**Environmental Injustices and Degradation of the Florida Everglades:**
**From Pa-hay-Okee to Drainage Empire to Alligator Alcatraz**
**by Sophie Whitham**

The Everglades is an ecological region spanning the southern portion of Florida with a rich human-environment history. Its capacity for biodiversity makes it one of the most important subtropical wetlands on Earth, and its protection is vital to preserve unique ecosystems, landscapes, and sociocultural heritages. Much of the degradation of the Everglades began with American colonization and influence in the area. During this time, Floridian Native American tribes were forcibly removed to reservations or further concentrated into or around the Everglades. The onset of development projects and misguided attempts to control natural flooding periods did much harm to the natural environment and the indigenous peoples remaining before the area became protected under state and federal legislation in the late 1900s. Despite the establishment of the Everglades National Park, Biscayne National Park, Dry Tortugas National Park, Big Cypress National Preserve, and various other refuges, sanctuaries, and conservation areas, the region and the people who historically inhabited it continue to be targeted economically, politically, socially, and physically by bad-faith actors in the United States government and disproportionately affected by anthropogenic climate change. The state of the Everglades is an unfortunate example of the complex cause-and-effect relationship between environmental injustices and degradation over time that is fueled by colonialism, systemic inequality, industrialization, capitalism, exploitation of resources, and willful ignorance of socio-environmental concepts.

The first peoples to inhabit the Everglades were the Paleo-Indians (late Pleistocene period) when the area was still arid prairie land. The climate shifted into its modern wetland state around 5,000-6,500 years ago, and with it the native peoples adapted.[1] Spanish explorers were the first to record contact with the Florida tribes: the Calusa, Tequesta, Ais, and Keys Indians, among others.[2] Spanish and British occupation and tribal conflicts reduced their populations, and

[1] David McCally, *The Everglades: An Environmental History* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2000), 31, 35.

[2] Jerald T. Milanich, "Original Inhabitants," in *The New History of Florida,* ed. Michael Gannon (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2012), 13–14.

cultural mixing with the Creeks and escaped African slaves led to the Seminoles and the related Miccosukee Tribe becoming the primary tribes of Florida. These tribes were further pushed south into the Everglades (which they referred to as Pa-hay-Okee or "grassy waters"), or they were exiled to Indian Territory as a result of Florida's being ceded to the United States through the Adams-Onís Treaty (1821), by the Seminole Wars of 1816-1858, and by a series of Indian Removal Acts.[3] The Seminoles, Miccosukee, and various unaffiliated indigenous groups still inhabit this area and are often on the frontlines of conservation and social activism efforts on behalf of their historical connection to the land and because they are disproportionately affected by many of the modern issues impacting the Everglades.

Negative public opinion of the Everglades stemmed from difficulties faced by American soldiers during the Seminole Wars and settlers in adapting to the unique terrain.[4] It was viewed as an uninhabitable wasteland in its natural state, and government and citizens alike saw dormant economic opportunities for industry and agriculture in a drained Everglades. The first-ever published study on the Everglades—gathered on behalf of the Secretary of the Treasury—states that "The statesman whose exertions shall cause the millions of acres they contain, now worse than worthless, to teem with the products of agricultural industry; that man who thus adds to the resources of his country…will merit a high place in public favor…he will have created a State!"[5] The Swamp Land Act of 1850 saw the region (along with all other swamp lands in America) be opened for development and various drainage and flood control projects, though the Civil War impeded these efforts for a short while. Florida governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward's vision of an "Empire of the Everglades" became the early blueprint for the physical and economic resources necessary to "reclaim" the Everglades.[6] By the mid-1900s, canals, railroads, roads, and urban areas gradually replaced native habitats.[7] With the establishment of Everglades National

[3] National Park Service, "What's in a Name?" (NPS, 2015), https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/kidsyouth/whats-in-a-name.htm; P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, "1821 – Florida Becomes Part of the United States," (University of Florida, 2021), https://pkyonge.uflib.ufl.edu/2021/08/20/1821-florida-becomes-part-of-the-united-states/.

[4] Michael Grunwald, *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 41.

