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EUGENE GARFIELD

INSTITUTE FOR SCIENTIFIC INFORMATION[®]
3501 MARKET ST., PHILADELPHIA, PA 19104

In Honor of Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Guardian of the Everglades

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This essay considers the life and work of Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890-), an authority on the Florida Everglades whose writings and advocacy have made her one of the most celebrated defenders of that subtropical region. Also discussed is a bronze statue of a Florida panther by Philadelphia sculptor Eric Berg, which ISI[®] has commissioned for installation in the Everglades National Park.

Activism on behalf of the environment, at least on a broad scale, seems a relatively recent phenomenon. The late-1960s' "ecology" movement, which probably reached its height with the observance of Earth Day in 1970, gave rise to a new popular consciousness of environmental issues. While this consciousness may have waned at times in succeeding years, there is no doubt that in the late 1980s, with headlines being made by oil spills, toxic waste, polluted beaches, disappearing rain forests, and the greenhouse effect, concern for the environment has returned to the forefront as an international priority.

For a few individuals, however, the conservation of nature has been a deeply felt, lifelong commitment, quite independent of social trends or political appeal. Last year I had the pleasure of meeting a woman who has made conservation her lifework. She has become celebrated for waging—almost single-handedly at times—a battle for a unique, fragile, and irreplaceable ecosystem in the southeastern US. That woman is Marjory Stoneman Douglas, and the region that she has dedicated much of her life to preserving is the Florida Everglades.

I had heard about Marjory Douglas for several years from my friend Len Greenfield, former chairman of the Biology Department at the University of Miami. Even-

tually, we visited the Everglades National Park together, where I purchased her books. I then asked Len to arrange a meeting with his old friend. The three of us met at her home in Coconut Grove last summer.

When I spoke with this remarkable woman, she shared many insights into her own life, the problems facing the Everglades and surrounding areas, education, politics, and a host of other topics. In this essay, in honor of Douglas, I'd like to describe briefly something of her life and work, present a few excerpts from our conversation, and discuss one small way in which ISI[®] is helping to pay tribute to the Everglades and those who have worked to save it.

The "Voice of the River"

Douglas began her life far away from the subtropical region with which she has become so closely associated. She was born in 1890 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and grew up near Boston, Massachusetts. In 1912, having majored in English, she was graduated from Wellesley College, Massachusetts. Three years later, fleeing an unhappy marriage, she traveled to Florida to join her father, Frank Bryant Stoneman, founder and editor of the *Miami Herald* (Marjory's parents had separated when she was six). She became a reporter and colum-

nist, covering everything from society to the plight of migrant workers. The pressures of constant newspaper deadlines took their toll on her health, however, and in 1925 she turned her talents to full-time fiction and magazine writing. (Readers interested in a more complete account of Douglas's life are directed to her autobiography, written together with John Rothchild, entitled *Marjory Stoneman Douglas: Voice of the River*, published in 1987.¹)

In 1943 the editors of a book series on American rivers approached Douglas to do a book on the Miami River. Instead, she convinced them to let her write about the Everglades. After nearly five years of research and writing, *The Everglades: River of Grass* was published in 1947.² Still in print some 40 years later, the book is a rich work, describing centuries of natural and human history in a style that is as poetic as it is replete with factual detail. Douglas's masterstroke was the book's three-word subtitle, which cast the Everglades in a light that few had chosen to see: not simply an inert swamp or marshland, but a moving, thriving ecosystem—a *river*. As she writes:

It stretches as it has always stretched, in one thick enormous curving river of grass, to the very end. This is the Everglades.

It reaches one hundred miles from Lake Okeechobee to the Gulf of Mexico, fifty, sixty, even seventy miles wide. No one has ever fought his way along its full length. Few have ever crossed the northern wilderness of nothing but grass. Down the almost invisible slope the water moves. The grass stands. Where the grass and the water are there is the heart, the current, the meaning of the Everglades.

