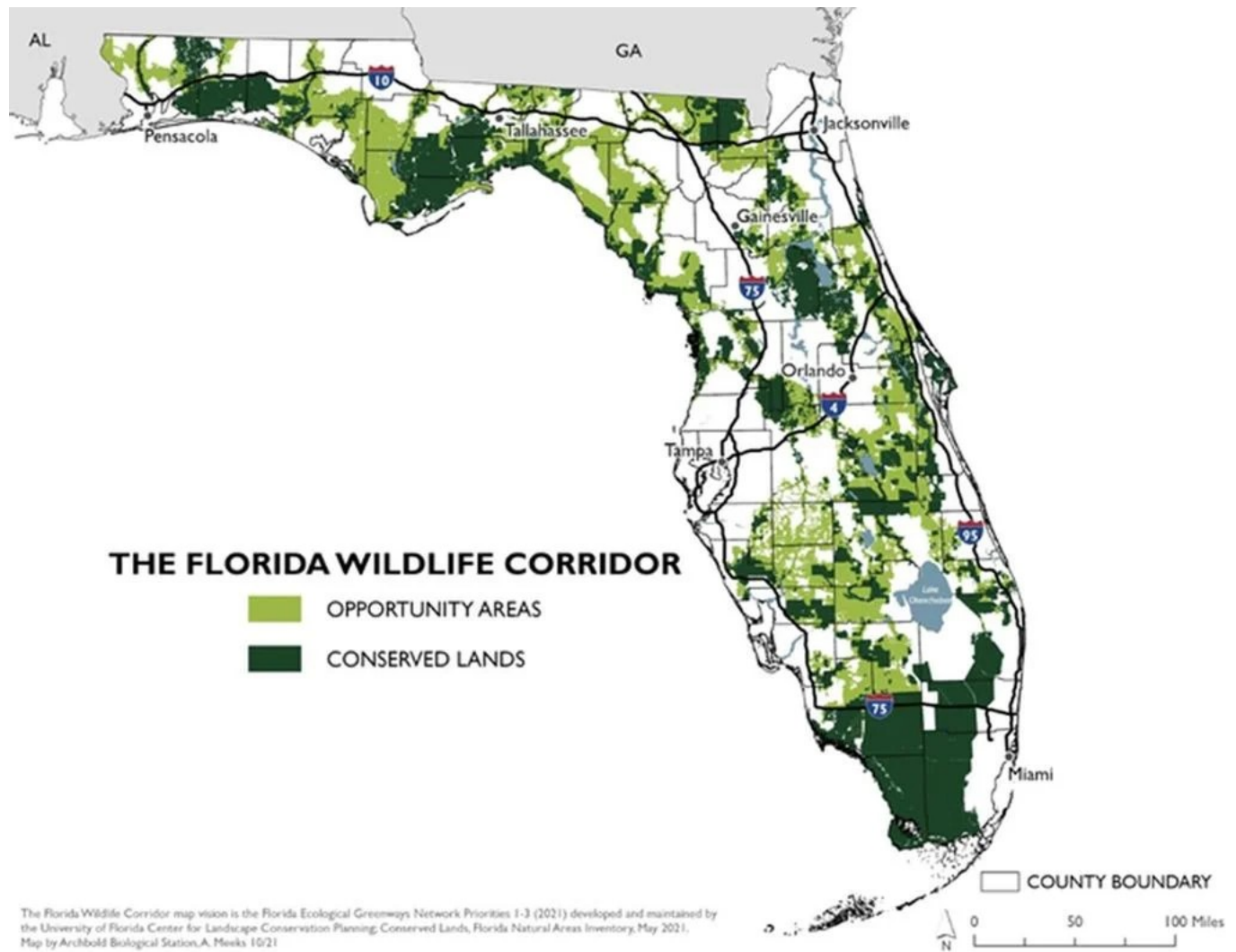


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## Archbold hosts Florida Wildlife Corridor Science Exchanges

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COURTESY/ARCHBOLD BIOLOGICAL STATION

Archbold Biological Station, a research institution just south of Lake Placid, recently hosted three online meetings to organize science for conservation of the Florida Wildlife Corridor, which is an 18-million-acre patchwork of public and private land.

Georgia and west to Alabama. It is primarily designed to protect connections between wildlife habitats. Last year, the Florida legislature unanimously passed, and Governor Ron DeSantis signed, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Act, formally recognizing the geography and providing funds for state land conservation activities. Along with two other groups, the Florida Wildlife Corridor Foundation and Florida Wild, Archbold is championing the Corridor vision — to conserve natural and agricultural lands of value to wildlife all across the state.

The recent meetings, dubbed the Florida Wildlife Corridor Science Exchanges because they were meant to promote exchange of scientific needs and information among attendees, were organized by Archbold's Director of Conservation Dr. Joshua Daskin, with other Archbold staff, plus close partners from the University of Florida and Florida Natural Areas Inventory. Daskin said the Science Exchanges will seed new connections among researchers and conservationists to help achieve the Corridor goals. "The Science Exchanges are about catalyzing the information sharing and research needed for effective, efficient land conservation in the Florida Wildlife Corridor. The aim is to identify what we know and what we still need to study."

Thirty-five to 50 invitees from state and federal environmental agencies, universities, and conservation organizations attended each Exchange. Facilitators from the Consensus Building Institute helped keep the meetings interactive with surveys, breakout groups, and creative ways of posing questions.

The first Science Exchange in mid-January focused on prioritizing lands in the Corridor, which are most critical for conservationists to work on protecting first. Daskin said, "This means balancing the few remaining parcels providing habitat near fast-developing urban areas with more rural properties that may not be developed imminently without conservation efforts, but which are

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critical to protecting wildlife in the long term. A key takeaway from the day's discussions was that science and data can help the state's many accomplished conservation groups and government agencies select priorities depending on their own values."

Dr. Reed Noss of the Florida Institute for Conservation Science spoke about the history of the Corridor, which dates back to science conducted in the 1980s, and Dr. Gary Tabor, a world leader in conserving connected areas for wildlife and people and the president of the Center for Large Landscape Conservation, described the Corridor as a national leader in statewide conservation efforts.

In March, two Exchanges focused on water resource protection in the Corridor and how Corridor land protection can help make Florida communities and farms more resilient to sea level rise and changing economies. "We are partnering with the University of Florida's Water Institute to resolve some really key questions about Florida's water supplies and wetlands, and specifically how the Corridor can and cannot contribute to their sustainability," said Daskin. Participants in the water Exchange stressed that it is key not to oversell the benefits of the Corridor — because it is primarily designed to conserve wildlife, it is not expected to solve all the rest of Florida's environmental concerns, too.

Still, the Exchanges revealed there are many benefits of land conservation. "In Highlands and other central Florida counties, some of the best tools we have for saving the Corridor are aimed at saving ranches; a working Florida cattle ranch provides so much benefit to wildlife, so we are doing all we can to keep ranching profitable and active. Elsewhere, in the panhandle, conserving the Corridor means protecting key coastal habitats that buffer communities from storm impacts."

Going forward, the discussions held at the Science Exchanges will allow Archbold, its partners, and other attendees to focus their research on the most important topics for advancing conservation of Florida wildlife habitats.

