



Audubon FLORIDA

State of the Everglades

Spring 2019



Least Bittern
Photo: Peter Brannon

Dear Friends of the Everglades,

We have many reasons to be hopeful this year. In our last report, I shared the troubling news that the 30-year-old consent decree that sets protective water quality standards in the Everglades was in jeopardy. Today I share proudly that Audubon prevailed in court and the judge ruled on our side, ordering work to achieve water quality in the Everglades continue as planned. The decree is safe and so is the Everglades ecosystem!

We have a new Governor and a complete revamp of the South Florida Water Management District embracing DeSantis' bold agenda of ecosystem restoration. This includes expediting the Everglades Agricultural Area reservoir recently approved by Congress, prioritizing nutrient pollution reduction, and increasing public transparency and accountability.

Following Audubon's recommendations, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is using their authority to manage Lake Okeechobee to allow for the recovery of critical marsh habitat for birds and wildlife. Today, we are seeing the fruits of our labor. Both emergent and submerged vegetation is sprouting back and breathing new life into the liquid heart of the Everglades. A healthy Lake is key to the entire Greater Everglades Ecosystem.

These and so many more things are fueling Audubon's work on behalf of America's Everglades and Florida's waters. None of this could be happening without your support. You are the wind beneath our wings.



Thank you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Celeste De Palma".

Celeste De Palma
Director of Everglades Policy



New Rulebook to Manage Lake Okeechobee Must Prioritize Lake and Ecosystem Health

The Army Corps of Engineers is reviewing the Lake Okeechobee Regulation Schedule, the rulebook it uses to manage lake water levels. The regulation schedule adopted in 2008 lowered lake levels to prevent failure of the fragile Herbert Hoover Dike. Even though the current set of operations recognized the need to keep lake levels lower, lake levels have reached 16 or more feet in depth in six of the last seven years, creating devastating impacts to lake and estuary health. Nutrient-absorbing marsh vegetation in the lake declined from over 44,000 acres in 2012 to a meager 5,000 acres today. The Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie Estuaries received persistent discharges of nutrient and sediment-enriched water that harmed seagrass and oysters, and carried harmful algal blooms. Fish and wildlife suffered throughout.

Under the new schedule, the Corps must weigh competing project purposes such as flood control, water supply, recreation, navigation, and environmental effects on fish and wildlife. Historically, environmental impacts have taken a backseat to flood control and water supply. Audubon Florida supports adoption of a regulation schedule that places the environment and endangered species on equal footing with other project purposes. Making ecosystem health a higher priority can improve water quality, lake vegetation, fish and wildlife, and downstream ecosystems.

Prioritizing lake and ecosystem health means resisting the call to make the lake deeper once dike repairs are completed. A deeper lake is a dirtier lake that drowns nutrient-absorbing marsh vegetation and increases harmful, high volume releases to estuaries. Managing lake water levels within an optimal range that fairly and equitably balances the interests of all stakeholders, promotes healthy lake and estuary ecosystems, and provides necessary flood control is the best outcome the Corps could possibly achieve in a new regulation schedule. Striking the right balance is a significant challenge, but we cannot afford to continue with the current set of operations or—far worse—repeating mistakes of the past in pursuing a deeper lake.

Audubon will continue to advocate for an ecosystem-based approach to managing the “Liquid Heart of the Everglades.”



Nutrient-absorbing sedges are sprouting again along the water's edge thanks to favorable mudflat conditions. Even wetland plants like these cannot germinate when water levels are too high. Photo: Paul Gray.



Water lilies float above submerged vegetation, signaling renewed life in Lake Okeechobee, heart of the Everglades ecosystem. Photo: Paul Gray



Snail Kite. Photo: Sandra Rothenberg

Audubon Research Vital to Protecting Wetlands

Audubon's Western Everglades Research Center, led by Dr. Shawn Clem, has identified a dramatic annual drop in dry season water levels at Audubon's Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary beginning around 2000. This region-wide situation affects wetlands, wading birds, water supplies, and adds catastrophic wildfire risk. Plausible causes include over-drainage of wetlands via canals, and over-pumping from shallow aquifers. Audubon is collaborating on regional modeling of causes and potential remedies.

Equally concerning is a proposal by EPA to reduce federal Clean Water Act protections for millions of acres of wetlands by redefining protected "Waters of the U.S." to exclude seasonal, rain-driven wetlands prominent in the Everglades. This ignores massive 2018 Harmful Algal Blooms that left over 2,000 tons of dead marine life on Southwest Florida beaches from Red Tide and Blue-green Algae. Audubon science, linking upstream wetland health and downstream water quality, is being used to oppose this threatening nationwide rule.



Wood Stork. Photo: Rick Wasmer

Send Water South. It Works for Florida Bay, Everglades National Park, and the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow!

Florida Bay suffers from a lack of freshwater flows. Currently, the bay receives only about one-fourth the amount of water it had prior to dredging. This puts Florida Bay at the knife's edge, especially during the dry season when fresh water is urgently needed to combat high salinity. Without increased freshwater flows, Florida Bay largely depends on rainfall, which is insufficient to prevent the hypersalinity episodes that stress this delicate ecosystem. We saw evidence of this in the late 1980s when seagrass die-off prompted the creation of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), and again in 2015 when Florida Bay's hypersalinity killed 50,000 acres of seagrasses. Everglades restoration hinges on sending the right amounts of fresh water to the right places, at the right time, and it all must be clean.

Florida Bay's future relies on our ability to maximize the amount of fresh water we can send south. The good news is that a network of projects in the southern terminus of the Everglades ecosystem—under construction for almost 30 years—is finally complete. The Modified Waters Deliveries Project along with the C-111 South Dade projects are envisioned to work in concert to send more clean fresh water south under the Tamiami Trail bridges and into Everglades National Park, ultimately reaching Florida Bay. How these projects work together is the focus of the Combined Operations Plan (COP) currently under formulation.



Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow
Photo: NPS / Lori Oberhofer

Recent rumors that the Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow stands in the way of sending more fresh water south are unfounded, misguided, and incorrect. The Cape Sable Seaside Sparrow is an endangered species in desperate need of Everglades restoration. What works for Florida Bay also works for the sparrow, and the current plan to flow water under Tamiami Trail and into Northeast Shark River Slough is exactly what is needed to save both the sparrow and Florida Bay. Simply put, what is good for the bird is also good for the Bay, the Everglades, and all the species that call this unique ecosystem home.

Audubon and partners have been working proactively with planning agencies to ensure that the Combined Operations Plan for these southern Everglades features deliver maximum ecological benefits to the Park and Florida Bay, as envisioned by taxpayers who funded these projects. The \$1 billion investment represents the largest capital construction project in the history of the National Park System. The COP must honor this hefty taxpayer investment by sending the maximum possible amount of fresh water into the Park and Florida Bay.



Florida Steps Up in Everglades Funding, D.C., Not So Much

A week into his new role, Governor Ron DeSantis launched an ambitious agenda when he announced his \$625 million budget proposal for Everglades and water quality projects for FY2019-20. The proposal included \$360 million dedicated to Everglades restoration, and Audubon's policy team got straight to work in support of this ambitious agenda. Our waterways are clearly impacted by pollution, and lawmakers in Tallahassee took notice. Following our recommendations and taking the Governor's cue, the Florida Legislature appropriated a total of more than \$360 million for Everglades restoration at the end of the 2019 session. This historic level of funding supports the completion of ongoing restoration projects, including the C-43 and C-44 reservoirs, and accelerates the EAA Reservoir so desperately needed to reduce estuary discharges and to connect Florida Bay to Lake Okeechobee.

Meanwhile, in Washington D.C., we continue to work with our Congressional Delegation to match the State's commitment to Everglades restoration. Disappointingly, the Trump administration's abysmal \$63.5 million budget for Everglades work falls far short of the desired \$200 million needed to accelerate construction of these critical projects. The federal budget cycle is just picking up steam and Audubon is committed to find additional funding to get us to the \$200 million mark to get restoration projects in the ground now. Our families, wildlife, and way of life in the Sunshine State depend on it!

Everglades Action Day a Success

Audubon and other Everglades Coalition members took Tallahassee by storm for the Seventh Annual Everglades Action Day on April 8. More than 60 advocates from around the Sunshine State visited decision makers to discuss the importance of funding Everglades restoration, Florida Forever, and water quality efforts to address our water crises. During that same period, advocates visited the Senate's Ethics and Elections Committee hearing to support confirmation of Florida Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Noah Valenstein and South Florida Water Management District governing board members Chauncey Goss, Charlie Martinez, Jay Steinle, Cheryl Meads, Charlette Roman, Jacqui Thurlow-Lippisch, and Scott Wagner. The committee recommended their confirmations, and the full Senate confirmed the new members during the last week of the 2019 legislative season.



Audubon discussed funding for Everglades restoration, Florida Forever, and water quality efforts with decision makers at Everglades Action Day

National Wildlife Refuge at Hobe Sound Named for Florida Conservation Legend ‘Nat’ Reed

On April 15, Audubon participated in the dedication ceremony that renamed Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge as the Nathaniel P. Reed Hobe Sound National Wildlife Refuge. This was a fitting tribute to honor the conservation giant and Hobe Sound native.

U.S. Senators Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio and Rep. Brian Mast sponsored legislation to add Reed’s name to the Hobe Sound Refuge shortly after Mr. Reed’s passing in July 2018. Known for his fiery oratory and unrelenting spirit, Nat Reed was instrumental in establishing cornerstone environmental laws like the Endangered Species Act and Clean Water Act. His footprint in the Everglades ecosystem is immeasurable, and we will be forever grateful for his dedication to the protection of Florida’s special places and species.



Members of Nat Reed’s family celebrated the renaming of the Hobe Sound National Wildlife Center in his honor.

Spearheading Success for Everglades Policy



Carol Timmis

Secretary and Development Committee Chair, Audubon Florida

“When I first arrived in Florida almost 25 years ago, I asked around to find out who was leading the work to restore the Everglades. The answer I got then – and the answer I give now – is Audubon. Audubon fields a team of scientists and policy analysts throughout the entire

ecosystem and is the leading voice for conservation in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. I work closely with this group of talented individuals and I believe that this is the team that can ensure restoration projects move forward in a sound and timely manner.”

Carol Timmis, Secretary and Chair of the Development Committee for Audubon Florida, has been living in Florida for 25 years. She is hopeful that future generations will continue to enjoy fishing, golfing, and birding in Florida.



Doug Gaston

Northern Everglades Policy, Audubon Florida

After a successful law career, Doug Gaston left the corporate arena to apply his background and experience to issues affecting oceans and coastal waters, sustainable fishing, and protecting critical habitat. In preparation, he earned an LL.M degree in Ocean

and Coastal Law from the University of Miami. Now serving as Audubon Florida’s Northern Everglades Policy Analyst, Doug is actively engaging partners, staff, and the angler community to solve major issues affecting the Lake Okeechobee watershed and the greater Everglades ecosystem.

“Audubon has a long history of protecting the Everglades and has made restoration of the River of Grass a top priority. I’m excited to work with a great organization and a great team that uses sound science and a common sense approach to protect and preserve this amazing natural resource.”



4500 Biscayne Boulevard · Suite 350 · Miami, Florida 33137
GivetoAudubonFlorida.org