

Florida Trend

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WILDERNESS TRAP

Why Indigenous tribes, hunters, Glades people and others are fighting a new protection plan for Big Cypress National Preserve.

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Betty Osceola,
member of the
Miccosukee
Tribe of Florida
(Panther Clan)

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WILDERNESS TRAP

The country's first national preserve might receive an added layer of protection. Here's why Indigenous tribes, hunters, legislators, Glades people and others are fighting it.

By Brittney J. Miller

Photos by Eileen Escarda





Big Cypress National Preserve sits smack-dab between Miami and Naples, its 727,000-plus acres of freshwater wetlands adjacent to Everglades National Park and almost equal in size to Rhode Island. Established in 1974, it marked the nation's first national preserve — a new classification designed to meld ecological conservation with public recreation.

For Betty Osceola, a member of the Miccosukee Tribe, Big Cypress was home before it was ever a preserve. Her father purchased their family camp there years ago, and she grew up among the swamps. She's one of the few remaining tribal members still living in a chickee hut, a traditional Indigenous shelter with a raised floor, thatched roof and open sides.

"It's just how I was raised. My mom was always adamant

that we needed to keep that (tradition) alive," Osceola says. And she has — for decades. But now, she fears for the future of her home after a proposal cropped up to give large swaths of the preserve a wilderness designation.

The designation stems from the Wilderness Act of 1964, which recognizes wilderness as federal land "where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." It's the government's highest level

of land protection, which generally prohibits permanent human structures, motorized equipment and recreation that compromises wilderness qualities. More than 111 million acres of wilderness comprise the National Wilderness Preservation System, totaling an area larger than California.

At first glance, such a designation might seem like a win for further protecting Big Cypress National Preserve. But tribal members, sportsmen, nonprofits, legislators, and state



Betty Osceola, a member of the Miccosukee Tribe, grew up in Big Cypress Preserve and still lives there today — but she fears for the future of her home.

officials and agencies have rallied against the idea. Amid the yearslong debate, a web of unorthodox alliances has formed, challenging traditional narratives of land conservation and making the preserve's future — and the future of those who live on it, care for it and fight for it — uncertain.

"With just one step off my yard, if the designation passed, you would be in the designated area," Osceola says. "I (could) be homeless."

Into the wild

On a camping trip for his seventh birthday, Franklin Adams first visited the Big Cypress Swamp.

At 87 years old, he can still feel the cold front that swept through the campsite decades ago. He remembers leaning against an oak tree by the campfire, watching whirls of fog turn into shapes and figures in his imagination, listening to his dad talk as he drifted off to sleep.

"Long story short, that captured me," Adams says. "I've been going back ever since."

Adams, who now lives in Naples, has had a long and varied career, including leadership positions with environmental groups like Friends of the Everglades and the Florida Wildlife Federation. One of his proudest accomplishments has been helping to save the Big Cypress Swamp from development.

It all started when the Dade County Port Authority quietly bought 39 square miles of land near Everglades National Park in the 1960s. Their vision? The "Everglades Jetport" — a six-runway hub destined for transnational travel. Five times larger than the JFK International Airport, it would've been the biggest airport in the world — if it had been built as planned.

A coalition of hunters, tribal members, activists and conservationists like Adams joined together in opposition, linked by a mutual concern about the project's environmental impacts. Work on the jetport stopped in 1970, but development still threatened the area. In 1974, then-President Gerald Ford established Big Cypress National Preserve as

