

# Supporting Natural Resources Community Outreach and Education

## Initiative Summary Statement:

Identify, organize, and expand cross-jurisdictional public education campaigns that raise awareness of environmental challenges in the County and encourage residents, visitors, and businesses to take steps to reduce negative impacts on natural resources.

## Initiative Description:

**Objective:** Encourage County residents to pursue actions that reduce impacts on local natural resources and contribute to healthy ecosystems by leveraging the shared experiences from Hurricane Ian in community outreach and education. By actively engaging with the surrounding communities, building strong relationships, and raising awareness about the significance of local natural resources, the County will be better positioned to effectively address shared challenges and promote long term stewardship of natural resources.

**Need:** Hurricane Ian caused destruction to many of the region's natural resources; responsible restoration and long-term management of these resources can have important environmental, social, and economic benefits for the Lee County community. While Lee County and local municipalities do have natural resource preservation practices in place, increasing the understanding and implementation of natural resources management is a long-term resilience strategy for the region. A healthy, functioning natural environment typically reduces the risk of damage from future extreme natural events (e.g., coastal natural barriers such as mangrove forests protect against storm surge and sea level rise, natural spaces and water management infrastructure regulate flow and reduce flooding, and trees and other vegetation provide shade and reduce heat impacts to life and property while providing treatment of water and habitats for wildlife). Furthermore, educating communities and community leaders about the cascading positive benefits of environmental action, especially where that action supports economic goals, is needed to increase adoption of solutions.

**Regional Approach:** Actions to fulfill this Initiative would include the coordination, design, and implementation of natural resources outreach and education campaigns. Outreach campaigns could include virtual and/or in-person strategies to identify those with an interest in natural resources and connect them with relevant education and services. Environmental education efforts could then focus on expanding the offering of programs that allows individuals to understand and explore environmental issues, engage in problem

solving, and take action to improve the environment.<sup>20</sup> Outreach and education efforts could also be coordinated with the Lee County School Districts and higher education institutions. The Lee County School District hosts collaborative events that can be expanded to further their reach into the community.

Lee County created “Our Water Story,” an online story map that provides a visual tour of the watershed, discusses local environmental challenges and root causes, and identifies action steps that the County and partner agencies have taken to help improve local water quality. This resource could be updated to include:

- Post-storm issues and natural resource recovery needs;
- Other campaigns not just about Water Quality or link to a separate StoryMap (e.g. Land, outreach and education);
- A section with municipalities, school district, partners, non-profit and faith-based organizations, and Universities’ initiatives;
- An Events section for community engagement and action; and
- Natural Resources Outreach and Education Plan.

**Impact:** Successful fulfillment of this Initiative would include expanded and/or new action-oriented environmental outreach and education campaigns that increase residents’ commitment to sustainable choices. Natural resources exist and function across political boundaries; the County and local jurisdictions already maintain objectives, policies, programs, and plans for managing natural resources. In addition to those resources, collaboration across local agencies and with external partners supports the development of common sets of education goals across resilience and economic benefits of these resources.

#### **Key Considerations:**

- Develop a Natural Resources Outreach and Education Plan based on an assessment of current natural resources community outreach and education programs, defined objectives, and aligned educational programming needs across the County.
- Update Lee County’s Our Water Story to include post-storm details and focus on outreach, education, and community action/engagement.

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<sup>20</sup> United States Environmental Protection Agency, *What is Environmental Education?*, <https://www.epa.gov/education/what-environmental-education>, accessed October 2023

- Public outreach campaigns should be data driven and should include the economic value of natural resources to educate and inform local leaders.

## Co-Sponsoring Branches:

Natural Resources, Cultural Resources, Education and Workforce

## Stakeholders:

- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- South Florida Water Management District
- Community development districts and other special districts providing utility services.
- Utility providers
- County departmental experts on natural resources, parks, and recreation.
- Municipal departmental experts on natural resources, parks, and recreation.
- Nonprofits involved in environmental education.
- School Districts
- University partnerships

## Potential Funding Sources:

- Environmental Protection Agency
- National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
- Florida Department of Environmental Protection
- South Florida Water Management District
- National Resources Defense Council

## Resources:

- Lee Plan (2023) Appendix A: Lee Plan Green Infrastructure and Solutions, Goals, Objectives, and Policies ([Lee Plan \(January 2023\)](#))
- New Horizon 2035 Evaluation and Appraisal Report (green infrastructure recommendations)
- City Comprehensive Plans
- Lee County [Our Water Story](#)