



# SALVAGING WHAT'S LEFT OF THE EVERGLADES IS VITAL TO FLORIDA'S FUTURE

BY ROBERT F. SANCHEZ

My interest in the Everglades is both personal and professional. The professional interest stirred during the 26 years (1974-2000) when I lived in Miami and served as the “token conservative” on the *Miami Herald* Editorial Board.

On the wall just outside the entrance to my office was a plaque dedicated to Frank Stoneman, *The Herald's* founder and long-time

publisher. Mr. Stoneman was an early defender of the Everglades, passionately opposing the plans of Gov. Napoleon Broward (1905-09) to drain the area, but he is now better known for his paternal role: He was the father of Marjory Stoneman Douglas, whose book would change the course of South Florida's history. More about her later.

When I joined *The Herald* Edito-

rial Board, the newspaper had perceived itself as having a special role in protecting the Everglades from the encroachments of agriculture and from the rapidly growing region's relentless urban sprawl. Indeed, just after World War II, *The Herald's* longtime editor John Pennekamp—the man for whom the unique coral reef state park in the Florida Keys is named—led the fight to create Everglades National Park. Later, *The Herald* also railed editorially against plans to devote a portion of the Everglades outside of the park's boundaries to a rocket factory and another portion to a huge new "jetport" for Miami.

Around *The Herald*, then, we writers could hardly avoid being immersed in the environmental and political issues affecting the area. Moreover, while living in Miami for more than a quarter century, just a few miles from the fringes of the Everglades, I could hardly avoid having a personal interest in the area as well. Indeed, in a frame atop my desk at JMI sits a photo of my son, Keith. He's proudly displaying a huge largemouth bass that he caught during one of our many fishing excursions. That junket happened to be to Clewiston, a small town on the southern shore of Lake



Okeechobee. Typically on these trips, Keith would head out onto the lake with a fishing guide at the crack of dawn while I would grab a Sunday paper and go to the nearby Clewiston Inn to partake of the breakfast buffet. Until 2007 the historic inn, like much of the rest of Clewiston, was owned by U.S. Sugar. Indeed, for decades Clewiston was truly a company town, and U.S. Sugar was the company.

On other fishing trips, Keith and I headed westward from Miami to the canals that crisscross the Miccosukee Tribe's lands along U.S. 41, a.k.a. "the Tamiami Trail." That historic east-west portion of the Tampa-to-Miami road, which opened for traffic in 1928, unfortunately serves as a dike impeding the water's natural southward flow toward Florida Bay.

These fishing trips along the Trail—and an eye-opening "Glades slog" through the marsh with my *Miami Herald* Editorial Board colleagues—also revealed the hurt we've put on the region. It is, for instance, severely infested with various invasive species of fauna and flora—not just pythons and iguanas, but also a host of other non-native pests—not to mention the sunburned tourists grouching about the clouds of mosquitoes.

### **A Diminutive Woman Who Cast a Giant Shadow**

Near my son's picture on my desk sits another photo. It shows me and the aforementioned Marjory Stoneman Douglas. We're standing side-by-side on the steps of her



tiny bungalow in Miami's historic Coconut Grove neighborhood. Even though I'm slouching a bit, I tower over her. She was a diminutive woman, not even five feet tall, but she cast a giant shadow over a large expanse of South Florida's turf. She was "only" about 96 years old when the photo was taken; she lived to be 108 and was feisty until the end. Her seminal book, *Everglades: River of Grass*, taught the uninitiated a new way of thinking about this watery region that previously had been dismissed as a mere swamp deserving of nothing more than draining and reclamation for "useful purposes" such as farming and industry.

### **The Graham Family's Cows Swim for Higher Ground**

Her book was especially timely when it was published in 1947, a year after the creation of Everglades National Park. That's because 1947's

disastrous floods in South Florida's urban areas led to demands for massive flood-control measures. Former Gov. Bob Graham, whose family then owned a large dairy farm in the area that is now the town of Miami Lakes, once told me that he recalls seeing cows from his family's dairy desperately attempting to swim to higher ground.

The flooding was a reminder of a saying still popular among the folks who have observed the weather in South Florida for generations: "We're never more than two hours away from a flood or more than two weeks away from a drought."

In any event, the flooding in 1947 ultimately led to the creation of the Central and Southern Florida Flood Control District, the progenitor of the agency that is now known as the South Florida Water Management District and is a key player in "the sugar deal," which is the focus of the two following articles—one pro, one con—in this *Journal*.

Despite the flooding, Ms. Douglas was correct in perceiving the Everglades for what it was and ought to be: not as a flood menace or a useless swamp but as a very wide, very shallow stream slowly carrying fresh water—mostly from Lake Okeechobee—to the sea. Some of this water winds up in the Atlantic and some of it in the Gulf, but much of it flows first into Florida Bay, that rich seafood incubator just to the south of mainland Florida's southern tip and, thus, near the Florida Keys. In that region's mangrove-lined littoral zone, maintaining the proper

mixture of saltwater and freshwater is crucial to the replenishment of countless marine organisms. Moreover, the environmental issue isn't merely how much water reaches its various destinations but also *when* it arrives.