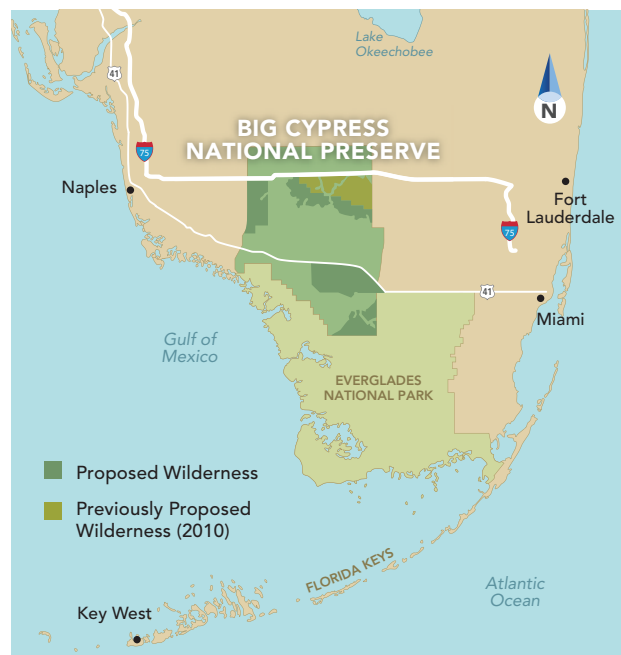
the nation's first national preserve.

The preserve's enabling legislation allows certain recreational, traditional and business activities prohibited in most national parks — a compromise between protecting the land and safeguarding traditional forms of access.

Among its language, the legislation allows hunting and fishing. Off-road driving is allowed for permitted users navigating remote areas with vessels like swamp buggies and airboats. Land and water rights were codified for the Miccosukee and Seminole tribes that have lived on the land for centuries. Existing private property was allowed to remain with the owners. Oil and gas exploration and extraction are permitted in the preserve.

The enabling legislation also required a review of the land for any eligible wilderness designations. A 1979 study concluded that no part of the preserve was suitable, citing factors like the free-ranging off-road vehicle usage allowed in the area. The National Park Service has since limited off-road driving to 278 miles of designated trails — and in 2022, after decades of changes in land management and federal policies, the National Park Service reevaluated Big Cypress National Preserve's suitability for a wilderness designation.

PROPOSED WILDERNESS



The National Park Service has recommended placing 25% of Big Cypress under a wilderness designation. More than 47,000 acres are already being managed as wilderness pursuant to a 2010 proposal.

Many Miccosukee Tribe members continue traditional practices daily within every region of Big Cypress National Preserve. The National Park Service's new protection plan could cut off access to their historic and sacred lands.

It now suggests that 147,910 acres — one quarter of the preserve, consisting of its most primitive parts — should receive a wilderness designation.

Any motorized off-road access would be explicitly prohibited in those areas. Historic vehicle trails trace through those regions, but they are long closed, the National Park Service says. (Locals estimate that hundreds of miles of closed trails are still being used regardless). While those areas would remain largely inaccessible, the agency's plan would increase the density of off-road vehicle trails in more resilient parts of the preserve. It would open 54 additional miles of primary trails — including 39 miles of airboat trails — along preexisting routes. Other additions would include 52 miles of secondary off-road vehicle trails, 141 miles of hiking trails and 83 backcountry destinations.

"The trail system in this alternative is large enough to provide access to those parts of the preserve traditionally used by people in the past, and sufficiently spread out to distribute users safely over a large area during hunting season," the agency's plan states. "(It) achieves the best combination of increased visitor access and long-term resource protection."

Neither the U.S. Department of the Interior nor the National Park Service accommodated multiple interview requests and written questions for this report.

Defending sacred grounds

The National Park Service describes Big Cypress National Preserve's Loop Unit, a swampy section in the southeast quadrant of the preserve, as one of its least disturbed areas of land. Calling it "undeveloped, largely untrammelled" and "primarily affected by the forces of nature," the 50,707-acre park unit appears to be a prime choice for a wilderness designation.

For Houston Cypress — and many other members of the Miccosukee Tribe — it's much more than that.

He remembers traveling into the Loop Unit with his grandparents, where they would collect cypress wood to carve with. His time racing through the maze of trees with his cousin are treasured childhood memories. He still goes into the Loop today, inspired, comforted and healed, he says, by the nature around him.

Cypress, a founder of the Love the Everglades Movement and a member of the tribe's Everglades Advisory Committee, dreads that access would be taken away.

