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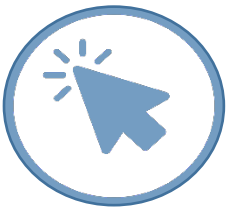
Our Everglades, Our Water

Audubon Florida is Florida's most influential conservation organization, engaging in the work needed to protect the Everglades and other special places in Florida. Check us out at **https://fl.audubon.org/**.

Navigating the Fact Sheet



This short fact sheet on the Everglades contains links to videos and graphics that help explain concepts, provide visuals, and dig deeper into the issues. Click on the bolded, blue words and phrases to access them. Feel free to explore all of them or just a few – whatever you need to help you understand the story of the Everglades.

What is the Everglades?

These iconic **wetlands** are woven into South Florida's identity, treasured for their biodiversity and their beauty. And they're not just significant to us here in Florida; the Everglades is the largest wetland in North America. In a wetland, the land is always or regularly covered by shallow water or, if it's not completely covered, the ground is soaked in water. For this reason, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, a writer and advocate who worked to protect the Everglades, famously called the Everglades a River of Grass.

The Everglades stretches across 18,000 square feet of **diverse ecosystem**, roughly the size of two states of New Jersey. Everglades National Park is only a part of it. The ecosystem starts north of Orlando and ends in Florida Bay, by the Keys. It is home to some of Florida's most celebrated **wildlife**, including more than 350 species of birds and scores of mammals, reptiles, and fish.

How has the Everglades changed?

Historically, water in the Everglades flowed down the Kissimmee River, overflowed the banks of Lake Okeechobee, and moved in a slow sheet across South Florida until it reached Florida Bay.

However, in the early 1900s, the Everglades was drained. Water was rerouted by a series of pumps, canals, levees, and other structures. 50% of its original wetlands were lost. The water that used to fill the lake and overflow the southern lip is now sent out to sea along the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Canals, while the southern Everglades is starved for freshwater. South of Lake Okeechobee, a large agricultural area sprang up in what was once previous marshland. Development up and down the east and west coasts grew on newly drained lands.

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What are some of the water problems the Everglades faces?

Because of changes in **water flow**, the Everglades doesn't receive the fresh water that it needs. Plants and wildlife depend on that water, and so do we.

The River of Grass **provides the drinking water for South Florida.** Altogether, the Everglades ecosystem supplies the drinking water for eight million Floridians. That's one out of every three people living in the state. In South Florida, much of the water we drink comes straight from the Biscayne Aquifer, an underground river replenished by the flow of water through the Everglades. The wetlands act like filtration systems, removing impurities from the water that moves slowly through them.

The changes to the historical water flow are also related to another problem. Fertilizers and pesticides from farms and urban areas are **washed into the water** when it rains, and that water gets sent to the east and west coast of Florida. These fertilizers and pesticides have nutrients that feed toxic algal blooms, which harm wildlife and businesses. Florida's 2018 **blue green algae** and **red tide blooms** were particularly severe.

What's up with sea level rise?

Coastal aquifers are at risk from **saltwater intrusion**. South Florida's aquifer is made of limestone, which is highly porous and permeable rock. Limestone contains tiny holes that allow water to move through it, like the holes in a sponge. At the coast, the freshwater in the aquifer meets the saltwater of the ocean. The pressure of freshwater within an aquifer serves as a barrier to that ocean water. But, when there is less freshwater in the aquifer and there are higher sea levels, saltwater can start creeping in. If the saltwater advances to the wells we use to draw up drinking water, those wells can't be used anymore.

South Florida's projected population growth will further increase demand on our aquifers and rising seas levels will exacerbate saltwater intrusion. **Getting more freshwater into the Everglades** helps fight saltwater intrusion and recharge our aquifers.

How are people trying to fix it?

The ongoing **Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP)** aims to **recreate the original north-to-south flow of water**. Water that is now sent out to sea will be cleaned and rerouted south once again in the right quantities and at the right time. The wetlands will receive the water they need and our drinking water supply will be replenished. CERP is funded by the federal government and the state government of Florida. As one of the largest ecosystem restoration projects in the world, CERP is an ambitious project to protect Florida's ecology, communities, and economy.