

Letter From Florida

An alligator basks in the Florida sun, stretched across a long, low branch, the picture of contentment. Clear sky, soft breeze. His worries slide off his back and land in the slow-moving waters below. His mouth is etched into a permanent grin. All that is missing is a cool drink.

The alligator is indifferent to the finger-pointing, the clicking cameras, the hum of small crowds gathered on a nearby elevated boardwalk. They have come to the Everglades to see the wildlife who have made a home in the shallow River of Grass, the name given to the ribbon of water that winds through the sawgrass prairie.

A steady stream of tourists flows through the Anhinga Trail, a short loop that offers a close look at alligators, turtles, fish, marsh rabbits and a host of birds, including anhingas, herons and egrets.

Long-necked, low-flying anhingas land in the water with an elegant precision that pilots would envy. Herons stand at attention, as though pondering their next move. Alligators laze on the grass or meander through the slough with casual flicks of their tails, eyes skimming the surface.

Soft-spoken nature photographers sit with oversized cameras, hunched over deep wells of patience. For others, a visit to the park is a respite from clogged interstate highways and strip malls.

Alligators still as stone, patient turtles, graceful herons – to stroll along the Anhinga Trail is to wade into a serene landscape, an oasis of uncluttered skies and unhurried quiet.

Beneath the calm runs a dark current of concern: The Everglades ecosystem is in peril. The park's wildlife depends on the fragile environment of a freshwater slough. Demand for freshwater is increasing daily as Florida's agricultural and urban needs continue to mount. More than 900 people move to the state daily, which means 900,000 more litres of water are needed every day. Some years, the vacationers swell to almost 40 million. Twelve million flock to Florida every winter, the dry season when water supplies drop.

At the bottom of this sea of statistics lie the alligator, the snail kite bird, the wood stork – animals whose survival is tied to water levels. Water management is the crucial issue for the Everglades. The park's plants and animals are adapted to the alternating wet and dry seasons. When humans begin to manipulate the natural flow of water – canals, water-control structures at the park boundary – the results can be disastrous. When too much water enters the park at the wrong season, alligator nests are flooded and eggs destroyed. Too little water, and large parts of the park cannot produce the small organisms that anchor the food web.

The park was created to avoid the very problems that continue to plague it. The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs established Royal Palm State Park in 1916, the first protected area in the Everglades. Concern over wide-scale drainage of the wetlands in the decades that followed spawned the birth of Everglades National Park in 1947.

Today, the National Park Service has joined forces with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to apply methods of water management patterned after natural rainfall models. The park's boundary has been extended to protect a slough where high concentrations of wading birds have long nested. Valiant measures in the face of a predator – urban teeth, an industrial appetite – with an unquenchable thirst.

Perhaps that sunbathing alligator at the Anhinga Trail is not so carefree and content after all. Perhaps the soft breeze carries some hard truths about the fragile fate of the Everglades. The curve of his mouth might be a grimace, not a grin.

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