

Addressing Offroad Vehicle Damage in J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area



Major Michael Davis and Dr. Thomas Reinert
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
Natural Resources Leadership Institute Class 24

J.W. Corbett Wildlife Management Area

- Established in 1947, covers >60,000 acres
- One of Florida's oldest Wildlife Management Areas (WMA)
- Most of the area was acquired using funds from the Federal Aid and Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act)
- Mission:
 - Conserve and restore natural wildlife habitat
 - Provide opportunities for fish and wildlife-based public outdoor recreation
- Off-road vehicle (ORV) use historically has been allowed since acquisition
 - Facilitates hunter access
 - Use primarily is restricted to active hunters



Off-road Vehicles (ORVs)

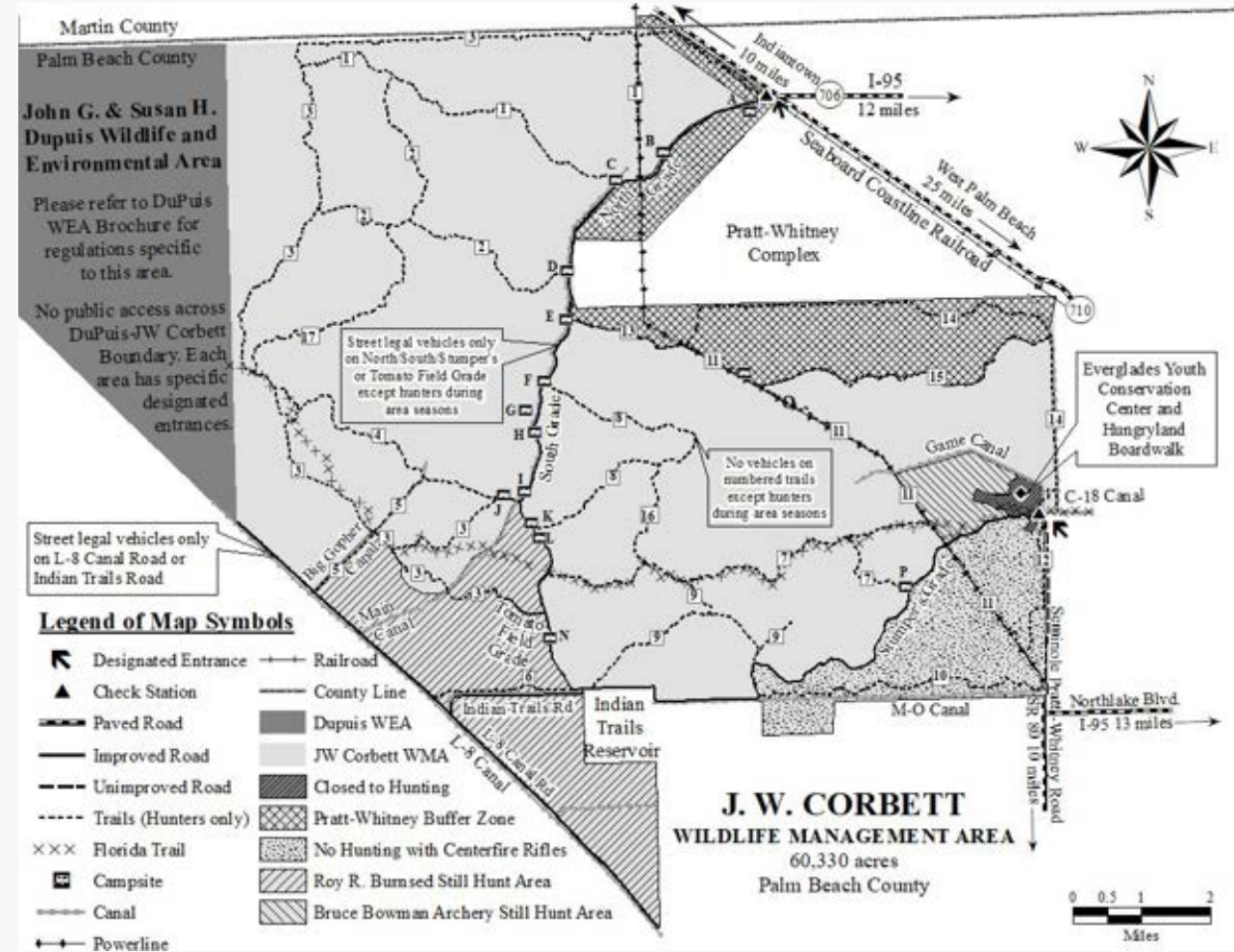
Then...

