

Caloosahatchee – Kissimmee Critical Linkage

Stretching across more than 550,000 acres of Florida's interior between the Caloosahatchee River to the south and west and the Kissimmee River to the north and east, the Caloosahatchee–Kissimmee Critical Linkage provides a vital connection between the headwaters of the Everglades, some of the last unprotected dry prairie in the state, and lands north of the Caloosahatchee River. For the Florida panther, this linkage represents an essential opportunity for long-term recovery. Currently confined largely to South Florida, panthers require northward expansion across the Caloosahatchee River into higher, more connected terrain as sea level rise and development pressure threaten their existing range. The Caloosahatchee–Kissimmee landscape provides one of the last remaining inland corridors for that movement, offering relatively dry, climate-resilient habitat essential for reestablishing populations across a broader range.

The linkage encompasses two major river corridors: Fisheating Creek and the Kissimmee River. These riparian systems are critical to Florida's ecological health, providing aquifer recharge, flood management, water purification, and habitat for both terrestrial and aquatic species. Fisheating Creek is the last naturally flowing tributary of Lake Okeechobee, while the Kissimmee River has become an internationally recognized model of ecosystem restoration. Since the 1990s, more than 45 miles of its channelized course and 25,000 acres of wetlands have been restored, resulting in the rapid return of native species such as wading birds. Protecting the surrounding lands ensures these restoration gains are secured and that the headwaters of the Everglades, Caloosahatchee, and Peace River watersheds continue to function as lifelines for ecosystems across South Florida.

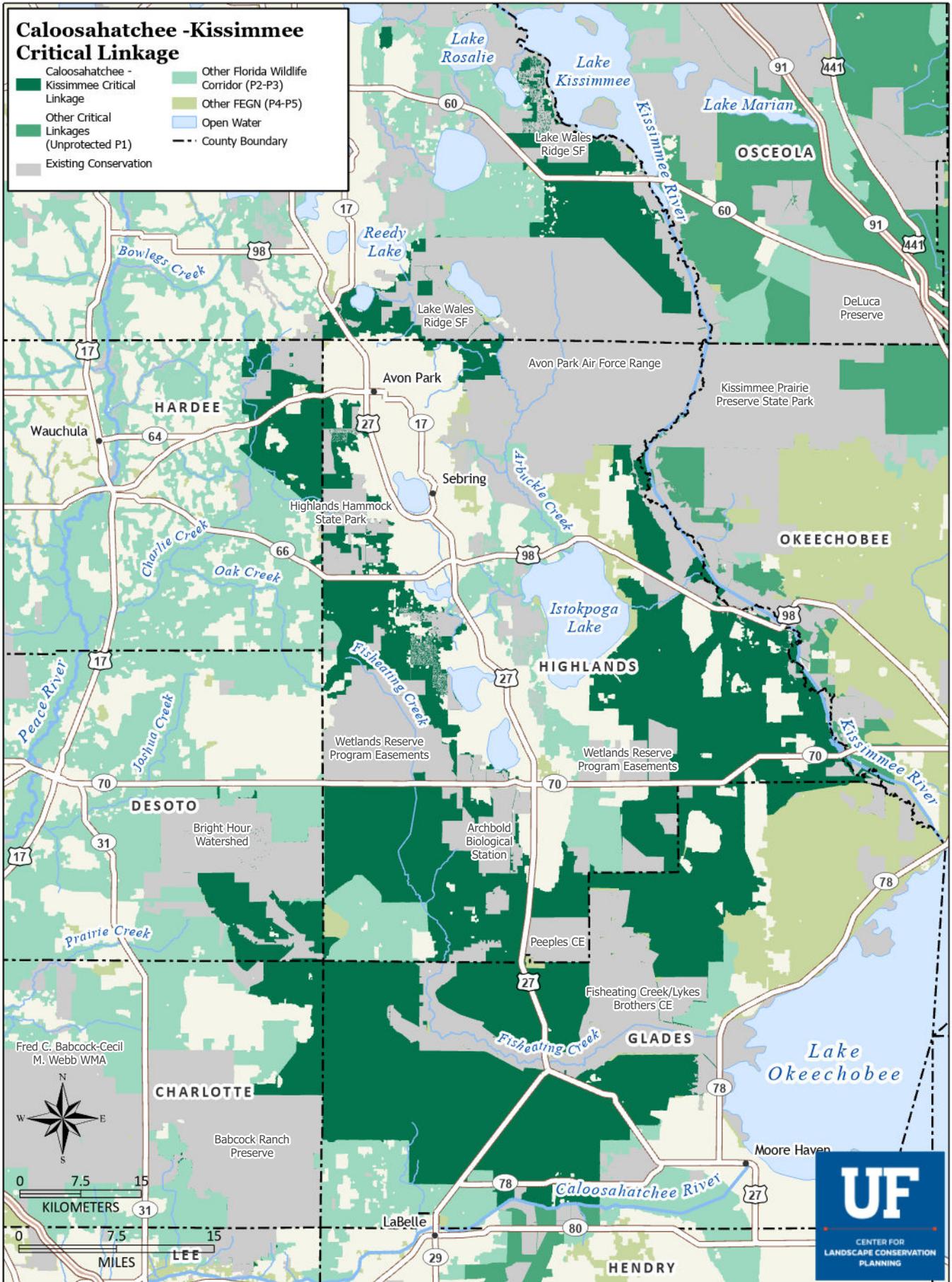
Much of the linkage landscape consists of extensive ranchlands and Florida dry prairie. Though altered, these working ranchlands provide large, open, and relatively unfragmented habitat that supports species such as the crested caracara, Florida sandhill crane, Florida burrowing owl, and the critically endangered Florida grasshopper sparrow. Ranchlands maintain ecological processes through fire, grazing, and seasonal flooding while sustaining rural economies and cultural livestock management traditions that predate the cowboy culture of the American West. With careful stewardship, these lands can continue to support both biodiversity and community livelihoods while protecting wetlands, sloughs, swamps, wet and dry prairie, and associated ecosystems within and beyond ranch boundaries in this region. Other significant natural communities in the linkage include mesic flatwoods and scrub, especially where the linkage overlaps with the Lake Wales Ridge.

