf South, flows into the Gulf just north of Cedar Key. While this river is mighty and still provides habitat for ancient creatures like Gulf Sturgeon, it faces threats from over pumping and agricultural pollution.

Despite these challenges, the opportunity to save a huge wild chunk of old Florida is right in front of us. United, we can rise to the challenge and save a place as vital as the Everglades and as wild as any left east of the Mississippi.



# FLORIDA'S ENVIRONMENT NEEDS YOU

Our state faces urgent environmental challenges every day. Your contribution to Sierra Club Florida provides the ongoing support needed to protect our water, wildlife, and lands — now and for future generations.

**Make a monthly gift and help save the places we love.**

[SIERRACLUB.ORG/FLORIDA/GIVE](https://sierraclub.org/florida/give)



## Get Involved!

Sierra Club Florida is working tirelessly to protect wildlife and wild places, ensure clean air and water for all, and fight for environmental justice here in Florida. Whether supporting our campaigns, participating in an outing, or volunteering with your local group, there are so many ways to get involved and support our mission!





# SIERRA CLUB

FLORIDA CHAPTER

P.O. Box 443220  
Miami, FL 33144  
[sierraclub.org/florida](http://sierraclub.org/florida)  
[@sierraclubfl](https://twitter.com/sierraclubfl)