

Tides of time

Everglades National Park, a Unesco World Heritage marine site in Florida, is facing many threats, but massive efforts are under way to restore its ecosystems

A tricolored heron in Everglades National Park.

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SPOTLIGHT | Undoing the damage

Everglades National Park: In a tranquil land, massive efforts to restore the flow of water

Dedicating Everglades National Park in December 1947, U.S. President Harry Truman said: "Here is land, tranquil in its quiet beauty, serving not as the source of water, but as the last receiver of it." Water was and remains central to the Everglades' identity and survival. The site was inscribed on the Unesco World Heritage List in 1979. At the time, the report by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), which evaluated Everglades National Park for World Heritage status, stated: "Water management manipulations are the largest environmental threat to the ecosystem. Water quality, timing of canal releases, amounts and distribution affect the natural system that in turn controls wildlife and vegetation populations." Today, 30 years later, the problem persists.

A shallow basin on Florida's southern edge, the park is an interface between fresh and salt water, shallow bays and deep seas. The Everglades were formed by a slow-moving river of freshwater that flowed across this flat expanse — a watercourse that originally varied from depths of six inches (about 15 centimeters) to spots where it stretched 50 miles (80 kilometers) wide. It ran untroubled, evolving over millennia into a finely balanced, interconnected mosaic of ecosystems — saw-grass

prairies, brackish marsh, pinelands, mangroves and the waters of Florida Bay; more than half are marine ecosystems. This complex hydrological regime has been prey to manipulation for more than a century.

Early settlers, deriding the Everglades as a mosquito-plagued swamp, in the 1800s began digging canals to drain it, without any understanding of its biological dynamics. This effort reached its zenith in 1948 — ironically, the year after the Everglades became a U.S. National Park — when the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers began construction of an elaborate system of roads, canals, levees and water-control structures. Though these brought benefits, they altered the wetlands' natural balance. In addition, freshwater began to be redirected toward new settlements to the north, to meet mounting population pressures, thanks to land booms that were to turn Florida into a second California.

As a result, less freshwater went to the Everglades, which reversed the local ecology. Plant and animal communities on land and in water depend on this aquatic stability, and they began to suffer. Wading birds such as egrets, herons and ibises have been reduced by 93 percent since the 1930s. In his book "Disappearing World," Alonzo Addison notes: "Years of draining, dike-building,

digging and construction have destroyed over half the Everglades. Today, it is arguably America's most endangered park."

The U.S. National Park Service developed a series of corrective measures in 2006. Says Stephen Morris, chief of the U.S. National Park Service's Office of International Affairs: "These were developed in cooperation with the IUCN, the official adviser to the World Heritage Committee for natural sites, and approved by the World Heritage Committee." Today, Unesco monitors annually how these measures are being implemented.

Kishore Rao, deputy director of Unesco's World Heritage Centre, revisited Everglades National Park in April. He says: "The most striking feature is the size of the problem and the scale of the effort that has been mounted. It would not be incorrect to say this is perhaps the largest ecosystem restoration project in the world." Though the terrestrial as well as aquatic plant and animal communities have adapted to each other over time, Rao points out that the historical water flow can never be recreated as a result of these measures. What is more, he says, any benefits will not be noticeable for at least a decade.

Restorative efforts in the Everglades started in 2000,

with the launch of a 35-year, \$10 billion program — worth twice that much in today's currency. Scientists from the South Florida Natural Resources Center, a division of Everglades National Park, are involved in a series of projects. These include a Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, authorized by the U.S. Congress to "restore, preserve and protect the South Florida ecosystem while providing for other water-related needs of the region, including water supply and flood protection." It is the largest hydrologic restoration project ever undertaken in the United States.

The combined efforts of Unesco and the Park Service will be crucial for the Everglades' survival. At stake is the largest subtropical wilderness in continental North America. As the first U.S. National Park preserved for its abundance and variety of life rather than scenic or historic value, the Everglades remains a sanctuary for birds, reptiles, wildcats and dolphins, offering refuge for 50 endangered species. These include the American alligator and crocodile (it is the only place where the two coexist), the Florida panther and the West Indian manatee. Two dozen varieties of orchids flourish alongside 1,000 other plants and 100 species of tropical and temperate-zone trees, of which 60 are endemic to South Florida. ■

ART NOUVEAU

Tourism at World Heritage sites

Unesco's World Heritage List includes 878 sites of outstanding universal value, and tourism has become an important concern at most of them. Unesco has established a World Heritage Sustainable Tourism Program, which develops policies to help site managers use tourism more effectively as a tool for conservation. The program also works with the tourism industry to maximize tourism's benefits and reduce its negative impacts. It does this by training local community members in tourism-related activities, as well as in environmental and cultural preservation; aiding them in marketing their products and using World Heritage sites as a lever for local economic, social and cultural development; raising public awareness of World Heritage values; and spreading lessons learned to other sites and protected areas.