...Now



Rules Relating to ORVs on J.W. Corbett WMA

- Motor vehicles may only be operated on named roads; however,...
- During archery and spring turkey seasons, **hunters** may also operate motor vehicles (street legal vehicles, side-by-sides, and swamp buggies only) on named roads and numbered trails
- During muzzleloading gun, general gun, and small game seasons, **hunters** may also operate motor vehicles throughout the area (except in areas closed to motor vehicles, e.g., still hunt areas)
- Users must be engaged in the act of hunting to access trails and be off-trail. 'Mudding' is not a part of traditional hunting practices.



Hunting Seasons and ORV use in J.W. Corbett WMA

<u>SEASON</u>	<u>ORV Use</u>
Archery ~ first three weeks in September	Roads and Trails only
Muzzleloading Gun ~ two weeks early/mid October	Throughout the area (off-trail)
General Gun ~ last three weeks in November and all of December	Throughout the area (off-trail)
Small Game ~ all of January through third weekend of February	Throughout the area (off-trail)
Spring Turkey ~ all of March through the first week of April (Saturdays, Sundays, Wednesdays only)	Roads and Trails only



~15 weeks of off-trail use is permitted



ORV issues in J.W. Corbett WMA

- Damage to Natural Communities
 - Bisecting tree islands
 - Short-circuiting hydrology
 - Preventing regrowth of trees and shrubs
- Spread of Invasive Plants
- Wildfire ignition



Staff Proposal

- Eliminate off-trail driving.
- During hunting seasons, allow ORV use (legal vehicles, side-by-sides, and swamp buggies) ONLY on named roads and numbered trails.
- Staff identified additional trails to add to the trail system.
- FWC will work with stakeholders to identify potential new trails.
- No quotas are proposed.
- No reductions in season lengths are proposed.



Public engagement and the NRLI process

- October: first public engagement meeting
 - Met with interested parties ‘in-the-round’
 - Included:
 - Florida Sportsman’s Conservation Association
 - Miami-Dade Halftrack and Airboat Conservation Club
 - Isaak Walton League Big Cypress Chapter
 - Equestrian interests
 - Mountain biking interests
 - Lake Okeechobee Airboat Association



Public engagement and the NRLI process

- October: first public engagement meeting
 - Introductions
 - Staff presentation and proposal
 - Question time
 - Discussion
 - Each member had opportunity to speak
 - Staff listened to concerns and suggestions
 - Goals: Engagement, Listening



