
STRATEGIC CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT OF
GULF COAST LANDSCAPES

**NORTHWEST
FLORIDA
SENTINEL
LANDSCAPE
USE CASE STUDY**

February 2022

NORTHWEST FLORIDA SENTINEL LANDSCAPE

Conservation Geography: Northwest Florida
Primary Stakeholder: Kent Wimmer, Defenders of Wildlife

Defenders of Wildlife is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting all native animals and plants in their natural communities throughout North America through work on the ground, on Capitol Hill, and in courts. Over the past three years, Defenders has been working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Air Force to build a **Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscapes Partnership**. The purpose of this partnership and associated designation proposal is to develop a regional approach to foster cross-sector partnership, build local capacity, and support ecological and community resiliency to protect military missions, maintain working lands and conserve wildlife habitat in Northwest Florida.

This project met several of the Strategic Conservation Assessment of Gulf Coast Landscape's (SCA's) Use Case Study selection criteria (see below), and was unique in its intention to submit for a Sentinel Landscape designation that could result in future conservation efforts across Northwest Florida. The primary stakeholder was **Kent Wimmer**, Senior Northwest Florida Representative for Defenders of Wildlife, who is Coordinator for the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape.

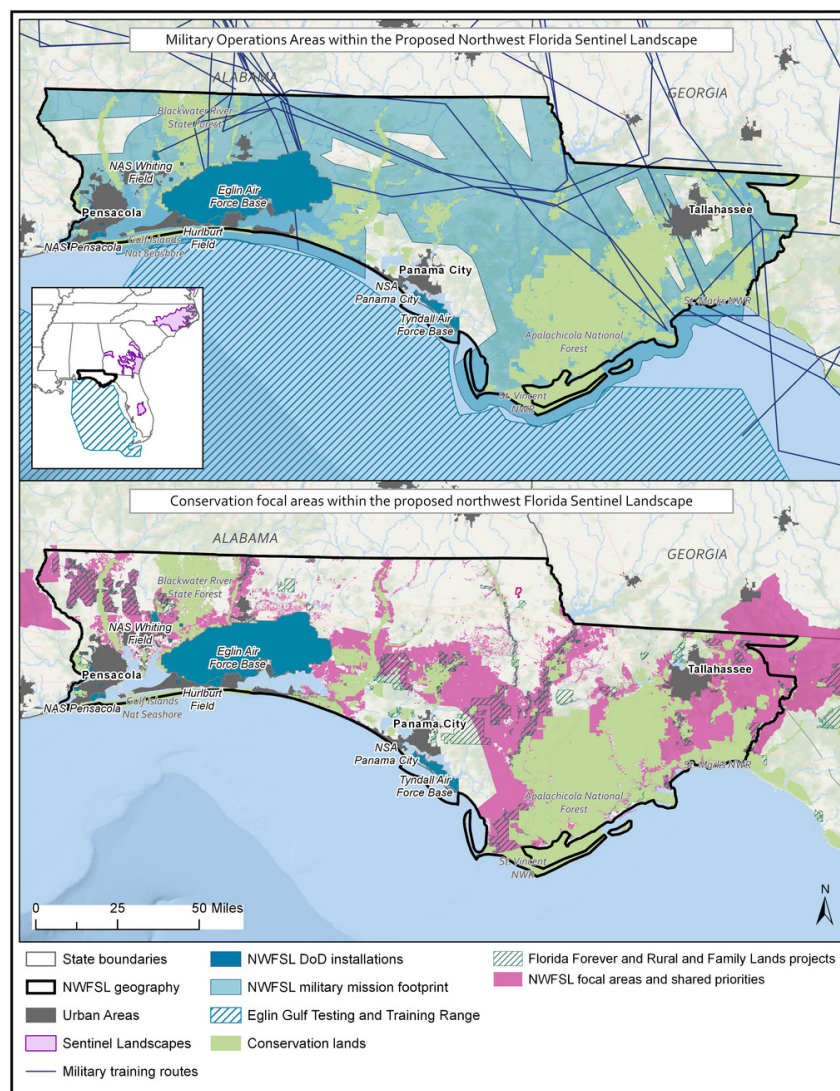
Use Case Study Selection Criteria

- ✓ focuses on the acquisition or easement of land (land conservation; not restoration)
- ✓ exhibits a transferable issue that could be experienced by other areas in the region
- ✓ represents an application scale that fits into the hexagonal framework of the SCA project
- ✓ represents a diversity of agency type / mission
- ✓ fits within the existing RESTORE Council goal framework
- ✓ focuses in an area that complements the geographic diversity of the SCA region
- ✓ has planning or funding decisions going to be made within the SCA project timeline

Use Case Study Purpose:

Using the SCA tools to provide additional scientific support for implementing conservation goals of the proposed Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape.

The SCA Team (hereafter we) launched this Use Case Study with an initial scoping call in August 2020. In describing his main goal for this Use Case Study, Kent said he was hoping: **“To obtain another tool that the partners for the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape would be able to use in evaluating potential land conservation projects”** (see map below of the proposed site).





Unlike the other Use Case Studies in which we spent a large portion of time using the tools to compare areas of interest, we focused our working sessions on discussions regarding what was necessary to further supplement the Sentinel Landscape partners' ([the Partners](#)) proposal, and on reviews of the data layers previously assembled (see the inset map on page 2). Several engagement sessions occurred from August 2020 to January 2021 to narrow down the priority data layers of interest. The priority data layers identified during these engagement sessions included [military boundaries and buffers and projections of future land use](#), which are all vital components for the Sentinel Landscape efforts.