"That's the horror of the wilderness (designation) — that all of this will become a memory," he says, sitting under the

Since he was a child, Houston Cypress has found inspiration and healing in a remote section of Big Cypress known as the Loop Unit. "That's the horror of the wilderness (designation)," he says. "That all of this will become a memory."



shade of a cypress tree in the Loop Unit. "It's a very foundational robbery that comes into play. ... It's stealing your dignity, your sense of identity that's being taken away, and trust in the other party"

The tribe's history intertwined with the Big Cypress Swamp before it was ever a preserve.

A nomadic group, the Miccosukee traveled up and down the East Coast for hundreds of years, their range stretching from the Northeast down to the Florida Keys. Amid the Indian Wars of the 1800s and the Indian Removal Act of 1830, about 100 tribe members retreated into the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp to avoid capture and relocation by the U.S. military. Ever since, they've lived among the swamps, adapting to the land and caring for it through sustainable hunting and gathering and controlled burns. The federal



government formally recognized the Miccosukee Tribe as a sovereign nation in 1962.

Many of the tribe's present-day population, which number around 600, continue traditional practices daily within every region of Big Cypress National Preserve.

Members gather plant medicines, from roots to leaves to bark, from the preserve. Others collect cypress logs and palm fronds to construct chickees. There are still 15 traditional villages in Big Cypress National Preserve, where an estimated 100 to 200 people like Osceola live. They frequent nearby ceremonial grounds for celebrations like the Green Corn Dance, an annual Indigenous ceremony of renewal. There also are active burial grounds distributed throughout the preserve.

The National Park Service's preferred management plan, tribal members say, would impede access to their historic and

PARK OR PRESERVE?

When development threatened the Big Cypress Swamp in the 1960s, stakeholders knew they needed to protect the expansive ecosystem. But how?

Simply adjoining it with the neighboring Everglades National Park would halt much of the land's traditional usage — a nonstarter for the Indigenous tribes, hunters and fishers that had grown dependent on the landscape. About 1.3 million acres, or 86%, of Everglades National Park is designated wilderness. Another 11% is eligible wilderness. (In contrast to most wilderness, motorized boats are allowed in some areas of the Everglades.)

Indigenous tribes, Glades people and other landowners were also forced off their properties when Everglades National Park was created. They didn't want to experience that again in Big Cypress.

A compromise came in the form of a new land management concept: a national preserve, which would protect the area but allow specific activities — like hunting and fishing — to continue. It also protected existing land ownership as well as Indigenous land and water rights.

"The compromise was this new breed of cat," says Franklin Adams, one of the foundational advocates for the preserve. "The people of Florida made it happen."

sacred lands. The boundaries of the designation would skirt by existing villages, cutting through residents' backyards. Many rely on cars to transport heavy gathered materials, like cypress wood, through the preserve. Some ceremonial sites fall in the footprint of the wilderness designation. Tribal members typically access those grounds by road and worry that, if those paths are taken away, they would no longer be able to participate.

Above all, members of the Miccosukee Tribe see a wilderness designation as a continued encroachment of their rights.

"It's always been a threat to us. We've always heard rumblings about it being proposed, being looked at. But I think more recently, it has turned up a bit," says tribe chairman Talbert Cypress. "It's important for people to understand that our culture is still alive and well within our tribe, and

this Wilderness Act will make it very hard for us to continue that."

The U.S. Department of the Interior has promised to carve out exceptions for the tribe in a wilderness designation, Miccosukee leaders say. But the tribe says that's not enough and has requested the agency halt the designation and pursue a co-management agreement.

"It just puts too many bureaucratic layers between us and the land that's always been available to us. And not only that — it will put us at the mercy of whatever administration is in office," says William "Popeye" Osceola, secretary of the Miccosukee Business Council. "We're fighting to maintain our culture. That's through the connection of the land, and that's what makes us Indigenous. We've been shaped by the land. I would hate to lose that connection."





