

# How Much Are Resource Values Worth?

Photo Courtesy of  
South Florida Water Management District

## ***Needed: A Close Examination of Public Policies***

**There is great irony in the way we view our land and its value for different uses.**

***For example: If you have a wetland on your property, you might be lucky to get it appraised at \$250 an acre. Start to fill it in, however, and you're likely to find yourself paying a \$10,000 a day fine to the U.S. Environmental Protection agency.***

**Consider this:**

**While natural habitats that are rare and fragile are considered priceless by society, our market economy gives them a low value.**

***Needed:***  
**New Tools to  
Protect the  
Environment**

## **Examining Public Policies**

**Here are some priceless natural resources that will not increase your property value:**

- ◆ **Wetlands**
- ◆ **Wildlife Habitat**
- ◆ **Presence of Threatened & Endangered Species**
- ◆ **High Food Production Capability**
- ◆ **Clean Drinking Water**
- ◆ **Clean Air**
- ◆ **Productive Fisheries**
- ◆ **Biological Diversity**
- ◆ **Scenic Views**
- ◆ **Biological, Botanical and Scientific Opportunity**
- ◆ **Soil Conservation**
- ◆ **Soil Creation**
- ◆ **Carbon Sequestering**
- ◆ **Flood Control**
- ◆ **Traditional Rural Character**

**In fact, these resources may actually  
*reduce* your property value.**

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## Examining Public Policies

**Much of the fault for this lies with our land appraisal process ... which, in many states such as Florida, is highly development-oriented. State and county policies literally spawn development, often at the expense of other land uses and environmental considerations.**

***Land is valued on the basis of how many housing units or condos it will accommodate ... not on how effectively it will grow our food ... or how important it is for aquifer recharge ... or as wildlife habitat.***

-- Assessments, Florida  
Statutes, Chapter 193, sec. 001.

## Examining Public Policies

**In fact, there presently is no way within the market economy to assign a dollar value to the land's ability to grow food, or to the natural resources and wildlife it harbors.  
(F.S. 193)**

**Agricultural landowners can apply for and receive an "exemption," and pay property taxes based on the current agricultural uses on their property.**

**But the land still retains its underlying housing density, as provided under state law and shown on each county's future land use map.**

## Examining Public Policies

**There is no property tax structure — or credit — for environmental uses of land, such as aquifer recharge, or for areas that are left in a natural or undisturbed state, such as habitats that harbor threatened or endangered species.**

## Examining Public Policies

**Consequently, the current property appraisal system actually works against less-than-fee, transfer of development right and conservation easement concepts that offer landowners compensation in return for their willingness to limit (or give up) residential use on their land so its food-growing and natural resources values can be retained or enhanced.**

## Examining Public Policies

**Many landowners do not want any limit placed on their options as a property owner.**

**However, the current appraisal system requires that they "give up" a potentially lucrative use of their property, if they choose to act as responsible custodians of the natural resources on their property.**

## Examining Public Policies

**Moreover, many land managing agencies and nonprofit organizations that operate less-than-fee and conservation easement programs, often are required by statute ... or insist ... that they pay no more than the current appraised value for the development rights that they purchase.**

**Some groups even try to reduce this price to 85% of appraisal.**

## Examining Public Policies

Hence, the landowner is given the impression that he or she is losing out on a valuable future use ... is being paid less than today's market value for that use ... and, therefore, is being **penalized**, not rewarded or provided a with a benefit ... for acting as a responsible steward of his or her property.

**A better approach would be to create an incentive program for private landowners who provide beneficial uses on their land for environmental restoration or enhancement ... with some form of *direct* or *indirect* compensation, such as:**

- a cash payment on an annual basis,
- an inheritance or property tax credit,
- funds for capital improvements and installation of Best Management Practices (BMPs),
- or regulatory relief.

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**Converting agricultural lands to urban uses will mean the loss of their natural resources and wildlife values. Purchasing them with public monies may be prohibitively costly.**

**The results of our study in Hillsborough County shows that open spaces purchased with public monies cost the county \$1.15 for every \$1.00 generated in revenues, creating a \$0.15 deficit, while agricultural uses only cost \$0.16 for every \$1.00 of revenue, producing an \$0.84 surplus.**

**Although the tax revenues and economic contributions produced by low intensity agricultural uses are small when compared with other land uses, the costs for the services they require are even smaller.**

**When these lands are purchased with public monies, their tax revenues and economic contributions are lost. The public also must pay for purchasing these lands, for making capital improvements and for providing ongoing annual maintenance and management.**

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**When public budgets are cut, maintenance and management of public lands often is one of the first categories to suffer, which in turn, allows these lands to degrade, become invaded with exotic species and, with the build up of undergrowth, be at greater risk of severe damage of habitat destruction as the result of intense fires.**

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**One dramatic example of this is the 60,000 acres of scrub jay habitat that has been purchased by the state with public monies. Scrub jay populations have declined as a direct result of the change in management practices (or worse, the lack of management) that has occurred from the time these lands were in private ownership.**

-- Kirby Green, Deputy Secretary, Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Keynote Address: "A Brief History of Public Land Acquisition and Management in Florida," Second Annual Agro-Ecology Conference, Jacksonville, Florida, February 25, 1999.

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**Much of the blame for this lies with a “buy now, manage later” philosophy that has permeated the state’s land acquisition program until just recently.**

**Two other contributing factors have been an across-the-board policy to immediately remove the private landowner from the property, which results in a cessation of the activities the landowner may have been pursuing for generations to manage the land, and the years-long delays that have occurred in developing public management plans for publicly-owned properties.**

**-- Also from Kirby Green, February 25, 1999.**

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**Land managers in several agencies -- including DEP and SFWMD -- estimate that it will cost from \$100 per acre up to \$1000 per acre to return these lands to the conditions that existed on them when they were purchased from private landowners.**

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**The fact that these lands have been allowed to degrade -- and need to be restored at an extremely high cost to the tax paying public -- represents a gross violation of public trust.**

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**If you go out to any parcel of state or water management district owned land, then go out on private ranch land you'll quickly see which lands have more wildlife and who are the better land managers.**

***Usually, it's the private landowner. We have to pay anyway. So why not pay private landowners to keep and care for the wildlife habitats and other natural resources that they now have on their properties?***

**We also need to ensure that our public lands are adequately managed ...**

**This means making funds available to immediately take care of the entire management backlog that exists on our public lands, before any more damage is done, or ecological values are lost ...**

**And not buying one more acre of land until the necessary funds are set aside to ensure proper management of our public lands ... for all time.**

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