The grass and the water together make the river as simple as it is unique. There is no other river like it. Yet within that simplicity, enclosed within the river and bordering and intruding on it from each side, there is subtlety and diversity, a crowd of changing forms, of thrusting teeming life. And all that becomes the region of the Everglades.² (p. 5)

The achievement of the book is all the more impressive considering that Douglas

had little formal scientific training—although a Wellesley course in what she refers to as “environmental geography” exerted a significant influence on her thinking. “I’m just a writer,” she observed last summer during our talk. “I’m a writer first. Writing implies research in a great many cases. If you want to write about something you have to know it thoroughly. And I was so fortunate, you see, in that the Everglades had not been written about. Nobody had done the work before. There were a couple of early pamphlets that were very inadequate, and that was all. So I did a lot of research nobody else had. I had to run around and talk to people who worked in it. I discovered the Everglades, you might say.”³

Unfortunately, in Florida's boom days at the turn of the century, others had discovered the Everglades. The latter sections of *The Everglades: River of Grass* describe the beginnings of the region's slow demise at the hands of human ambition and heedlessness. Under the leadership of developer Hamilton Disston and, later, Florida governor Napoleon Bonaparte Broward and numerous successors, programs were begun to dredge, drain, rechannel, and otherwise coerce the wetlands into the capacity for more “profitable” uses. Concluding her book with a depressing chronicle of the advent of developers, farmers, and cattlemen and the subsequent alteration and shrinkage of the Everglades, Douglas ends on a dimly hopeful note. “Perhaps even in this last hour,” she writes, “in a new relation of usefulness and beauty, the vast, subtle, and unique region of the Everglades may not be utterly lost.”² (p. 299)

Even as Douglas was writing those words in 1947, however, the damage was worsening, as it would continue to worsen for the next few decades. The concerns of development, population, and commerce prevailed, and the US Army Corps of Engineers embarked on a billion-dollar program of “flood control” that saw the construction of 1,400 miles of canals, levees, floodgates, and pumps for the draining and development

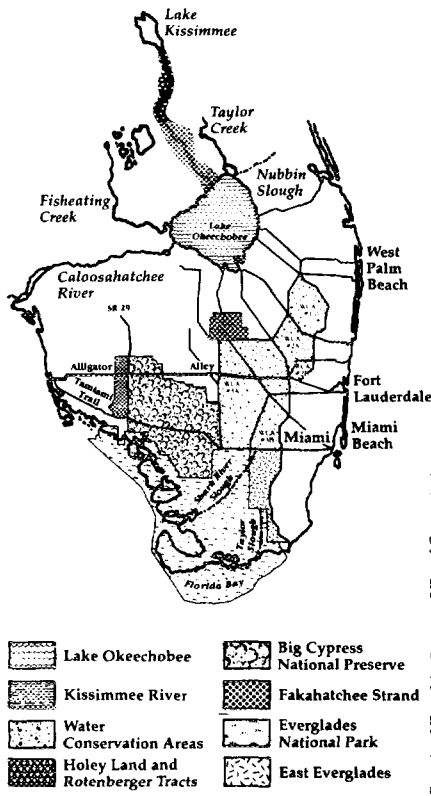
of the wetlands. As writer Sue Douglas (no relation) notes in *Oceans*, environmentalists point to this program as the greatest travesty humankind ever worked against nature.⁴

The most notorious part of the Army project, by all accounts, was the straightening of the Kissimmee River in the early 1960s. The Kissimmee, which had meandered 100 miles over a wide floodplain, carried water slowly southward to Lake Okeechobee, the main body of water in the Everglades. Along the route, the marsh grass served as a natural filter, scrubbing pollutants from water that flowed down from Orlando and surrounding areas. The Corps' "improvement" project consisted of diverting the river into a straight, 50-mile, 150- to 300-foot-wide canal that now speeds polluted water into the lake in just two days.⁴ The marshlands, once home to a rich variety of wildlife, dried up. The cumulative effect, as writer Steven Yates detailed in *Audubon* magazine, has been to upset the fragile aquatic balance not only in the Everglades proper, but in the entire ecosystem of southern Florida, the system known as Kissimmee Basin/Lake Okeechobee/Everglades, or KLOE for short.⁵ (See map at right.)

