

It's been chilly lately, but when the weather is nice here in the panhandle, people just seem to run for the outdoors.

A new partnership is giving nature lovers a way to connect to the West Bay ecosystem.

Today the Audubon Society and the St. Joe Company announced their plan to create a nature center. This news is good for locals, tourists and the environment.

The serene landscape is the future site of the Audubon of Florida Nature Center on West Bay.

The land donated by the St. Joe Company has been used for growing timber, but a lot of work will bring these trees back to the basics.

Eric Draper with Audubon Florida said, "We hope to bring back not just the landscape, but also the birds and wildlife that once occupied this beautiful place."

Neil Lamb of the Audubon of Florida says this is one of the centers of biological diversity for all of North America because of the number of plants, fish, and more than 165 species of birds.

"Red head ducks, lesser scop ducks, horned grebes, common lutes. These are birds that nest in the far north, and they come here and it's our responsibility to have a place for them that's secure and safe to over winter."

John Middlemas with Audubon of Florida said, "It's an opportunity to protect West Bay better than any bay in Florida is probably protected."

The nature facility will also be a huge development for tourism as well. It will let the Tourist Development Council expand marketing to visitors and lead the way for more nature based opportunities.

Bob Warren with the TDC said, "It will be very much a green airport in its design. You couple that with the West Bay sector plan, and all the environmental things that we're protecting, you add this particular nature preserve to it and you've just got a well-rounded community that cares about the environment."

Construction should start by 2009, but it will cost \$15 million. The Audubon Society is reaching out to the community for funding and design ideas for the facility.

About 41,000 acres of land will be preserved.

For more information, check out [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org).