Big Cypress is home to 51 species of reptile, including the American alligator, and more than 150 threatened or endangered plant and animal species. State agencies worry a wildlife designation could cut off access needed to manage their habitat.

William “Popeye” Osceola, secretary of the Miccosukee Business Council, is skeptical of the Department of Interior’s promise to carve out exceptions for the tribe. He says it will create “too many bureaucratic layers” and leave the tribe subject to the whims of “whatever administration is in office.”

Ecological ripples

A lone alligator moseys through clear waters under a sunny sky, its dark scales blending in with the muddy river bottom. Nature’s symphony is its playlist: the ripples of flowing water, the grunts of bullfrogs, the buzz of cicadas hiding in vegetation, the chirps of birds overhead. Cypress trees — some several centuries old — stand guard all around, their roots webbing across half of Big Cypress National Preserve.

Among its inhabitants, the haven houses more than 150 federally or state-listed plant and animal species. The preserve offers homes for state-threatened species like the gopher tortoise and the Big Cypress fox squirrel and federally endangered species like the red-cockaded woodpecker and the Florida scrub-jay. It’s listed as critical habitat for the West Indian manatee and proposed critical habitat for the Florida bonneted bat, two federally threatened species. And it contributes to the largest contiguous acreage of habitat for Florida panthers in South Florida.

Additionally, 37 plant species in the preserve are considered threatened or endangered in Florida. Of the vegetation on the preserve, 10% is endemic to Big Cypress National Preserve — meaning it’s found nowhere else in the world.

The National Park Service has assured continued management of the preserve and its delicate ecosystems even with wilderness designations. But state agencies worry the site’s ecological balance could go astray if such designations cut off access for needed land, species and resource stewardship.



Gladesman Dave Shealy used to take visitors to Big Cypress fishing and hunting on airboats and in swamp buggies until the National Park Service closed the trails he used. It nearly decimated his business.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission — which has various responsibilities in the preserve, including species restoration and research — objected to a National Park Service wilderness designation in a February letter to the U.S. Department of the Interior.

“Invasive plants and animals are a well-known threat to the unique habitats of the (preserve),” commission chairman Rodney Barreto wrote. “A wilderness designation would hinder the ongoing management that is critical in minimizing the loss of biodiversity caused by nonnative species.”

Five invasive plant species — including Brazilian pepper and melaleuca — are common in the preserve and risk displacing native plant communities. Nonnative wildlife species also pose threats to local ecosystems, namely invasive Burmese pythons. The giant snakes have established breeding populations in the preserve and prey on mammals like rabbits, foxes, raccoons and deer.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection relayed similar concerns about invasive species management in a March letter. It also pointed to a wilderness designation being a barrier for fire suppression activities within the preserve, particularly the administration of controlled burns that minimize the threat of wildfires.

“The wilderness designation would create barriers to accessing the lands rapidly during these emergency situations to minimize the loss,” department secretary Shawn Hamilton wrote. “While fire can play an important role in land management and improving the health of habitats, uncontrolled fire can result in severe ecological losses that,



once gone, may never return.”

The South Florida Water Management District, which manages and protects water resources across 16 counties in South Florida, cited additional concerns in an April letter about a wilderness designation’s impact on Everglades restoration. District executive director Drew Bartlett listed potential challenges with constructing or removing water infrastructure, collecting data and samples, and conducting restoration projects like the Western Everglades Restoration Project, which is restoring water flow and quality to historically mismanaged parts of the Everglades.

Neither the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Florida Department of Environmental Protection nor the South Florida Water Management District granted an interview for this article.



Clinging to tradition

It's 9 p.m., and darkness has fallen over Big Cypress National Preserve. Mike Elfenbein is in the driver seat of his Toyota Tundra, inching it slowly down a dirt road. His eyes are trained on the roadside vegetation illuminated by the bright spotlights mounted to his truck.

He brakes hard, whipping out a handheld flashlight and training it on a dark shape in the grass. He sighs. "Just a stick," he murmurs in disappointment, taking his foot off the brake and carrying on. The chase continues — a scavenger hunt for a Burmese python, one of the various threats to the preserve he has fought to protect for years.

The Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America — a conservation group that Elfenbein heads up — was explicitly forged to help create Big Cypress National

Mike Elfenbein, executive director of the Cypress Chapter of the Izaak Walton League of America, worries that a wilderness designation would allow invasive species, such as the Burmese python, to proliferate in the preserve.

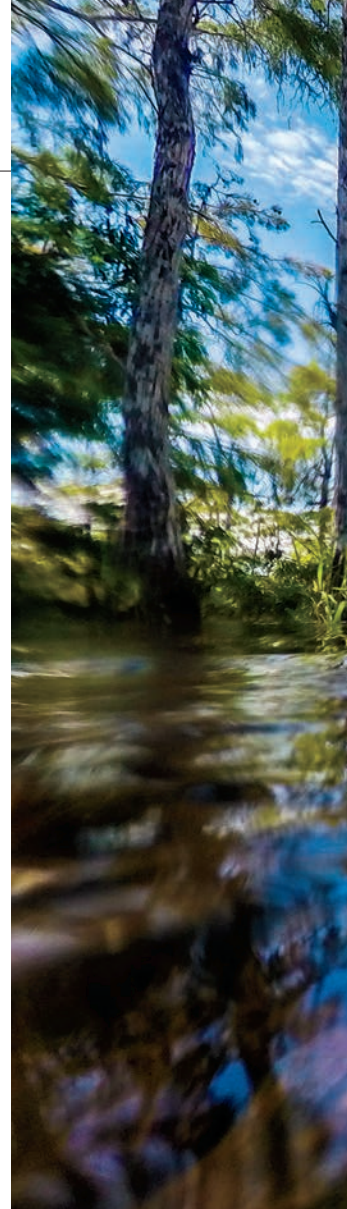
State agency officials say a wildlife designation would make it more difficult to access the land for controlled burns and to conduct work on the Western Everglades Restoration Project.

Preserve. It has opposed wilderness designations ever since, he says, and is rallying with other stakeholders to protect their historic access to the land.

“Here we are, 50-something years later, the offspring of the people and the successors of the people who came before us,” he says, “uniting again to save this place.”

Elfenbein and other Glades people — folks who develop a close relationship with South Florida’s swamp ecosystems, often living off the land — see a wilderness designation as the culmination of decades of decreased access to the preserve. They accuse the National Park Service of slowly chipping away at the recreational haven they fought to forge years ago, doubling back on promises made in the enabling legislation.

They point to, for instance, the original off-road vehicle access once freely granted across Big Cypress National Preserve, which Glades people and other patrons could use for hunting, fishing, camping and other recreational activities. The National Park Service eliminated that *carte blanche* access in 2000, opting for a system of designated primary and secondary trails throughout the preserve. Several lawsuits



Tim Spaulding has lived in Big Cypress National Preserve for more than 50 years. An avid hunter, he has seen his backcountry access — and the area’s game populations — dwindle over time. “Twenty years ago, you could drive off (trail). You could go anywhere,” he says. “They’ve stopped that now, so access is greatly reduced.”



from environmental groups like the National Parks Conservation Association and the Sierra Club have targeted off-road vehicle trails in Big Cypress ever since, pausing access to secondary trails to this day.

For Dave Shealy, a Gladesman raised in the preserve, those closures nearly doomed his Trail Lakes Campground.

His business depended on a web of trails tracing from his campus in the preserve, where visitors could go hunting and fishing on airboats and swamp buggies. When those trails were closed, it rendered Shealy's newly constructed boat ramp defunct and cut off much of his revenue stream.

"I lost everything," he says. "How do you operate when you don't have a boat ramp, and you have airboats? Or you don't have a buggy trail, and you cater to people with swamp buggies?" His son now owns the campground, which still offers a range of cabins and cottages along with non-motorized ecotours. "It's wrong what (the National Park Service) did, and I did not have the legal means to fight it."