[5] J. E. Dovell, "The Everglades Before Reclamation," *Florida Historical Quarterly* 26, no. 1, article 4 (1947): 1–43 at 33.

[6] George A. Smathers Libraries, *America's Swamp: The Historical Everglades Project* (University of Florida 2025), https://guides.uflib.ufl.edu/c.php?g=1123872&p=8197489.

[7] National Park Service, "Developing the Everglades" (NPS, 2020), https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/historyculture/development.htm.

Park in 1947 and the Central and Southern Florida Project (C&SF) in 1948, the government initially had goals of creating better organized water control projects in response to hurricanes, droughts, and flooding. The northern portion of the Everglades was divided into Water Conservation Areas (WCAs) and the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA), while the south was dedicated to the National Park.[8] The environmental impacts of this extensive human involvement are numerous and far-reaching. Today's greater Everglades ecosystem has lost over seventy percent of its water flow and is less than half of its original size.[9] The nine primary habitats (defined by plant communities) of the Everglades—hardwood hammock, pineland, freshwater marl prairies, freshwater slough, cypress, coastal lowland, mangrove, marine, and estuarine—are extremely sensitive and require ultra-specific conditions to properly function, a combination that does not mix well with human-induced loss of overall biodiversity, introduction of exotic species, and depletion of healthy soils and water.[10]

It was not until 1969 through the 1970s that major concern was devoted to the environmental degradation of the Everglades. This concern came after an attempt by the Dade County Port Authority to build a 39-square-mile jetport in a Big Cypress WCA without permission from the C&SF, National Park authorities, and the Department of the Interior. Environmental scientists and activists, conservation groups, and media outlets came together to shut down the project that would have decimated the water supply and created tons of pollution and waste region-wide.[11] Shortly after this, the Big Cypress National Preserve was established, UNESCO appointed the Everglades as a Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage site, and it was noted as a Wetland of International Importance by the Ramsar Convention.[12] The Everglades is still under threat by urbanization, agricultural and water control projects, mining, oil drilling, invasive species, pollution, geological subsidence, and climate change. With these come negative social impacts for the peoples living in or near it, namely displacement, desecration of sacred lands, resource scarcity, disruption of livelihoods and cultural practices, health issues, and loss of

[8] South Florida Water Management District, "History of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem," (SFWMD, 2017), https://www.sfwmd.gov/who-we-are/history.

[9] Conservancy of Southwest Florida, "Everglades Restoration," (CSF, 2024), https://conservancy.org/everglades-restoration/.

[10] National Park Service, "Habitats and Plant Communities," (NPS, 2025), https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/nature/habitats.htm.

[11] Robert S. Gilmour and John A. McCauley, "Environmental Preservation and Politics: The Significance of 'Everglades Jetport,'" *Political Science Quarterly* 90, no. 4 (1975): 719–738 at 729, 737.

[12] UNESCO World Heritage Convention, "Everglades National Park," (UNESCO, 2025), https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/76/.

ancestral identity. There is a notable lack of communication between organizations (environmental or otherwise) and indigenous tribes of the Everglades, which has persisted since American settlement of the area. This is despite the fact that "Allowing Indigenous people to remain caretakers of their lands and waters, numerous studies have shown, are critical to protecting biodiversity, forests and fighting climate change" and that these peoples are often more directly affected by environmental issues.[13] Many indigenous groups have adapted to their new environments after displacement from their ancestral lands, and another great injustice is making decisions without their input, decisions that greatly impact their quality of life and the land that supports them.

It is no coincidence that less than sixty years later, the Everglades and its peoples once again come under threat by a major development project: an immigrant detention center colloquially dubbed "Alligator Alcatraz," which is situated directly on the abandoned jetport site in the Big Cypress Reserve. This facility operates as a temporary internment camp for migrants that are to be deported and is one of many that have increased activity in 2025 as part of President Donald Trump's strict deportation policy. Politicians, civil liberties groups, and environmental activists (such as the Friends of the Everglades and the Center for Biological Diversity) have raised concerns over the humanitarian conditions and environmental impacts of this facility. Also, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Florida, Americans for Immigrant Justice, and the Miccosukee Tribe have come together to file a class action suit *(Friends of the Everglades, Inc. vs Noem et al.)* against involved government officials; and Amnesty International recently reported on "Torture and Enforced Disappearances in the Sunshine State." In addition to human rights abuses including unsanitary conditions, medical neglect, cruel punishments, due process violations, and people unaccounted for, the Miccosukee Tribe and other environmental activists assert that:

> cultural activities will not be allowed to proceed due to the environmental effects of the facility's operation and construction, as well as attendant concerns related to the health, safety, and security of residents and community members. Additionally, the facility is located immediately upstream from several Tribal villages such that potential

[13] WGCU, "In Florida, the Miccosukee fight to protect the Everglades in the face of climate change" (The Associated Press, 2025), https://www.wgcu.org/section/environment/2025-03-07/in-florida-the-miccosukee-fight-to-protect-the-everglades-in-the-face-of-climate-change.

> contamination or pollution from the facility will have a direct and adverse effect of potable water quality for residents and the surrounding environment.[14]

Alligator Alcatraz officials are found to have violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and Administrative Procedure Act (APA) in failing to conduct environmental impact surveys and residential impact assessments before construction of the site began.[15] Despite also being a massive financial burden, the facility remains operational (as of December 2025) and has thus far managed to dodge legal accountability through political connections and a technicality of it being state-run and not bound to the "usual" standards (though potential federal funding is currently under investigation as well).[16] The lack of federal oversight and integration into the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) databases/systems has permitted secrecy and made it difficult for environmental and human rights organizations to study the true extent of harm inflicted.[17] A United States Geological Survey (USGS) environmental impact study conducted on the 1969 jetport site stated that development in this area would "lead to land drainage and development for agriculture, transportation, and services in the Big Cypress Swamp which will inexorably destroy the south Florida ecosystem and thus the Everglades National Park."[18] Now, scientists examining the immediate impact of Alligator Alcatraz (through indirect methods) have observed air, water, and light pollution; landscape alterations; habitat fragmentation; and other threats to the sensitive ecosystem and its many threatened and endangered species.[19] Alligator Alcatraz, on a conceptual and realized level, exemplifies the intersectionality within environmental injustices: an area of natural and cultural significance is being used for government-enforced political violence and callous endangerment of multiple

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[14] Amnesty International, *Torture and Enforced Disappearances in the Sunshine State: Human Rights Violations at "Alligator Alcatraz" and Krome in Florida*, Amnesty International, AMR 51/0511/2025 (2025): 1–61 at 5–6, https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/AMR5105112025ENGLISH.pdf; *Friends of the Everglades, Inc. v. Noem: Motion to Intervene – Document No. 33*, District Court, S.D. Florida, 1:25-cv-22896-JEM (2025): 1–20 at 9, https://storage.courtlistener.com/recap/gov.uscourts.flsd.692544/gov.uscourts.flsd.692544.33.0.pdf.

[15] *Friends of the Everglades*, 9–10; Richard Luscombe, "Alligator Alcatraz Snaps Back to Life after Judges' Reprieve of Florida's Migrant Jail" (*The Guardian*, 2025), https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/oct/07/trump-alligator-alcatraz-florida.

[16] Luscombe, "Alligator Alcatraz Snaps Back."

[17] Amnesty International, *Torture and Enforced Disappearances*, 6.

[18] United States Geological Survey & United States Department of the Interior, *Environmental Impact of the Big Cypress Swamp Jetport* (USDOI, 1969): 1–155 at 152, https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/FI/06/01/11/15/00001/jetportimpact.pdf.

[19] Kaylyn Zipp, "'Alligator Alcatraz' Could Threaten Fragile Ecosystem" (The Wildlife Society, 2025), https://wildlife.org/alligator-alcatraz-could-threaten-fragile-ecosystem/.

vulnerable populations in a fragile ecological system. William "Popeye" Osceola, scribe of the Miccosukee Tribe, states "It's not lost on us that there's this facility where you're trying to round up individuals who do not look like them, that they say do not belong here, and they're not part of their country. And just looking at tribal history, that's the whole basis of the reservation system in this land."[20] It has never only been about land itself, but also about who deserves to rule over it. The racial overtones cannot be denied, the commitment to misinformation and scapegoating is intentional, and the sense of entitlement over peoples and lands has done irreversible harm to society and Earth alike. That is the crux of colonialism, and happenings in the Everglades today and historically are living testaments to it.

