

Dare to Save the Everglades

Editor's Note: The following piece is excerpted from an article by Nathaniel P. Reed, former assistant secretary of the Department of the Interior, veteran of 35 years working on Everglades problems, adviser to two Florida governors, and now a member of the South Florida Water Management District. It was carried in the Feb. 21, 1993 edition of the Miami Herald.

Last year—the year of great hope for the Everglades—may yet rank as the Year of Great Frustration, due to the gap between our grand promises and our minuscule accomplishments.

The National Park Service and the environmental community consistently rank Everglades NP as the most threatened of all our nation's parks. *The Miami Herald* has well reported the increasing sea-grass die-offs and algal blooms in Florida Bay. The visible problems have compounded quickly and the repercussions are now widespread.

That water is the heart of the problem is universally recognized. Water flows to the Everglades and Florida Bay have been dramatically modified by man. Water of the wrong quality now arrives at the wrong times and in the wrong amounts.

In 1992, with great fanfare, numerous agencies—the South Florida Water Management District, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the National Park Service—all made commitments to move forward aggressively with Everglades Park restoration efforts.

So what happened? The water management district, with great publicity, installed a temporary pump capable of moving an additional 100 cubic feet per second of water into the water-starved Taylor Slough and has proposed to “test” it for the next two years. This additional water is generally recognized by resource managers as wholly inadequate and a rather meaningless “test.” The action also delays addressing the complex issues of delivering larger amounts of water while lessening potential adverse impacts upon competing users of the flood-control system.

In 1987, the water management district initiated a similar experimental two-year water delivery program from the Tamiami Trail gates into Everglades NP. Six years later, that “experiment” is just routinely extended with no effort to analyze the results and modify the program accordingly.

The NPS has been repeatedly asked to define the water needs of the park so that water managers can evaluate options to provide it. This critical work was again promised in 1992, but still remains uncompleted. The Corps of Engineers must stop stalling, stop equivocating, stop endless studying. The fate of the entire Everglades system—

from the Kissimmee River Restoration, to Lake Okeechobee's mandated water-level schedules, to the water delivery systems to the Shark River and Taylor Slough—must be their “priority,” not a difficult stepchild that needs another round of study and restudy.

The prevailing reasons given for government inaction are “the federal pollution lawsuit,” insufficient funding, or Hurricane Andrew. The real reason is a lack of coordination, cooperation, and priorities.

Why haven't we accomplished anything significant? It's not lack of knowledge—we are indeed studying the Everglades to its death.

Perhaps the greatest problem is that the current bureaucratic process now effectively stifles government action. Restoration efforts have stalled for three reasons:

- **There is no agreement on what “restoration” means.** What level of recovery and/or protection are we trying to achieve in the Everglades? The goals range from meeting the needs of a single species to the undefined needs of “the ecosystem.” There is no consensus regarding what parts we are trying to protect and what parts must also serve other public needs.

- **There is no clear game plan to get there.** Each agency is pursuing some part of the puzzle and frequently using the failure of a sister agency to move forward as an excuse to further delay its own efforts. We lack measurable milestones, deadlines, and responsibilities to move forward.

- **There is no leadership to ensure that all the important players work together with a sense of urgency.** There has clearly been no strong leadership or vision among the resource managers with responsibilities in the Everglades arena.

I believe it is well past time for a new approach—one built upon communication, cooperation, leadership, and “dare.” It also is time to focus public attention squarely on the performance of the key players in achieving the goal they all profess to share.

As a first step, all the agencies need to form a high-level task team to define the restoration goal. I abhor forming yet another Everglades team, but the participants seem in such wide disarray that the only restarting point seems to be to lock them in one room and give them a collective shake! The team

must have a fixed time frame—say, a short 45 days—to redefine the collective goals and define their respective obligations. The new secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, must intervene directly if necessary, to end longstanding conflicts between components of his agencies to produce a unified approach.

The new administration must also commit to promptly resolve conflicts between agencies such as Interior and the Corps of Engineers. Gov. Lawton Chiles must ensure that involved state agencies participate actively and constructively. The product must be a clear, concise plan for all agencies that the public can understand and track.

(In a discussion of "the Frog Pond" and "Rocky Glades," two properties within the historic eastern Everglades' watershed where competing interests have kept massive quantities of water from Taylor Slough and eventually from Florida Bay, Reed suggests that old conflicts must be settled and fundamental errors of public policy reversed.)

Florida Bay has too little patience left! We must take serious strides, not just shuffle our feet if we wish to save the Everglades/Florida Bay system. Bureaucrats too content to just step in place and deliver speeches at conventions should not be tolerated any longer. They should be held to standards of productivity and accountability.

The moment is opportune—we have informed, committed leadership in Gov. Chiles. The U.S. Department of the Interior, at last, has a knowledgeable, dedicated conservationist as secretary and the backing of an administration supportive of natural resource protection. I would challenge these resource managers to immediately define the key components of an effective plan for Everglades restoration. I would further challenge the Everglades Coalition to assertively and impartially chart their progress.