As this water flows slowly along on its leisurely journey from the lake to the sea, some of it also replenishes the underground aquifers on which this populous region now depends for its fresh water. It does this by soaking into the porous limestone layers that lie beneath southern Florida, relics of the area's long geologic era beneath the sea. The underground water was so abundant in the distant past that early settlers reported finding "artesian wells," miniature springs where fresh water erupted through the surface strata or even up from the bottom of Biscayne Bay, sometimes with a force much like that of this year's oil well leak in the Gulf of Mexico.

However, when more of the aquifer's water is pumped out than soaks in, as has been the case in recent decades, the artesian wells cease flowing and some of the wells near the coast begin to experience salt-water intrusion. Indeed, that latter problem first became apparent as early as the 1940s in Coconut Grove, prompting local officials to partner with the U.S. Geological Survey to conduct a study of subterranean South Florida, particularly its aquifers. Although Florida still has more first magnitude fresh-water springs (17) than any other state, none of

them is in South Florida.

Of course, some of the fresh water never completes its journey—either downward into the aquifer or onward into the sea. Instead, even though the abundant vegetation such as sawgrass partially shades it from the relentless subtropical sun, it becomes subject to evaporation, which includes transpiration—the botanical equivalent of exhaling.

Yet even this water turned to vapor may have a benefit to South Florida's human population. According to the late environmentalist Arthur Marshall and others, all of that evaporation of water into a moisture-laden atmosphere creates something akin to "a rain machine," bringing the frequent thunderstorms that mark South Florida's summers and keep all those lawns, farms, and golf courses from becoming parched—and, incidentally, made the Florida Marlins baseball team lobby for a taxpayer-funded stadium with a retractable roof.

Despite the region's abundant rainfall, however, South Floridians are already becoming accustomed to restrictions on their water usage. It's not that the state has a shortage of rain; it does not. Rather, it has a shortage of storage space. In fact, elsewhere in North America, particularly in the continent's mountainous regions, there are glacial lakes whose surface area is relatively small but that nonetheless contain a lot more water than Florida's wide-but-shallow Lake Okeechobee, by area the second-largest lake (after Lake Michigan) that is totally within the

boundaries of the United States.

Because of South Florida's inadequate storage space for surface water, there are periodic shortages that lead to those limits on activities such as car washing and lawn watering. As the area's population grows and its aquifer is drained at an unsustainable rate, the situation grows more problematic.

Therefore, unless Florida wants to risk having its most populous and economically important region imperiled by severe water shortages—or have the ecology of Everglades National Park, Florida Bay, and the Florida Keys irreparably harmed—the multifaceted project to restore what little remains of the original Everglades needs to proceed in some fashion. Granted, restoring the entire region to its original expanse is obviously out of the question because it would require the displacement of hundreds of thousands of residents from Southeast Florida's western suburbs. However, restoring a significant portion of water's sheet flow is unquestionably essential to maintaining the quality of the region's environment and the quality of life for the area's human inhabitants.

### **A Previous Sugar Deal**

As the following two articles about the Everglades and “the sugar deal” indicate, the effort to “restore” the Everglades has been a topic of debate for many years, dating back to the creation of Everglades National Park in 1946. In 1996—an election year—I attended a ceremony

at Flamingo in the national park marking the park's 50th anniversary. Vice President Al Gore, Gov. Lawton Chiles, Lt. Gov. Buddy McKay, Sen. Bob Graham, EPA Administrator Carol Browner, St. Joe President Peter Rummell, and various other federal and state officials were there. Mr. Gore hailed the acquisition of more than 50,000 acres of property belonging to Talisman Sugar, a St. Joe subsidiary. It was billed as a jump start for the ambitious plan to restore a significant amount of the “sheet flow.”

Yet as often happens in romantic relationships—even that of Mr. Gore and his wife, Tipper—the federal-state partnership to re-plumb the region has foundered on the age-old issue of who will pay how much and for what. The litigation has enriched lots of lawyers. Whether “the sugar deal” to acquire a portion of U.S. Sugar's property is a good deal or not is for our state's policy makers to determine. For our readers, we offer two articles submitted by knowledgeable authors—one pro, one con. So, in the words of Fox News, “We report. You decide.” Whatever you decide, however, please believe that doing absolutely nothing is not a viable option. ☞

*Robert F. Sanchez, The James Madison Institute's Policy Director and editor of The Journal, is the co-author with the late Jeanne Bellamy of the article concerning the Everglades in The Florida Handbook, a reference book originated by the late Allen Morris and now edited by Joan Morris.*