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Destroying the Everglades

by Bart Frazier

When most people think of southern Florida, they conjure up images of Disney World and spring break. Yet further south than Mickey and Daytona International Speedway are the Florida Everglades, one of the most unusual ecosystems in the world and a true mecca for wildlife enthusiasts. Over the past half century, the Everglades have been suffering from pollution, water problems, loss of habitat, and a tremendous loss of wildlife. What most people don't realize is that the federal government bears a large portion of the blame.

The Everglades is a vast swath of shallow fresh water running south from Lake Okeechobee into the Gulf of Mexico. In most parts of the world, when water leaves a lake and runs toward the ocean, it flows in the form of a well-defined river. But because of Florida's extremely flat geography, the "river of grass" that is the Everglades flows as a huge sheet of shallow water that is 50 miles wide in some places, though only inches deep in most. Dotted with a vast array of habitats, including sloughs, mangrove forests, coastal prairies, hardwood hammocks, and cypress stands, the Everglades is home to more than 350 species of birds, 40 species of mammals, and 15 endangered animals.

The habitats of the Everglades are dependent on a yearly water cycle. Rains start in May and don't end until October. Lake Okeechobee, a large 730-square-mile lake near Palm Beach, fills and eventually overflows, sending water south. All animal reproduction is timed to the wet season. Birds lay their eggs and fish spawn as the water levels rise. As the dry season starts, water levels fall and animals begin to concentrate around pools that form. The young of animals that survive this long gorge themselves on the food that concentrates in those pools.

Diverting the water

Since the latter half of the 19th century, developers have been interested in draining the swamps of southern Florida for development purposes, but the draining of the Everglades didn't really get under way until the federal government became involved in the 1940s.

In 1948, Congress approved the Central and South Florida Project, which authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to divert all of the water flowing south out of Lake Okeechobee. Over the next 20 years, a webwork of canals, levees, and roads constructed by the Corps diverted water to farms and populated areas. Some 1,800 miles of canals and levees, 200 water-control structures, and 16 major pumping stations were eventually constructed that drained 1.7 million acres of wetlands, almost half of the Everglades.

The effects on the Everglades were devastating. According to the National Park Service (<http://www.nps.gov/ever/historyculture/develop-everglades.htm>),

The numbers of wading birds, such as egrets, herons, and ibises, have been reduced by 90%. Entire populations of animals, including the manatee, the Cape Sable seaside sparrow, the Miami black-headed snake, the wood stork, and the Florida panther, are at risk of disappearing. Exotic pest plants such as melaleuca, Brazilian pepper, and Australian pine have invaded natural areas, choking out native plants and altering habitats. Massive die-offs of seagrass beds in Florida Bay have been followed by the extensive losses of wading birds, fish, shrimp, sponges, and mangroves.

In other words, utter environmental ruin. Even though there were stipulations in the Central and South Florida Project to provide water for the remaining Everglades and to protect the wildlife within, they could not have done a more thorough job of destroying the ecosystem if that had been their goal.

Central planning simply cannot replace the natural cycles that occur in nature. Just as in the pricing system, there is too much information involved for a central planner to process to get the result he is looking for.

The sugar industry

In addition to directly destroying the Everglades through drainage and interference with Everglades hydrology, the government also harms the Everglades through its trade policy.

The U.S. sugar industry is one of the most heavily subsidized sectors of the U.S. economy. Sugarcane growers are protected from international competition by quotas and aided domestically by nonrecourse loans. In 1994, it was estimated that the top 10 sugar producers in Florida received approximately \$174 million in federal benefits.

Most people would be surprised to learn that, south of Orlando, a large portion of the country's sugar is grown below Lake Okeechobee. The sugar industry is largely responsible for the deterioration of the Everglades, and, in all likelihood, would be only a fraction of its current size if the government did not protect it.

Of the 1.7 million acres created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers through the Central and South Florida Project, 1.2 million are currently being used for the cultivation of sugar cane.

Sugar cane is highly destructive to the Everglades. As discussed above, the most detrimental effect of the sugar industry is the disruption of the water cycle to which the wildlife has adapted. The entire Florida sugar industry hugs the southern shore of Lake Okeechobee like a giant tick, directly blocking the water source for the remaining Everglades. All water flow is now controlled through levees and canals, with a large portion of it being used for irrigating sugar cane, with more being diverted to both of Florida's coasts.

The farming techniques that the sugar farms employ are not very Everglades-friendly. The largest pollutant of the Everglades is phosphorous, a primary component of fertilizer used to grow sugar cane. High levels of phosphorous cause algae blooms to multiply, which chokes off the oxygen supply in marine ecosystems, killing off vast quantities of wildlife. The primary source of phosphorous in the Everglades is fertilizer runoff from sugar-cane production. The soil of southern Florida is not ideal for sugar production, and the farms must use large doses fertilizer to get the results they are looking for.

Lack of a market

All of this is not to say that the Everglades would not have been drained without the aid of government. It is certainly conceivable that private developers would have drained as much of the Everglades as the government has drained, or even more of it. But what the government has done is to short-circuit the market for wilderness, just as it short-circuited the Everglades water cycle.

And there is surely a market for wildlife and the habitats they need. The gem of the National Audubon Society is Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary (<http://www.audubon.org/local/sanctuary/corkscrew/>). In the 1950s and 1960s the Audubon Society purchased or received donations of land totaling almost 11,000 acres on the western edge of the Everglades. A 2.25-mile-long boardwalk takes you deep within cypress stands and wet prairie, a must-see for those interested in wildlife, and one of the highlights of the Everglades.

However, the government destroyed the market for Everglades wildlife by draining large portions of the Everglades and nationalizing the rest. Of the original 3 million acres, the government drained 1.7 million through the Central and South Florida Project, and nationalized another 1.5 million acres through the creation of Everglades National Park. In all, the government removed more than 3 million acres of the wilderness from the market. Groups such as the Nature Conservancy and the Audubon Society were precluded from conserving any of the Everglades through voluntary action.

Some people will argue that the National Park Service has actually saved the Everglades through the park system. All one needs to do is look at the results of the of overall government action to see that it is government that is responsible for the current condition of the Everglades. The government consciously destroyed roughly half, and since the establishment of Everglades National Park we have witnessed the devastation of what was left.

Frédéric Bastiat may be best known for his essay “What Is Seen and What Is Not Seen,” and it is here that one would learn why the Everglades are in trouble. When the state intervenes in the marketplace, it simply does not have the foresight to see beyond the primary impacts of its policy. By trying to help landed interests in Florida, it is the federal government that is responsible for so much of the destruction that has occurred in the Everglades over the past 60 years.

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This article was originally published in the June 2007 edition of *Freedom Daily*.