Sentinel Landscapes serve to protect: [1\) the mission of military installations, 2\) the habitat of threatened and endangered species, and 3\) working lands \(e.g., farms, forest\)](#). The opportunity for synergy in our efforts stemmed from the Partners' knowledge of military installations and working lands and our data measures related to threatened and endangered species. Kent was also interested in the additional data measures used in the SCA Tool Suite because they could provide further information about potentially mutually beneficial conservation opportunities.

Throughout 2021, we maintained connection with the Partners while they were actively engaged in developing their pre- and full proposals for the Sentinel Landscapes program. In August 2021, they submitted the full proposal to the Sentinel Landscapes Federal Coordinating Committee.

In February 2022, the Sentinel Landscapes Partnership officially announced the designation of the [Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape](#)! This federal designation covers an area of approximately 7.7 million acres in the Florida Panhandle and will be essential in supporting the coordination of cross-programmatic efforts to conserve working lands and wildlife habitat around Eglin Airforce Base.

As the SCA project nears completion of a year-long tool refactoring, we are now able to focus on enhancing tool functionality for Use Case Studies, such as this one, by including high priority datasets identified during the co-production process. Additionally, the SCA project received a project extension, which has enabled us to **reaffirm our collaboration with the [Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape Partnership](#), and we look forward to future discussions, synergistic opportunities, and the collaborative pursuit of shared objectives and outcomes.**





This Use Case Study adequately fulfilled its initial objective of showing how the SCA tools could provide additional scientific support for implementing conservation goals of the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape; however, another objective was developed through our efforts that indicate future opportunities. **Now that the Partners have received a Sentinel Landscape designation for Northwest Florida, the whole SCA Tool Suite may become more valuable in assisting future land conservation projects.** For example, the Partners may be benefitted by using: 1) the [Conservation Planning Inventory Tool](#) to review conservation plans and find partners for new collaborative efforts, 2) the [Conservation Prioritization Tool](#) to evaluate and prioritize areas of interest for conservation, and 3) the [Conservation Visualization Tool](#) to determine where conservation opportunities overlap with military installations and working lands to fully support the Sentinel Landscape mission.

Our approach to these Use Case Studies has been a co-production process in which we collaborate with stakeholders to promote a cross-pollination of institutional and local knowledge while capturing feedback to inform future tool improvements. **We recognize the challenges of attempting to work collaboratively in a virtual environment and appreciated Kent's patience as the project evolved and team underwent changes.** We wanted to capture additional feedback regarding the overall process as a form of evaluation because we know it could be improved, so we asked Kent the following questions.

Why were you interested in becoming a Use Case Study?

"Northwest Florida has been proposed for designation as a Sentinel Landscape. We believe the tool could be beneficial to our partners in prioritizing potential land conservation projects."

What did you enjoy about this process?

"The SCA staff were easy to work with, they discussed our needs and objectives and went out of their way to highlight our case study in their newsletter and public presentations."

Do you think your Use Case Study was a success?

"Yes I do. The partners for the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape look forward to employing these new tools as we identify partnership opportunities, to evaluate potential conservation projects and to have solid data to inform our collaborative decision making and actions."

Can you think of anything that would have made your Use Case Study more successful?

"I appreciate the Case Study including datasets for military boundaries and buffers areas and projections for future land use in the tools. These datasets will influence the conservation projects that are identified and selected. We look forward to the opportunity to working with SCA to employ these tools."



Given the unique nature of this Use Case Study, there were many lessons learned and valuable accomplishments for both sides of this collaboration. Kent provided appreciated feedback regarding the tools though he has not yet had the opportunity to apply them to any on the ground conservation efforts. Our current collaboration and future synergy opportunities, including **identifying strategic areas for conservation within the broad military focus areas mapped in the Northwest Florida Sentinel Landscape boundaries**, highlight further beneficial ways of applying the SCA Tool Suite to real-time conservation efforts. Furthermore, should the tools' extent be expanded in the future, they may prove useful for additional Sentinel Landscape efforts. When asked about his most valuable lesson from this effort, Kent stated that he realized:

“There are powerful GIS tools available for evaluating potential conservation opportunities being developed.”

Kent concluded by saying he believes the major accomplishment of this effort was:

“The opportunity to establish new partnerships to further the mutual conservation objectives in Northwest Florida.”

This Use Case Study is currently considered complete, though we intend to work with the Partners over the coming year as opportunities arise for collaboration, such as potential data layer inclusions into the tools and teaching the Partners how to apply the tools to evaluate landscape conservation opportunities.

STRATEGIC CONSERVATION ASSESSMENT OF GULF COAST LANDSCAPES

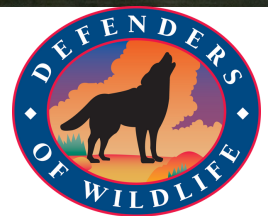
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

Thank you to Kent Wimmer of Defenders of Wildlife for his collaboration and provision of valuable feedback over the last year and a half.

Funding for this project was provided by the Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council through an agreement with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Cooperative Agreement no. F17AC00267), and was produced with support from the Forest and Wildlife Research Center at Mississippi State University. The findings and conclusions in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service or Gulf Coast Ecosystem Restoration Council.



FOREST AND WILDLIFE RESEARCH CENTER



PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS:

All photos courtesy of Defenders of Wildlife and Running Wild Media; Map on Page 2 courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Florida Ecological Services Field Office, Southeast Conservation Adaptation Strategy, and Southeast and South Atlantic Conservation Blueprints teams (Data: Jane Cooke; Map: Louise Vaughn)

www.quest.fwrc.msstate.edu/sca-project.php | scaprojectgulf@gmail.com
