

The Florida Everglades

The Everglades is a unique treasure found in South Florida. The Everglades is the largest remaining subtropical wilderness in the United States. It consists of 1.5 million acres of saw grass marshes, mangrove forests, and hardwood hammocks dominated by wetlands. It is home to endangered, rare, and exotic wildlife.

Origins of the Everglades

Water in South Florida once flowed from the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee. Then it flowed southward over low-lying lands to Biscayne Bay, the Ten Thousand Islands, and Florida Bay. This shallow, slow-moving sheet of water created a mosaic of ponds, marshes, and forests. Over thousands of years this developed into a balanced ecosystem.

Wading birds such as great egrets, white ibis, herons, and wood storks were abundant. The Cape Sable seaside sparrow, Miami blackheaded snake, manatee, and Florida panther made the Everglades their home. Alligators and crocodiles existed side by side.

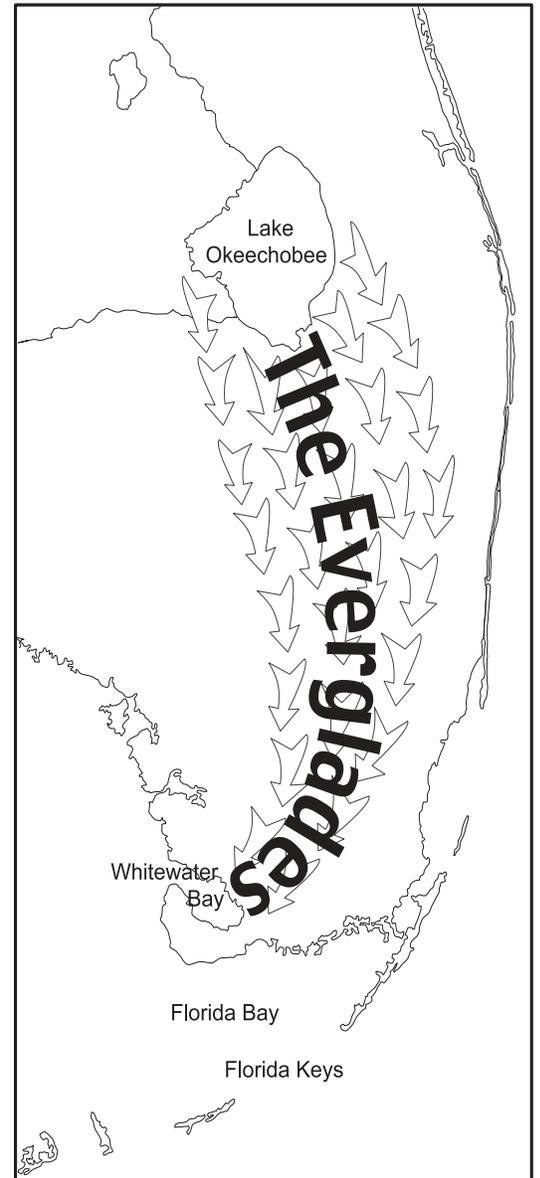
The Seminole and Miccosukee Indians settled in the Everglades. Although they battled with the alligators and crocodiles who live in the 'Glades, they did not interfere with the overall balance of the ecosystem.

Draining the Everglades

Early settlers and land developers considered the Everglades to be a worthless swamp. By the 1800s, developers started digging canals to drain the wetlands. Between 1905 and 1910, large tracts of land were converted to agriculture. This “new” land stimulated the first of South Florida’s land booms. Henry Flagler constructed the first railroad down the Florida peninsula opening up this area to people.

By the 1920s, visitors and new residents flocked to towns like Fort Lauderdale, Miami, and Fort Myers. As they arrived, more canals were dug. Canals, roads, and buildings took the place of native habitats.

In 1948, Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct a system of roads, canals, levees, and water-control structures stretching throughout South Florida. This was intended to provide water and flood protection and to help preserve the Everglades. However, the alteration of the wetlands—combined with increasing population—damaged the natural system.



Marjory Stoneman Douglas called the everglades a “River of Grass.”

In the 1960s, the federal government considered building an international airport in the Everglades area. Florida environmentalists objected. Marjory Stoneman Douglas organized the Friends of the Everglades. The airport was not built and a strong crusade to “Save the Everglades” was begun.

The Everglades Today

Today, 50% of South Florida’s original wetland areas no longer exist. The numbers of wading birds have been reduced by 90%. Entire populations of animals are in danger of disappearing. Exotic pest plants have invaded natural areas. Losses of seagrass beds in Florida Bay have been followed by losses of wildlife.

In Mrs. Douglas’s classic book, *The Everglades: River of Grass*, she wrote, “Unless the people act . . . overdraining will go on. The soil will shrink and burn and be wasted and destroyed, in a continuing ruin.”

However, she continues, in a hopeful vein, “There is a balance in man also, one which has set against his greed . . . Perhaps even in this last hour, in a new relation of usefulness and beauty, the vast, magnificent, subtle and unique region of the Everglades may not be utterly lost.”

The best way to see the Everglades is by picking up a paddle. In wintertime, when the temperatures and swarms of mosquitoes have decreased, Everglades National Park draws large numbers of visitors. They include kayak and canoe campers, along with birders, hikers, and fishermen. They include those with a desire to see this unique treasure.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas 1890-1998



During the century of her life, Marjory Stoneman Douglas was a journalist, playwright, and environmental crusader. She fought for feminism, racial justice, and conservation long before these causes became popular.

Her book, *The Everglades: River of Grass*, published in 1947—the year Everglades National Park was established—has become the definitive description of the natural treasure she fought so hard to protect.

In his introduction to her autobiography, *Voice of the River*, John Rothchild describes her appearance at a public meeting: “Mrs. Douglas was half the size of her fellow speakers and she wore huge dark glasses... along with a huge floppy hat.... Her voice had the sobering effect of a one-room schoolmarm’s. The tone itself seemed to tame the rowdiest of the local stone crabbers, plus the developers, and the lawyers on both sides. I wonder if it didn’t also intimidate the mosquitoes.”

One small person can make a huge difference. Mrs. Douglas was a very small size but cast a giant shadow over the Everglades. Her influence on Florida’s environmental movement was significant.