Glades people and tribal members say they tip off the National Park Service about any issues they see during their boots-on-the-ground activities in the preserve. If their recreational access is diminished, so would be their ability to

keep tabs on ecosystems. Many have claimed they're already seeing declines in wildlife populations in the area, especially for game species. Deer harvests in the preserve's wildlife management areas, for instance, have declined by more than 80% over the last 10 years, according to state data. Snipe harvests have dropped to near-zero in recent years. Some locals attribute the trends to mismanagement of the land and its resources — which, they believe, would be exacerbated by a wilderness designation.

"It hurts a lot of people down here because it's our heritage. You're taking a culture away from everybody," says Josh Minton, a sixth-generation Gladesman based in Everglades City. "The Big Cypress is really the last little piece of area that Gladesmen can enjoy, besides some state land areas through the Everglades. It's going to be a constant battle."

Legislative intervention

Only Congress can formally designate lands as wilderness. That's why stakeholders are trying to go through Congress to prohibit such a proposal, pairing with state legislators to safeguard their Big Cypress National Preserve.

Florida Sens. Rick Scott and Marco Rubio co-sponsored

a bill (S.B. 4267) that would prohibit giving the preserve a wilderness designation. In a March letter to the Department of the Interior, the Republican lawmakers expressed “deep concern and opposition” to any wilderness designation, which they said could impede the preserve’s management and public access.

U.S. Rep. Scott Franklin (R-Lakeland) introduced a companion bill (H.R. 8206) in the House of Representatives. He also questioned Joy Beasley — the National Park Service’s Associate Director of Cultural Resources, Partnerships and Science — in a June subcommittee hearing about how Big Cypress National Preserve is currently being managed.

The Wilderness Act, Beasley said during the hearing, directs areas eligible or proposed for wilderness to be managed as wilderness to preserve “wilderness qualities” until Congress determines if a designation is warranted. That means that once the National Park Service’s 2022 study is finalized, 25% of Big Cypress National Preserve can be managed as wilderness — even without a formal designation by Congress. (A 47,182-acre chunk of the preserve is already

Only the U.S. Congress can formally designate lands as wilderness. Stakeholders have been working with lawmakers to try to prohibit a designation.



The Florida black bear is one of 35 mammal species that makes its home in Big Cypress. Its tracks are not an uncommon sight on the preserve’s trails.






being managed as wilderness, pursuant to a 2010 National Park Service proposal.)

“I’m fairly certain Congress never intended the Park Service to have that level of authority to manage Big Cypress as a wilderness without express approval,” Franklin said in the subcommittee hearing. “I appreciate the need to strike a balance between conservation and public access. And in Florida, we know that often the best way to protect our state’s natural beauty is to leave it in the care of those who have been charged with preserving it for generations.”

The National Parks Conservation Association, one of the few groups publicly supporting a wilderness designation in the preserve, strongly opposed the proposed legislation in a statement to the committee. The nonprofit hailed the use and management of wilderness in neighboring Everglades National Park.

“Stewarding eligible and designated wilderness is part of the NPS mandate to sustain and preserve vital park ecosystems, like Big Cypress,” it wrote, noting threats to the preserve like oil exploration and drilling. “NPCA urges the Committee to recognize the critical importance of protect-

ing Big Cypress National Preserve and to not legislatively preclude the use of a valuable conservation tool.”

Most recently, the Republican-led House passed an appropriations bill (H.R. 8998) that would prohibit any federal funding from being used to designate or manage Big Cypress National Preserve as wilderness. It would also require the U.S. Department of the Interior to prepare an environmental impact statement prior to approving any oil- or gas-related activities within the preserve. At press time, a Senate appropriations bill contained no similar language. The National Park Service has been largely quiet about its timelines and explicit plans for a wilderness designation in Big Cypress National Preserve. 



Behind the scenes: floridatrend.com/bigcypress. Associate Editor Brittney J. Miller trekked deep into Big Cypress Reserve for this report. She reflects on the swamp buggy rides, 20-plus interviews and other work it took to get the story.