

Nature Coast Critical Linkage

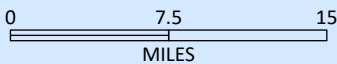
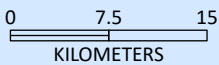
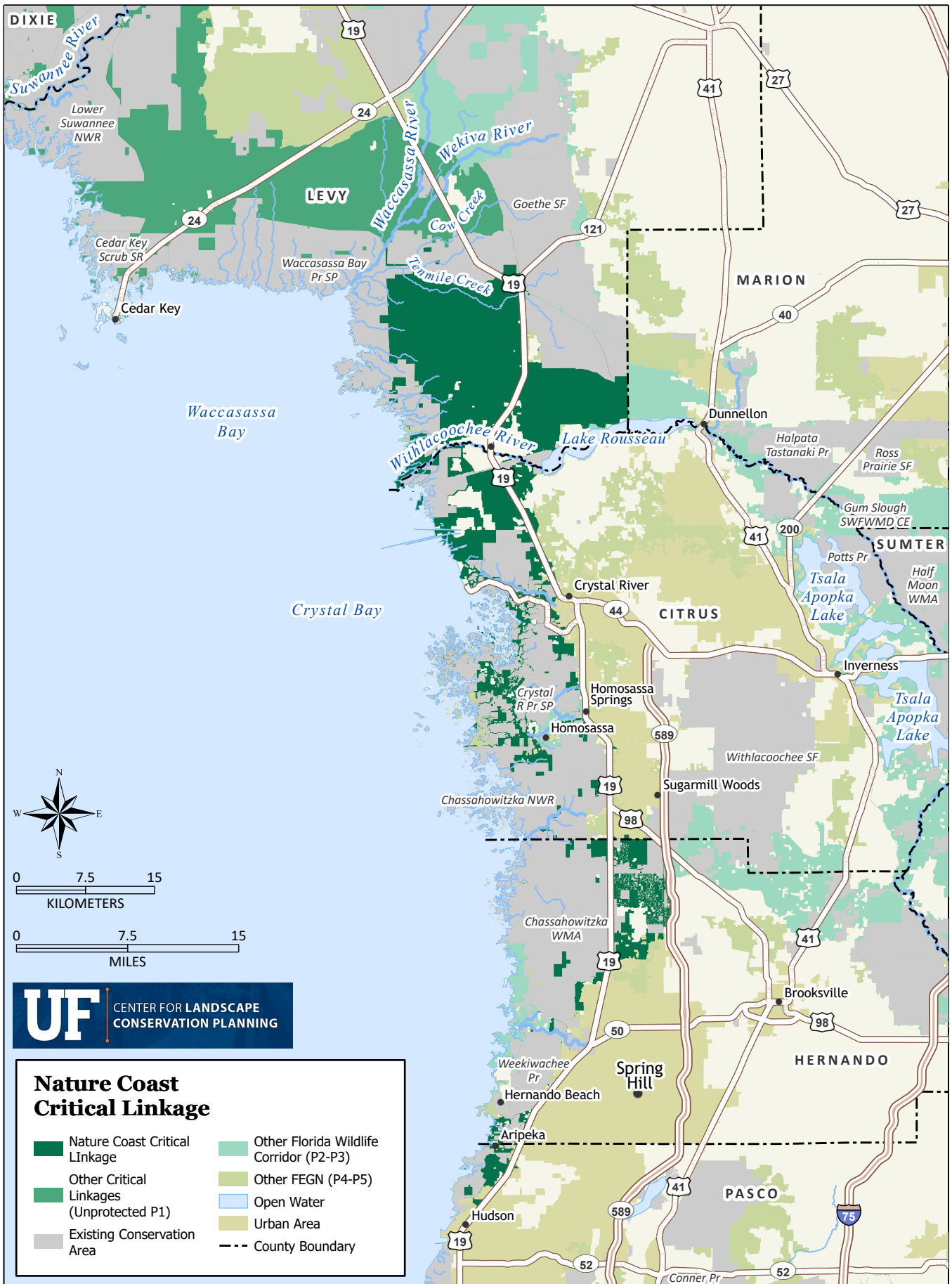
The Nature Coast Critical Linkage, located north of Tampa along Florida's west coast, represents one of the most vulnerable and fragmented corridors in the Florida Ecological Greenways Network (FEGN). This narrow connection seeks to link inland conservation areas such as Withlacoochee State Forest with coastal preserves including Chassahowitzka and Crystal River National Wildlife Refuges, while also providing a northward connection to the Big Bend region. Despite its strategic importance, the linkage is already heavily constrained by development along U.S. Highway 19 and faces additional long-term threats from sea level rise, which could inundate existing tidal marsh and further compress the corridor.

The Nature Coast is defined by its globally significant spring systems and rivers. Iconic first magnitude springs such as Crystal River's Three Sisters Springs, Homosassa Springs, and Weeki Wachee Springs are critical warm-water refuges for the Florida manatee. These systems also anchor a robust tourism and recreation economy. However, nitrate pollution, saltwater intrusion, groundwater withdrawals, and intensive recreational use are degrading water quality, reducing flows, and increasing the frequency of harmful algal blooms. Protecting the surrounding uplands and aquifer recharge areas is essential to sustaining these spring-fed rivers and the coastal ecosystems they support.

Ecologically, the corridor includes a mosaic of unique natural communities, from hydric hammocks and coastal hardwood forests to remnant sandhill ridges and the Gulf Hammock region, a once extensive coastal forest largely converted to pine plantations. These habitats support species like the Florida black bear, which depends on this corridor for movement. The local bear population is increasingly isolated, facing high risks of vehicle collisions and human-wildlife conflict as natural habitats are further fragmented. The linkage is one of the last opportunities to secure functional north-south and east-west bear movement routes in this part of Florida.

Conservation challenges here differ in degree from other Critical Linkages. Fragmentation by highways, commercial zoning, and coastal development has already severely reduced connectivity, leaving only narrow tracts of land that may serve as minimally functional corridors. Nearly all land along U.S. 19 is zoned for commercial use, creating a significant barrier to wildlife movement and long-term ecological function. Buffering the coastline against sea level rise and consolidating a viable corridor between the Chassahowitzka National Wildlife Refuge and the Gulf Hammock area are among the most urgent priorities.

The Nature Coast Critical Linkage illustrates the difficulty of maintaining corridor viability in a region where development pressure, water quality degradation, and climate change converge. Future strategies will need to extend beyond large-scale acquisition, focusing instead on targeted easements, habitat restoration, and collaborative planning that integrates conservation into a rapidly urbanizing landscape. Without intervention, the area risks losing one of the few remaining connections between central Florida's inland forests and the Gulf Coast, with lasting consequences for manatees, black bears, and the unique ecosystems of the Nature Coast.



UF CENTER FOR LANDSCAPE CONSERVATION PLANNING

Nature Coast Critical Linkage

- Nature Coast Critical Linkage
- Other Florida Wildlife Corridor (P2-P3)
- Other Critical Linkages (Unprotected P1)
- Open Water
- Existing Conservation Area
- Urban Area
- County Boundary

