America’s greatest wetland treasure is dying. A harrowing kayak crossing reveals why our most overlooked and endangered national park demands saving.

by JON WATERMAN

My kayak knifed through warm Gulf waters as fast as it could run. We had outfitted our boats with 10-foot masts, outrigger arms on inflatable sponsons, and 2-foot-long leeboards, happy to be plying the wind instead of slogging by paddle. When I shook out the sail reef for more speed, the sponsons skipped over waves like thrown stones. Holding tight to shore, I adjusted my course by tapping the rudder pedals to dodge sharp mangrove stumps. I briefly closed my eyes, happy to have escaped winter, immersed in a sense of mastery as I inhaled the rotten-egg fecundity of the Everglades. America’s most magnificent swamp stretched limitlessly before me.
In 1966, I first visited the Everglades during a field trip with my Boca Raton grade school and the place—filled with God-only-knows-how-many bugs—spoke to me. A ponderous river ran across and underneath the swamp, watering over a thousand different plants, haunted by leg-endlorable critters amand an extraordinary panoply of nine different habitats. For nearly a half-century (until Death Valley was established), it remained the largest national park in the Lower 48. As a 10-year-old in need of adven-ur and male mentorship, I watched an airboat skim through a vast sawgrass prairie and imagined poachers chasing wildlife—conjured up by my favorite TV show Everglades, featuring larger-than-life park ranger Lincoln Vail.

Along with that Everglades visit, those indelible adolescent years living with my grandmother while sailing and fishing in southern Florida set a hook. I would become an avid bird-watcher, a live-aboard sailor, and fisherman, a national park ranger, and an avid bird-watcher, a live-aboard sailor and fisherman, a national park ranger, and a lifelong explorer. In the meantime, the ancient Everglades—and Florida itself—continued its precipitous decline.

South Florida’s population grew to over 6 million acres as the 60-mile-wide by 100-mile-long River of Grass continued to dry up. In order to develop the coasts and farmlands, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was tasked with draining the swamp with canals. Since 20th-century bureaucrats gravitated toward development-oriented flood control rather than water wetlands. In nearby Key West over 6 million as the 60-mile-wide by 100-mile-long River of Grass continued to dry up. In order to develop the coasts and farmlands, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was tasked with draining the swamp with canals. Since 20th-century bureaucracies gravitated toward development-oriented flood control rather than environmental restoration, few understood that this massive effort to re-wet a rapidly drying ecosystem runs counter to the park’s other existential threat: ever-rising sea levels.

I came to the Everglades to see if America’s most endangered national park had taken its last breath. In 1947, the same year the park was established, the journalist Marjory Stoneman Douglas—who became renowned for her efforts to save this place—published The Everglades: River of Grass. In the final chapter, “The Eleventh Hour,” she wrote “the Everglades were dying.” She described a once-gi-giantly diminished marsh, denied more than half of its life-giving water, cooked by unprecedented wildfires, and polluted by sugar plantations.

I had never seen so many different bird species in one place, often clutching fish in their talons or beaks; squadrons of pelicans, teams of ducks, masterings of storks, and herds of curlews. All morning long, stingerays leapt and splashed into the sea. Sailing downstream, I veered ever closer to a long, uninhabited white-sand beach, catching short rides as the shallows lapped the water up into surf. But as I rounded a point onto flatter water, a murky wave came off shore, bisecting my point of sail. I had startled a crocodile, basking in the sun. With powerful,snake-like tail undula-

The park itself stretches over 1.5 million acres—as big as Delaware, but with no roads leading through its two ends, just a wilderness of water filled with unexpected,�y, and alone. The world’s largest reptiles cohabitate.

The team sails sea kayaks across the national park, including a night on a chickee tent platform (top right) with a panda at the mouth among wood storks and great egrets (bottom).
caught up to Chris in Coot Bay. With a breeze chipping the water, we left the protected canal, reeled our sails, pushed down the leeboards, and sped across the wind. Above us, an evergreen kite streamed to forked tail like two trailing legs, tracing the rich, green shoreline from the air in search of apple snails.

A veritable jungle of salt-tolerant mangroves—the largest contiguous protected forest of its kind in the Western Hemisphere—surrounded us. The hardy roots also act as a coastal barrier and shelter for numerous animals and less salt-tolerant inland plants. Yet the smell of hydrogen sulfide gas wafting out of the forest is an exigent reminder of the decaying mangroves that lie beneath the surface, many of which were killed in Hurricane Irma nearly three years ago. Along with more frequent and powerful storms surging the ocean is rising on this flat coastline, up to three times faster than that of the global average. As saltwater breaches the mangroves, it reaches other freshwater flora such as the park’s dominant 6-foot-tall sawgrass. These plants grow in the carbon-rich, peat soil backbone of the Everglades, in the opposite direction of its once-mighty headwaters. Maps can’t show the Everglades, in the opposite direction of their entire shadowed tunnel. If these wading birds, indicators of the ecosystem’s overall health, ever disappear, it’ll mean that the dying Everglades too—along with all the bird habitat—are finally dead.

Through the winshield, I watched an anhinga perch statuesquely, chasing down our mac and cheese while watching an alligator perch statuesquely, hanging its wings out to dry. In the morning, we were elated to find the tide continued to favor our northern journey, to a sail, I had been drawn back here in part because of what Douglas, grandmother of the Everglades, described in her book as continuous southeast trade winds that “pour across the land their cool stiff tides.”

