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VANISHING FLORIDA: A LAND REMEMBERED

WABASSO ISLAND, Fla. Sixteen enthusiastic participants joined a big-wheel, open air swamp buggy adventure co-sponsored by the Environmental Learning Center (ELC) and the Indian River Land Trust on the Padgett Creek ranches on a recent Tuesday afternoon for three hours. The sold-out event will be repeated on December 16, January 6 and March 3—and reservations must be made by calling 772-589-5050.

The Padgett Creek ranches comprise two properties covering more than 1600 acres: the Long Shadows Ranch and the Triple S Ranch, adjacent to each other off of SR 60 about 20 miles west of I-95. Indian River County last year executed a conservation easement agreement with the owners that protects the ranches from development in perpetuity.

The program participants were treated to a trip back into vanishing Florida, on a working ranch raising stock cattle for export to other states where they grow and fatten and with a small herd of heirloom “cracker” cows, descendents of the livestock early Spanish settlers left behind when they departed the area.

Lumbering through some improved pastures, as well as many natural hardwood hammocks, scrubby flatwoods and dry and wet prairie, participants explored the flora and fauna—deer, birds, evidence of feral pigs, native plants—that are largely disappearing because of encroaching development.

The group was led by naturalist Heather Stapleton, the ELC Education Coordinator, who guided the trip, identified plants and animals, provided history of the Padgett ranches and explained that Padgett Creek is part of the headwater of the St. John’s River and plays an important role in Florida water management. It is also part of a public and private initiative, led by the Florida Forever state land acquisition and management program, that constitutes the

world's largest conservation land buying effort, having protected more than 530,000 acres as of late 2006.

The Environmental Learning Center is located north of Vero Beach off County Road 510 at the western edge of the Wabasso Bridge. Its 64-acre island campus includes exhibit areas, native plant gardens, picnic facilities, gift shop and visitor center. A list of its many field excursions including hikes, boat excursions, nature walks and bird watching can be found at www.DiscoverELC.org.

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