While the injustice and degradation in the Everglades cannot be undone, various restoration efforts are well underway and providing important successes. The largest among them is the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), which is led and supported by the Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives (OERI), National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the U.S. Department of the Interior. OERI has a Congressionally established task force (established in 1996) that carries out its three main restoration goals: improve watershed quality and restore historic water flow (CERP's current focus); habitat protection and invasive species management; and human-environment cooperation.[21] Other government organizations that have developed multiple Everglades restoration projects include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), United States Department of Agriculture, and USGS. The EPA conducts an Everglades Ecosystem Assessment Program for the purpose of providing public-access environmental health data for the region as a whole and its specific habitats.[22] Such federal efforts often struggle to make leeway due to funding disparities and partisan legislation, but state-level projects have made progress through targeted location or issue-focused approaches. The Everglades Forever Act (1994) has helped lower phosphorus levels and agricultural runoff from the EAA.[23] The Kissimmee River

[20] Alexandra Martinez, "'History is Echoing': Miccosukee Tribe Challenges Secrecy and Environmental Harm at 'Alligator Alcatraz'" (*Prism Reports,* 2025), https://prismreports.org/2025/08/05/alligator-alcatraz-miccosukee-tribe/.

[21] Office of Everglades Restoration Initiatives, "Everglades Restoration Programs and Projects," *EvergladesRestoration.gov*, https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/restoration-program-overview.

[22] Environmental Protection Agency, "Environmental Monitoring in the Everglades" (EPA, 2025), https://www.epa.gov/everglades/environmental-monitoring-everglades.

[23] Florida Department of Environmental Protection, "Everglades Forever Act (EFA)" (FDEP, 2024), https://floridadep.gov/owper/eco-restoration/content/everglades-forever-act-efa.

Restoration Project (completed in 2022) restored 40 square miles of floodplain and 20,000 acres of wetland, recovered 44 miles of water flow, and removed water control structures.[24] Despite public support and comprehensive planning, the unfortunate reality is that restoration and conservation endeavors are too little and too late. Sea level rise and intensified storms influenced by climate change and global warming are especially harmful to the coastlines and subtropical zones that comprise much of Florida's territory. Major obstacles in the path of restoring the Everglades include scale, cost, and funding, as well as political pushback and the failure to address climate change itself. The efforts of grassroots indigenous activists (especially those of the Miccosukee Tribe) and organized protests reflect resilience and hope for the Everglades ecoregion and continuously raise awareness towards environmental and social issues.

Florida's Everglades and its inhabitants have been subjected to a violent cycle of degradation and injustice since American colonial forces exerted influence over the area. The region called Pa-hay-Okee by indigenous tribes is only a skeleton of its former self, having suffered through misguided water control projects, habitat destruction, and encroaching industrial and urban settlement. Whether considered a drainage empire in the early 1900s or a site for an inhumane immigrant detention facility in modern times, the Everglades is a microcosm of the power imbalances that form the dark underbelly of American prosperity and capitalist ideologies. Exploitation of resources, pushing minority groups into the fringes of society politically and physically, polluting biological systems that are necessary for life, and facilitating the loss of biodiversity has recklessly endangered this sensitive ecosystem and all the living beings who depend on it. The American government has proven unreliable at best when it comes to environmental issues, and constant partisan legislation and stalemates allow places of incredible importance like the Everglades to degrade further as waters rise and temperatures warm globally. Restoration and conservation efforts should remain the top priority for the Everglades, and more must be done locally, regionally, and federally to support its rehabilitation and to platform indigenous voices who live interconnected with this sacred land.

[24] South Florida Water Management District, *Restoring the Kissimmee River* (SFWMD, 2022), https://www.sfwmd.gov/sites/default/files/documents/factsheet_KissimmeeRiver_2022_Final.pdf.

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