As the sun painted the mangroves a brilliant lime, we raised our sails and tacked out into the bay, then turned north and continued along the narrow channel. Soon enough, the wind stiffened and surrounded against the sail. The blackploach and large egrets to even you’d be giving your life away. In other words, it’s glorious wilderness.”

Despite any requisite suffering that you must first pass through, wild places are a balm for the soul, where we can leave our information age behind and reconnect with the primeval. I go in, for part, the challenge of navigating the infinite, for the joy of mastery in being or climbing or skiing. But mostly I go to watch the stars bright above the treetops in a world where we can breathe clean air and hear the wind on our faces while we connect with wildlife in the viceroy, intuitive way that our hunting ancestors once did. I have sought out the joys of remote spaces while boating source to sea on the Colorado River, paddling across the Northwest Passage, climbing Denali in the wintertime, and sailing the Pacific. But when I learn of wilderness at risk— in a wetlands as treasured and unique as the Everglades—I feel that a piece of our American heritage is being violated. This protected acreage belongs to everyone as a democratic right, to be preserved in perpetuity for future generations. So, if we continue destroying the Everglades—the congressional mandate of preserving national parks will become meaningless.

While the wind dropped and the setting sun doused itself into the Gulf. Then I plunged into my own internal twilight as biting midges arrived in gray clouds, impervious to insect repellent, burrowing under our coverings and pants. While the mosquitoes of the Arctic and the blackflies of New England merely require a Buddhist calm, the onslaught of what South Floridians call sandflies— their minute teeth sawing into my own internal twilight as biting mosquitoes would survive the night. Even the call sandflies—their minute teeth sawing into my own internal twilight as biting mosquitoes—would survive the night. Even the call of the mosquito was a part of the Everglades’ environment, making us feel that we were part of the Everglades too, and that we belonged there.

In the wildest reaches of the Everglades, it is difficult to civilization totally behind. After listening to news of an incoming storm on Greg’s weather radio, we opted to speed up our trip and move further north to Jewell Key. We pulled up to an idyllic beach after a pleasant seven-hour sail. In pelagic waters, seemingly free of predators, I stripped down and took the week’s first bath, protectively cupping the sandflies in my hand, then ducked back under as we passed.

Somewhere beneath me, too, would be manatees and more than a dozen species of sharks. I pulled my trailing hand out of the tropical water and back into the cockpit. Just then, a curious bottlenose dolphin dared to approach my outrigger and exhaled a spumy pong that smelled as rich as low-tide mud beaches.

We patiently plied the dying southern trade, as we worked our paddles beneath the sail and kept our northern course. To starboard, we studied the nearly 1.3 million acres of Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness (amid another 200,000 acres of national park). Piles of dead seagrass mounted up on the beaches. Beyond the impossible mangrove beds, the area had been further safeguarded (after it had already been made a park) by Congress under the 1964 Wilderness Act. To protect its rich biodiversity, this wilderness area is intended to remain bereft of improvements, preserved solely in its natural conditions—despite a jet from a nearby military base repeatedly thundering through the sound barrier above us.

Pine in the wilderness—tall trees that backbone collapses. Now, as saltwater exposes and kills freshwater habitats—are finally dead. If these wading birds, indicators of the ecosystem’s overall health, ever disappear, it’ll mean that the drying Everglades too—along with all the bird habitat—are finally dead.

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Nor did the three illegal campfire scars he stood next to on the beach. After he left, I chucked the toasted coral back into the sea and spread out the ashes. Then we gathered driftwood for a (legal) campfire down in the littoral that would be flushed clean by high tide.

As the north wind fanned sweet smoke from our burning mangrove logs, I knew that all of this—the Milky Way phosphorescing above us, our days working the wind while watching birds, and even the exceptional bugs—had drawn me back to the swamp after so many years.

And through experiencing the unexpected resilience of its animals, along with the dizzying wonder of its many plant species, I believe it should be saved as something wilder and more sacred than an artificial “Disneyland Everglades” (as an Army Corps official has called it). And he may be right, at least partially, because we’ll never get back the pre-contact Everglades. While the wetlands are now less than half of what they used to be, we still have an obligation to save what remains, not contrive some type of theme park. After all, this is legislated wilderness. We’re already committed.

To restore the River of Grass, it’ll take more than just political will. The most pressing issue is regular funding that would infuse 17 different uncompleted CERP projects, such as a planned reservoir just south of Lake Okeechobee, to hold and release water into the wetlands during the dry season. Since the $8 billion program began in 2000 as a 30-year plan, CERP has now become a 50-year, $15 billion dream.

Still, there is hope, given the science and engineering behind CERP. If the Corps can replumb the Everglades and bring back its freshwater head (the River of Glades) from the north, it would create a backpressure to stave off the storm surges and ocean rise in the south—now beginning to salinate both the wetlands and the freshwater aquifers sustaining millions of Floridians.

There are other issues at hand too, such as tens of thousands of Burmese pythons slithering among the Glades as one of over 100 different invasive plants and animals pushing out indigenous species. To cope and support restoration, we need a fully funded park service with leadership that’s more interested in resource management than overzealous law enforcement. We also need everyone to understand how the clock is now running out on America’s most extraordinary wetlands.

We need to heed the words of Marjory Stoneman Douglas: “There are no other Everglades in the world.”

As the squall hit Jewel Key after dark, my companions shouting back at a violent wind gust, it seemed epiphanic how this swamp that belongs to all of us offered up the same sense of surprise and allure I had felt as a boy. And in the half-century that had passed, I have never seen another wilderness like it.

I dove into the tent, flattened by the wind, turned on a headlamp and braced the walls with my arms. Not an insect guest to be found.