Public engagement and the NRLI process

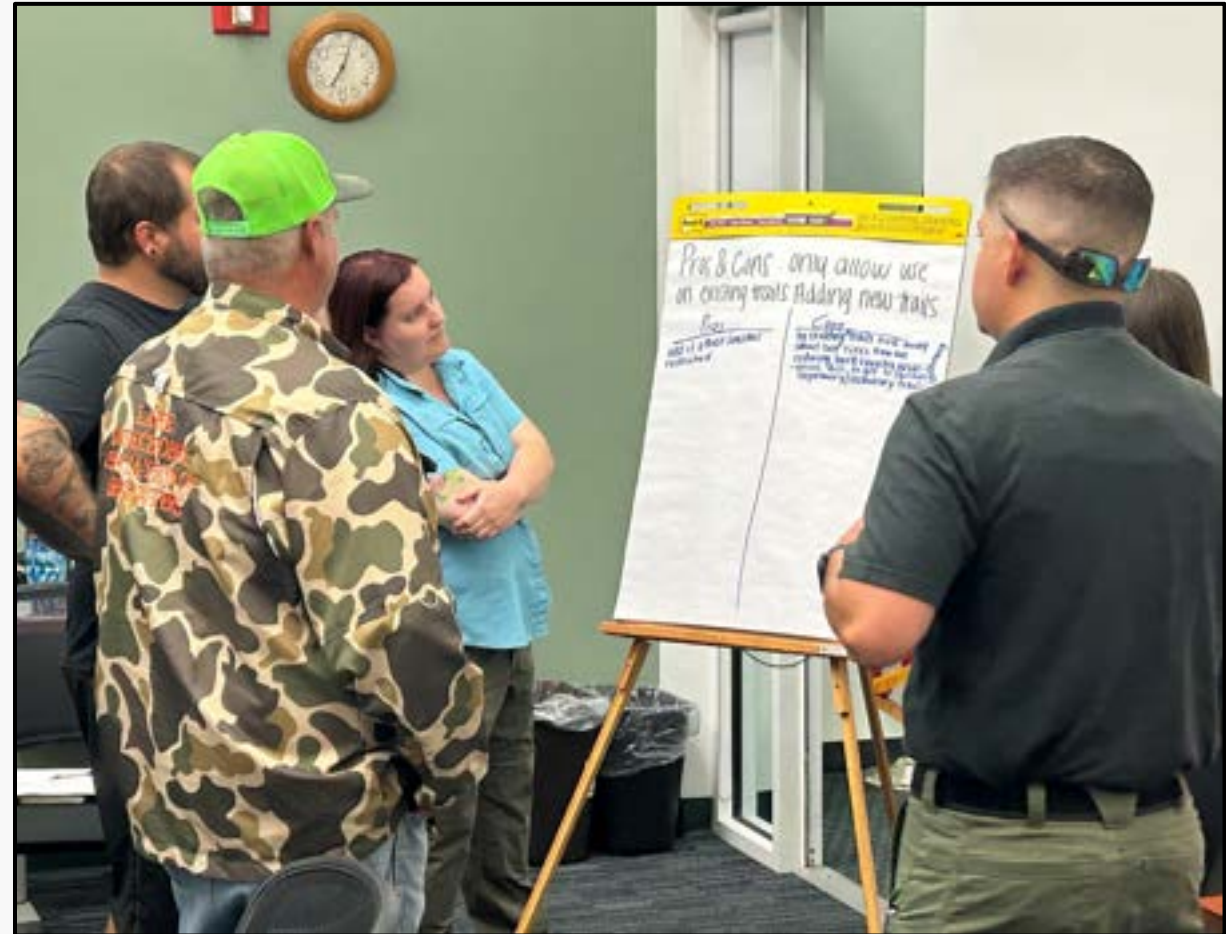
- January: second interested party meeting
 - Met individually with two ‘thought leaders’ of the community
 - ‘Interview’ style meeting over lunch
 - Discussed variety of subjects and specifics of ORV issue at Corbett
 - Goals: Engagement, Trust-building



Public engagement and the NRLI process

- April: third interested party meeting
 - ORV and ‘still’ hunters that use Corbett; ‘Small Group discussion-style’
 - Introductions and presentation
 - Groups: One FWC staff, one FWC officer (plain clothes), two hunters: one ORV and one still hunter
- Breakout into ‘4-corners’
 - “Only allow access on existing trails; adding new trails”
 - “Eliminate off-trail use during MZ gun and Small Game”
 - “Divide General Gun into 1-month ‘walk’ and 1-month ‘vehicle’ seasons”
 - “Other ideas to reduce off-trail damage”
- Whole group summary and discussion
- Goals: Discussion, Consensus

Guest starring Amanda Thompson!



What did we learn?

- Area users are resistant to change
 - “Traditional use”
 - “Loss of access”
- Some recognized the issue, others didn’t
- Blame shifting
 - “Jeep clubs!”
 - “Just need more enforcement!”
- “Need” to be off-trail during dog-hunting season (General Gun*)
 - “Only area in South Florida to dog hunt!”
- Many suggestions that didn’t directly address the issue



Next Steps

- Continue to work on the proposal with FWC staff
- Create alternatives for focus-group consideration
- Additional focus group meeting(s)
- Develop rule proposal for annual Hunting Rules survey (Fall 2025)
- Draft Rule development for FWC Commission consideration
- Draft Rule proposal, Nov. 2025
- Final Rule, Feb. 2026



Questions?



Now...



...Future?