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## 2023 REGIONAL CONSERVATION PRIORITIES: SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

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Proposed for Audubon Assembly, October, 2022:

Audubon has a long history in the Western Everglades region, beginning with hiring wardens to protect wading bird colonies from plume hunters, later creating the Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (now a vital partner for these chapters), and helping to secure federal and state public lands. Audubon Florida and its five affiliated southwest Florida organizations are committed to working together to protect and restore the Southwest Florida watersheds and downstream coastal ecosystems in the face of rapid human population growth and increasing anthropogenic climate change impacts.

Among the climate impacts, poor water quality that feeds harmful algal blooms remains a major threat in this region. This climate issue also intersects regional wetland protection, restoration, stormwater, and pollution prevention policies.

Coinciding with and quite related to climate impacts is the crisis of species declines and extinctions. Audubon organizations see these amongst avian species, but their food base of insects and plants are just as concerning. It seems the individual and our local communities are powerless to address these declines, but this is not so.

Regarding the vitally important issue of equity, diversity and inclusion, Audubon and its chapters recognize the underrepresentation of diverse communities in our leadership, membership, programs and staff. This lack of diversity, including not only in race, but also age and socioeconomic status, is a challenge to be addressed for everyone's collective benefit. Our regional work could benefit immensely from collaboratively working with disadvantaged neighborhoods and communities.

*Therefore be it resolved:*

*The five local Audubon organizations in the Southwest Florida Region, using sound science, professional policy guidance, and in complement to Audubon Florida's statewide conservation priorities, will mobilize volunteer and staff leadership, members, allies, community leaders, elected officials, and government agencies to cooperatively advance four regional priorities:*

- 1. Reduction in harmful algal blooms in southwest Florida through nutrient source control, watershed restoration, wetland preservation, and protection of connected coastal and inland habitats from Lake Okeechobee, Caloosahatchee River, Peace River/Charlotte Harbor, and Big Cypress and Corkscrew Swamps to their downstream estuaries and beaches.**

In addition to supporting Audubon calls for advocacy relating to issues such as improvement of stormwater treatment infrastructure and removal of leaking septic systems, SW Florida chapters may elect to engage in some or all of a variety of supportive activities on several levels — individual homes, neighborhoods, streets, municipalities and counties. Examples could include community science such as collection of water quality data, establishing rain gardens and cisterns, support for Low Impact Design strategies, and support for seagrass restoration.

***2. Conservation/enhancement of as much wildlife habitat and land of environmental value as possible in the areas where our five chapters operate.***

In addition to supporting Audubon calls to advocate for purchase of environmentally sensitive land, conservation easements and similar measures especially in SW Florida, chapters may wish to support local initiatives such as Plants for Birds Campaigns, native tree planting, urban wildlife habitat creation, turf grass conversion to native plants, and reduction of risk to birds from buildings.

***3. Enhanced regional and local sea level rise/climate change adaptation and mitigation planning and implementation, and considering the overwhelmingly diverse and growing list of climate impacts in SW Florida.***

Regional chapters will encourage local government participation in the Southwest Florida Regional Resiliency Coalition. Efforts will be made to assure governments fairly evaluate the University of Florida/Florida Gulf Coast University ACUNE and other models of sea level rise and climate impacts in deciding on actions required to protect human and wildlife communities at risk in SW Florida. Chapters may also promote local and regional measures to lower greenhouse gas emissions and increase resiliency through nature-based strategies such as watershed restoration (e.g., Horse Pen Strand and Charlotte Harbor Flatwoods purchase and restoration), offshore and oyster reef creation, coastal bird and habitat stewardship, or mangrove and sea grass restoration.

***4. Increased diversity of chapter membership and leadership as well as of the beneficiaries of chapter programs.***

Our chapters tend to be older and less economically, culturally and racially diverse than the larger communities where they are located. To attempt to remedy these imbalances, chapters, in consultation with leaders of previously under-represented groups, will attempt to assure that such activities as Plants for Birds, urban wildlife support, and native tree plantings benefit such groups. Similarly chapters will support efforts to remediate pollution and other negative environmental outcomes which differentially afflict less advantaged groups. Special efforts will also be made to assure that Audubon environmental education programs reach more diverse audiences.