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Conservationists sue Miami-Dade County for Approving Water Park, Hotel & Retail Development that will devastate Environmentally Sensitive Land Against Voters' Wishes

MIAMI, FL (Oct. 4, 2022) — [Bat Conservation International](#), [Tropical Audubon Society](#), and a citizen of Miami-Dade County filed a [lawsuit today](#) against Miami-Dade County for leasing environmentally sensitive county-owned land to a water park, hotel and retail developer in direct violation of a voter-approved referendum that prohibits commercial use and development on such land.

According to [the complaint](#), the county entered into a lease agreement on June 23 with Miami Wilds, which seeks to build a 67-acre development on land located in the Richmond Pine Rocklands, which contains the largest and most biodiverse fragment of critically endangered pine rocklands outside of Everglades National Park. The land's unique properties make it vital to the survival of some of the most federally endangered species in Florida, including the [Florida bonneted bat](#).

The proposed development site, adjacent to Zoo Miami, is part of a critical area that supports dozens of rare animals, plants and insects found nowhere else on Earth. In addition to the Florida bonneted bat, it includes the endangered [Miami tiger beetle](#), the [Bartram's scrub-hairstreak](#) and the [Florida leafwing butterflies](#), and the [Eastern Indigo snake](#). Rare plants, including [Florida brickell-bush](#) and [Carter's small-flowered flax](#), are also present around the proposed development site.

At issue is the 2006 voter-approved Metrozoo Referendum that allows for commercial development of county-owned property provided it is on land that is *not* environmentally sensitive. The plaintiffs, including citizen José F. Barros, argue that the county violated the referendum because the number of federally endangered species that live and/or forage in the proposed development site clearly show that it is environmentally sensitive land. The plaintiffs also say that the county violated Article 7 of the Miami-Dade County Charter by entering into a lease for the development of environmentally sensitive public park property without securing approval from Miami-Dade County voters. *Continued >*



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“The proposed Miami Wilds project is a lose-lose,” said Bat Conservation International Executive Director Mike Daulton. “It’s bad for the environment and bad for Miami families. This ill-conceived project will cause the extinction of Florida wildlife while raising costs for Miami families to visit the zoo. The project is illegal and violates the will of Florida voters. It’s time to go back to the drawing board.”

“The county broke the law when it entered into a lease agreement with Miami Wilds blatantly defying the will of our citizens, who clearly voted to protect environmentally sensitive land,” said plaintiff and Miami-Dade County resident José F. Barros [who is also president of Tropical Audubon Society]. “The county needs to heed the will of our voters and protect the rare animals and plants that rely on pine rocklands for their survival and also help make South Florida so unique.”

“Urgent conservation action must be taken to save the Florida bonneted bat from the growing threats of habitat destruction and sea level rise,” said Tropical Audubon Society Senior Conservation Director Lauren Jonaitis. “Every species counts because biodiversity is essential to the ecosystems we all rely upon to eat, breathe and thrive. But not only is the survival of this rare mammal crucial, the protection and preservation of pine rocklands, a globally critically imperiled habitat, is also at stake.”

The plaintiffs are represented by pro-bono counsel Enrique D. Arana, Brian A. Hart and Patricia M. Patino of Carlton Fields in Miami.

[View the full complaint here.](#)

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Founded in 1982, Bat Conservation International is a global conservation organization dedicated to ending bat extinctions. Bat Conservation International works worldwide to conserve caves, restore critical habitats in danger, and ensure the survival of the world’s bat species. For more information, visit batcon.org

Tropical Audubon Society is a science- and solutions-based nonprofit conservation organization driven by its grassroots community and principles of equity, diversity and inclusion. Tropical Audubon’s Legacy is to protect, conserve and restore South Florida ecosystems by working closely with local governments and other stakeholders, and by fostering wise stewardship of native habitats, birds and other indigenous wildlife. For more information, visit tropicalaudubon.org.

TROPICAL AUDUBON SOCIETY MISSION: “Conserve and restore natural South Florida ecosystems, focusing on birds, other wildlife and their habitats.”