Today, the original Everglades region is long gone—half of it drained for farmland, most of the rest kept unnaturally flooded for water storage.⁵ Myriad problems—water levels, pollution, soil erosion, endangered wildlife, encroaching development—still imperil the Everglades. Complex lines of conflict and alliance have been drawn between legislators, scientists, developers, engineers, bureaucrats, conservationists, and others—all of whom have differing ideas on what's best for the region.

There is, however, genuine cause for optimism. In August of 1983, Florida's then-governor, Bob Graham, announced an unprecedented "Save the Everglades" program. According to its architects, this ambitious plan would, by the year 2000, make the Everglades appear more like it did in 1900 than it does today.⁴ The project, as outlined by Florida writer Charles Flowers

The Kissimmee Basin/Lake Okeechobee/ Everglades System



in *National Wildlife* magazine, called for acquisition by the state of new land, more effective management of the deer population and other wildlife, the restoration of the water flow across the Everglades, the protection of the endangered Florida panther (more on that later), and the dechannelization of the Kissimmee River. The last of these goals moved toward fruition in a demonstration project beginning in 1984, when steel weirs, or dams, were installed to re-route the water back onto the wetland meanders of the Upper Kissimmee.⁶

Marjory Douglas, not surprisingly, has been a major activist force behind the effort to save the Everglades. "I have always been political—you have to be," she says. "When I was in college I was in one of the

early suffrage clubs. I worked for votes for women long before we had the right."³ In Florida, Douglas and others lobbied for the establishment of the Everglades National Park. The park was finally founded in 1947, the year *The Everglades: River of Grass* was published. Douglas spent the next years concentrating on other writing projects, including *Florida: The Long Frontier*, published in 1967.⁷ She did not become active in the political fight to preserve the Everglades until the 1960s, when she joined the opposition to a proposed jetport in the park (the construction of which was subsequently abandoned).

Friends of the Everglades

Fellow conservationists urged her to form a grass-roots group. In 1970 she founded the Friends of the Everglades, a group devoted to the improvement of the Everglades and to the spreading of information through lobbying, speeches, and other avenues. While her failing eyesight and hearing may have forced her from the day-to-day struggle to save the region, she remains highly involved as the most visible and celebrated champion of the Everglades. She spends hours on the telephone every day. As park superintendent Mike Finley told an interviewer: "She has been the leader, the conscience, the rallying point."⁸

And Douglas remains blunt in her opinions about the problems confronting the Everglades. "Two important things have to be done, and they can be done simultaneously. One is to restore the meanders of the Kissimmee River. And we also have to stop the pollution of Lake Okeechobee by getting rid of the sugar people in the south and the dairy farmers in the north. The farmers return the water to the land with pesticides and fertilizer in it, and they go into the Everglades National Park and down into the lower bay. The fertilizer gets into the water, and that is not good. It's not good for the production of the small fish and the brackish water, and I'm trying very much to get rid



Neil Benson

Puma (and friend) at the ISI® Caring Center for Children and Parents

of it. We have got to clean up Lake Okeechobee and we have got to see to it that the continuous flow down the course of the Everglades is restored and that it is clean water."³