For more information, visit <http://whc.unesco.org>

EXPLORING | Discovering 1.5 million acres

Earth and water: Walking, canoeing and the wilderness experience

Every year, more than 30 World Heritage sites draw over one million visitors each, and Everglades National Park, which attracted 1,074,764 visitors in 2007, is one of the few marine sites on that list. Whether these visitors come for an hour or a week, for a walk or a wilderness experience, they can find it in the nearly 1.5 million acres (600,000 hectares) that make up this U.S. National Park in Florida. Camping, boating, hiking, fishing — and even a visit to a Cold War-era Nike missile base in the center of the park — are possible. One hundred fifty-six miles (251 kilometers) of canoe, kayak and walking trails as well as nearly 50 wilderness campsites await travelers. Many walking trails are wheelchair-accessible.

These activities let tourists of all ages observe everything from birds to alligators. The former can be found nearly everywhere. The U.S. National Park Service (www.nps.gov/) offers a "Bird Checklist" cataloguing 366 species, their breeding habits and where to spot them. Wading birds can be seen at Eco Pond, the Anhinga Trail and

around the Gulf Coast Visitor Center; visitors might also see flamingoes along Snake Bight Trail at high tide.

A Canadian visitor, T.K. Philip, recommends the Anhinga Trail. "If you only have time to visit one place in the Everglades, this is definitely it," he says. The Web site of Fodor's travel guide lists the 0.8 mile (1.3 kilometers) Anhinga Trail as the place for alligators. "In winter, spying alligators congregating in watering holes is almost guaranteed," the site says. These animals thrive in the canals alongside the trail. Boardwalks jutting over the waters allow for safe alligator viewing.

Anyone who has ever visited a U.S. National Park can attest to how well visitor activities are organized. In addition to the "Bird Checklist," the Park Service Web site also provides "Trip Planners," containing tips on what to see during the rainy season (May-October) and the dry season (November-April). Both have their advantages: fewer people visit during the rainy season, while bird-watching and alligator viewing are best

in the dry season, the site says. The Everglades offer many tours with park rangers, including trips to the historical missile base, no longer in use, built in 1963 after the Cuban Missile Crisis. A missile, assembly building, silos and control centers are on view.

Bike trails are numerous, allowing visitors to observe nature close at hand. Biking is also a good way to leave the crowds behind. There are 14 miles of nature trails on Long Pine Key Trail, making it a good choice for those seeking a few days outdoors, according to the Web site of the travel adviser GORP. The Everglades' flat terrain means hiking is not strenuous, but climbers who ascend the 0.2 mile boardwalk to Pahokee

("River of Grass") Overlook are rewarded with a 360-degree view of the park. Hiking trails are concentrated around three visitor centers: Flamingo, Long Pine Key and Shark Valley. Since water prevails at the park, the best way to experience it is in a canoe or kayak. More than 50 sites allow for paddling trips, and fishing enthusiasts will have ample opportunities to land that big one. Florida Everglades Bass Fishing, a specialty angler's Web site, says that "South Florida holds the state record for the number of fish caught per person." The site offers helpful hints on bass fishing in the Everglades. ■

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Swiss luxury watchmaker takes a stake in marine heritage

The main reason Jaeger-LeCoultre was drawn to the "Tides of Time" project, a partnership with Unesco's World Heritage Centre and the International Herald Tribune that began a year ago, was its guiding principle — protecting the world's marine heritage. Jérôme Lambert, chief executive of the Swiss luxury watchmaker, says this type of ethic has ripened inside the organization over its 175-year existence. "Our longevity has given us a global understanding of the sense of time," he says. "We have built ourselves into a company that measures time and that considers time important. 'Tides of Time' does the same thing, by taking something that was here before we were and preserving it for

tomorrow." He adds: "You believe in these values and fight for them. At the end of the day, it's all about the values on which you have built the company, your products and your relationships with clients."

Jaeger-LeCoultre wanted to be part of the project because of its global reach in safeguarding World Heritage sites. In the next two years, the manufacture plans to help raise awareness on the local level, increasing communications via its teams across the globe. "Tides of Time" has struck a chord among the work force at its headquarters. Notes Lambert: "Our team is proactive in finding new ideas. That's how you measure the positive aspect of a program — if it's meaningful for everybody."



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