This linkage is also recognized as part of the Avon Park Air Force Range Sentinel Landscape, where conservation, agriculture, and national defense priorities align. Spanning more than 1.7 million acres, the Sentinel Landscape supports wildlife habitat, water resource protection, and rural economies while maintaining buffers for military readiness and training.

Protecting the Caloosahatchee–Kissimmee Critical Linkage is vital for sustaining hydrological processes, securing the integrity of the Everglades headwaters and Florida's prairie region, maintaining ranchland economies, and ensuring connectivity for imperiled species like the Florida panther.

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- Caloosahatchee - Kissimmee Critical Linkage
- Other Florida Wildlife Corridor (P2-P3)
- Other FEGN (P4-P5)
- Other Critical Linkages (Unprotected P1)
- Open Water
- County Boundary
- Existing Conservation



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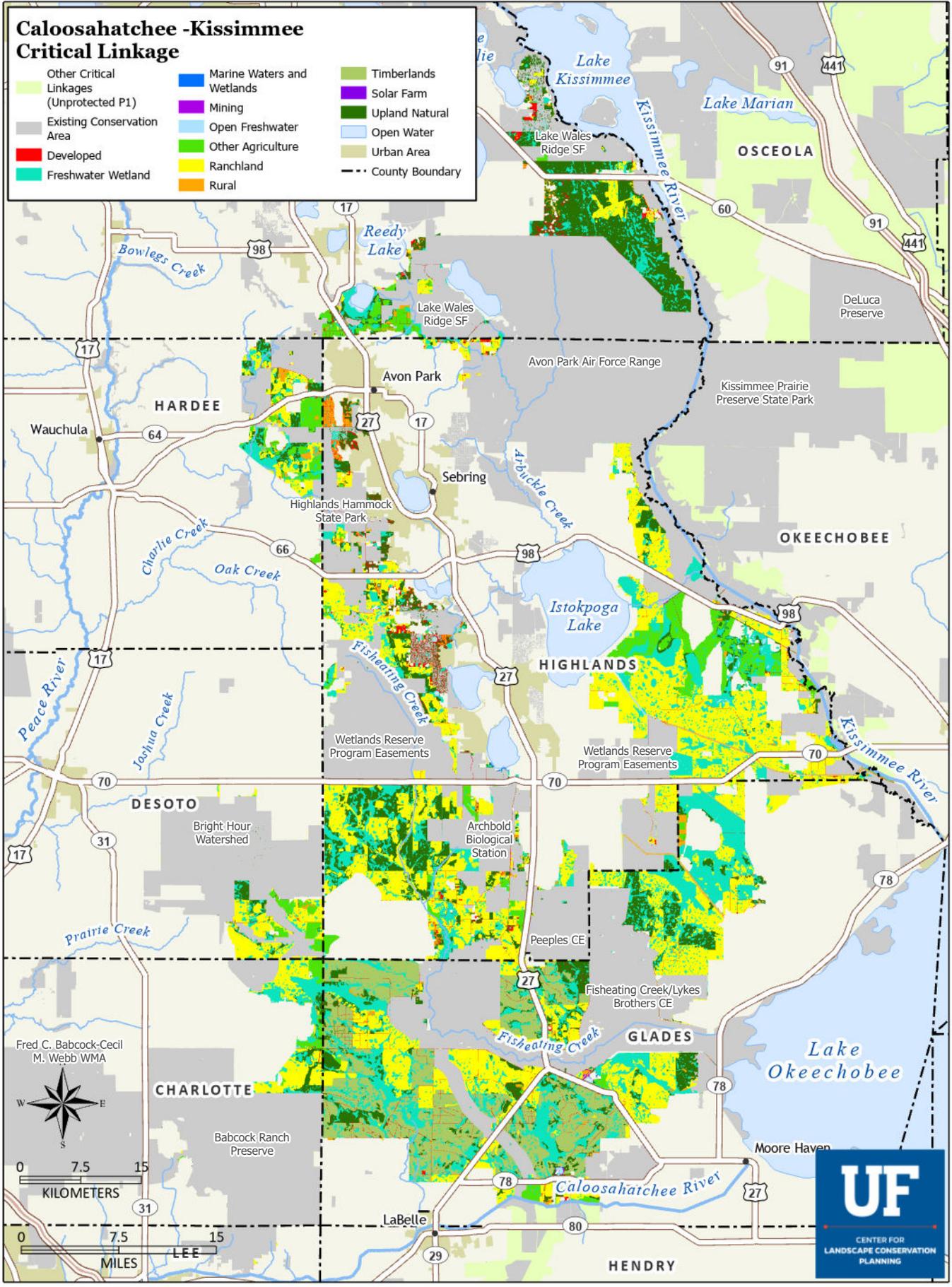
0 7.5 15
KILOMETERS

0 7.5 15
MILES



Caloosahatchee-Kissimmee Critical Linkage

- | | | |
|------------------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| Other Critical Linkages (Unprotected P1) | Marine Waters and Wetlands | Timberlands |
| Existing Conservation Area | Mining | Upland Natural |
| Developed | Open Freshwater | Open Water |
| Freshwater Wetland | Other Agriculture | Urban Area |
| | Ranchland | County Boundary |
| | Rural | |



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