The dairy and sugar industries that Douglas describes have become a powerful presence in the region, representing hundreds of millions of dollars for the state. However, as she points out, preserving the Everglades is in the best interests of *everyone*. "Eighty percent of our rainwater comes from the wet Everglades," she says, "so we cannot let them dry up, because we wouldn't have any rainfall and we would be a desert. So it's very much to the advantage of the state to keep the Everglades going." And Marjory is pleased to acknowledge that word on the Everglades has gotten out. "The general public is getting more and more alarmed about the possibilities of the Everglades getting developed," she says. "We have been able to educate the public. The maintenance of the KLOE system is a

public project now. People know about it and talk about it."³

The Florida Panther

In reading some of Douglas's work, I was struck by her remark that there has never been a statue erected to commemorate the Florida panther. This Everglades predator, a subspecies of the puma, or mountain lion, is in grave danger of extinction. Fewer than 50 are thought to remain in the state.⁶ Although an effort is under way to study and save the panther, the animal's extremely elusive nature and the disrupted state of its food supply in the wild make for a very difficult undertaking.

In our talk Douglas mentioned that a statue of the Florida panther would serve as a fitting monument to Ernest F. Coe, a landscape architect who, in 1928, conceived the idea of an Everglades National Park. Coe, as Douglas explains in *The Everglades: River of Grass*, "talked and wrote and argued and lectured and, as he said, 'made a nuisance of himself'" until the park was approved.² (p. 294) His 20 years of effort in creating the Everglades National Park, as Douglas told me, deserve a monument.

With this in mind, I approached my friend, artist Eric Berg, who is noted for his animal sculptures at the Philadelphia Zoo and elsewhere. As I have mentioned in earlier essays, Berg created the bronze puma at the ISI® Caring Center for Children and Parents.⁹ He was fascinated by the idea of sculpting a Florida panther. After consultation with Douglas and with park authorities, the work was approved. Berg is now in the midst of creating a life-size, bronze sculpture of the Florida panther—a close relative of the puma he rendered for ISI. I had told Marjory about our puma statue, and in a subsequent visit I presented her with a miniature replica (see photo above).

For the puma sculpture, which is placed prominently in the playground at the Caring Center, Berg had purposely selected a benign, nonthreatening pose for the cat. The



Eugene Garfield and Marjory Stoneman Douglas

work is installed at ground level, and the puma is lying down, licking its front paw—a pose designed to invite children to play on and near the work (see photo on previous page). For the Florida panther, however, Berg has chosen to render his subject in a stalking pose.

"I decided, rather than to put him in a very formal, statuary kind of stance, to give a sense of the character of the creature," says Berg. "The work will be a complete, proportional representation, giving all the presence of the animal, but still conveying a sense that it's a stalking cat—that he's a predator, and that he's good at what he does. Let me put it this way: you wouldn't want to be his prey."¹⁰ Berg is currently completing the Styrofoam core of the sculpture, which provides a rough shape of what will be the finished work. A thin layer of clay will be placed on the core, so that external features such as ears, eyes, musculature, and fur texture can be rendered in detail. A series of molds will then be created, allowing the work to be cast in bronze. The finished sculpture, which will weigh between

400 and 500 pounds, will be installed in early 1990 at the Royal Palm Visitors Center in the Everglades National Park.

Douglas, while passionate about memorials for her colleagues, displays little interest in tributes to herself. Tributes, however, seem to keep coming her way. Last January *Ms.* magazine selected Marjory as one of its six women of the year.¹¹ *Esquire* magazine also recently featured her in its annual collection of noteworthy women.¹² In May, at a fund-raising reception marking her 99th birthday, she was made an honorary vice president of the Sierra Club. She continues to speak and work on behalf of the Everglades. Marjory is also busily editing the manuscript of her biography of W.H. Hudson, the British author and naturalist. At the outset of our talk last summer, I somewhat naively expressed concern that our interview might be too tiring for her. "I'm not tired,"

she shot back. "Oh no! I'm not tired. I'm old, but I'm not tired."³

After we discussed the panther sculpture, I asked Douglas what she would like her own memorial to be. She replied, "Do you remember the Latin that says, '*Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*'—'If you seek his monument, look around'? That's my motto."³ Nevertheless, I look forward to celebrating Marjory's 100th birthday next year at the dedication of the memorial she inspired.

* * * * *

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