

**Sonny Williamson**  
*Cattle Rancher*

Cattle ranching has been in Florida since the Spanish brought cattle into St. Augustine in the 1500s. So it's probably 100 or even 150 years older as an activity than cattle ranching in the West. That's something a lot of people don't understand. In Florida, we have a part of the business that's called the cow-calf operation, where cows are raised and they're bred and have calves and those calves are sent as steers to the feedlots in Texas, the high plains area of Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska.

The heifers are kept for replacement cows and so they have a different destination when they are weaned from the cows. Many of them stay right here on this ranch. Some are sent to our Alabama ranch where they are raised, bred and put into the cowherd. The cows themselves stay here until they are probably 8 or 10 years old, at which time they are culled from the herd and end up as hamburgers. That's what this business is about. In the trade it's called the cow-calf part of the business. It's separate from the stocker feeder or the feedlot part of the business.

Well, I think beef cattle ranching is unique in that you can do ranching profitably on the land with very little intensive use of the land. In other words one calf in 4 or 5 acres of pristine land that had been untouched in Florida, it could be one cow for 15 acres. And, it's a way to make some income off the land and yet impact the wildlife habitat and the natural qualities of the land much less. So in my view environmental stewardship and beef cattle ranching mix well together. As long as they're kept in unintensified use. That is you don't try to put 4 cows to one acre. Instead of four acres to one cow. So taking the history of Florida where we drained through all the 1900s and just recently have understood that we must maintain the rest of our wetlands and to help restore the State wetlands. Everybody's heard about the problems with water quality in the everglades and it's very apparent that we need to do a lot in this area of Florida to reverse those practices where we just drained everything. We're trying to find ways to restore wetlands and to do it in a way that will really benefit the water quality when it finally does leave the land, and also to store the water and not pipeline it straight into Lake Okechobee and pipeline it into the everglades, which means more water than should be going and also a dirtier water. So it's a very important issue and we're trying to face up to that here on this ranch.

There's always the challenge of marketing, in other words staying in a profitable business. Only if ranchers can stay in a profitable business can they do the other job of environmental stewardship and do it well. So we have issues about international competition, issues about food safety, issues of diseases that might be perceived to affect humans, all of these sort of things are major challenges.

I suppose the major challenge other than environmental stewardship is marketing --and prices. Right now they're good but there have been times where they were really bad.

One other issue let me mention is land prices in our area of Florida, particularly south Florida have just exploded upward in the last 2 years. It's unbelievable what has happened to these prices because it appears everybody wants to come and live in Florida, or a large number of people do.

The lands are being bought by developers who are putting in huge developments including building small cities. And it's made these acreages go up in value. Well good for the rancher I guess you could say but also bad for the environment because it means that a lot of the large holdings in Florida are going to be broken up and sold for development and they will never be the wildlife habitat that it is now, ever again and they will deteriorate. What we are trying to do is to save and protect Florida's natural habitat. Something, something needs to be done rapidly because that's happening right now.

You know if we lose the habitat, the natural habitat of Florida then Floridians will never be able to see and understand the kind of thing that I've seen, the beauty of this ranch, the beauty of this state as it was. Our connection with nature is extremely important I believe and I don't know what happens to the human being when he is completely urbanized, but I don't really want to be around when that happens.

Wood storks and egrets are common on the ranch, but not in large number. We do have less wetlands on this ranch because a large part of this ranch was drained in the 1940s and 50s, mainly in the 40s and earlier. And so we don't have as much bird life as we used to have but there's a lot of it here. That remnant surely needs to be protected and maybe increased by restoring wetlands here.

I'm second generation on this ranch. I'm actually 5<sup>th</sup> generation Floridian so my son is 3<sup>rd</sup> generation on this ranch and his son is 4<sup>th</sup> generation so we're now into our fourth generation of ownership here.

Wildlife in Florida of course is still abundant. The whole way of wildlife for some species has been disrupted. You might find amphibians in that end of the scale, very much depleted but deer are very much increased so it's an unbalanced nature at this point, working quite well. Nature has a way of accommodating those things but not what we would expect to find in Florida in the 1800s.

Well the future of wildlife in Florida depends on all of the things that you think of that make an environment healthy. The major competitor for wildlife in this state is housing. So if we don't figure out a way to cluster houses to keep them away from large areas, then we're going to have no wildlife or very diminished wildlife in this state. It's true of any state of course but it's happening so rapidly in Florida. We have an opportunity right now in these next few years that we'll never have again — to do something about saving the green spaces that are left.