



Park Victory! Investing in Everglades Restoration

By Cara Capp

The journey to restore America's Everglades took a tremendous leap forward in 2019, with both the federal and state governments funding key restoration projects. Combined, the State's commitment of \$400M and Congress' commitment of \$200M will help advance projects long supported by NPCA and our members, like the Everglades Agricultural Area Reservoir.

The need to invest in Everglades restoration is significant. America's Everglades was once a free flowing "River of Grass" that began at the meandering Kissimmee River, flowed into Lake Okeechobee, and then cascaded slowly down to Florida Bay and the area that is now Everglades National Park. Over the years, development and agriculture have intruded on the natural Everglades, stifling the historic flow of water vital for the health of this unique, abundant ecosystem.

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Top: Great Blue Heron ©Donyanedomam | Dreamstime **Right:** Tourists and community members board the National Parks Trolley at Losner Park in the city of Homestead ©David Riera

100 YEARS OF PARK PROTECTION

By Melissa E. Abdo, Ph.D.

Reflecting on NPCA's long history as the only independent, nonpartisan organization devoted to protecting and enhancing America's National Park System, I am overcome by how NPCA's core work—to protect and enhance our parks—remains as absolutely relevant today as it was 100 years ago. At that time, just three years after the creation of the National Park Service, a small group of scientists, artists and civic leaders realized the imperative for our organization to exist. Robert Sterling Yard, one of NPCA's founders and its sole staff member for nearly a quarter century, described NPCA's role thus: "Unconnected with the Government and absolutely independent of political or other adverse influences, [NPCA] has become the fearless and outspoken defender of the people's parks and the wild life within them against the constant, and just now the very dangerous, assaults of commercial interests."

Here in the Sun Coast, we are both humbled and empowered by this responsibility to protect our parks. Over the past two decades alone, NPCA has led the charge to restore America's Everglades; we've achieved significantly improved protections for marine wildlife in Biscayne and Dry Tortugas National Parks; and we've helped protect endangered Florida panther habitat, critical wetlands and more than 70 species of

endangered flora and fauna in Big Cypress National Preserve. We created an annual "Florida Bay Day" to educate agency leaders and decision-makers about the importance of restoring the Greater Everglades ecosystem, and continue to advocate for even greater impetus for ecosystem restoration to help



mitigate climate change impacts and ensure a resilient future for Florida. In the U.S. Virgin Islands, we joined with community leaders to help stop two proposals for two mega-yacht marinas that would have damaged marine habitat, and we have supported coral and mangrove research to document the park's ecological recovery following the devastating 2017 hurricanes. NPCA's Sun Coast team also helped connect the gateway

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FIELD REPORT

Winter 2019-2020

Florida, Louisiana, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands

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CHANGING OF THE GUARD New Leadership in the Sun Coast

After an incredible 17 years of service to the Sun Coast, first as Everglades restoration program manager and then as regional director, John Adornato III transitioned into a new leadership role within NPCA as deputy vice president for Regional Programs. The significant park protection victories achieved by the Sun Coast team over the past two decades were realized during his tenure, and were made possible through his dedication, wisdom and leadership.



resulted in greater understanding of iconic national parks, including Big Cypress National Preserve and Biscayne and Everglades National Parks, as well as over 200 other protected areas in South Florida, the Caribbean and island ecosystems abroad. She has led major biodiversity research projects and expeditions supported by the MacArthur Foundation,

the Mellon Foundation and the National Geographic Society, among others, and is the recipient of several fellowships and awards recognizing her work to jointly enhance community livelihoods and conservation outcomes. She is the first woman to have led major study expeditions into several remote tropical forests, from Jamaica's Cockpit Country to Hispaniola's southern wilds to Indonesia's Moluccan isles, and has discovered species new to science along the way.

In May of 2019, Dr. Melissa E. Abdo stepped in to lead the Sun Coast region. Since childhood, Melissa has loved exploring national parks and wild areas—from forests to swamps to islands to coral reefs—so coming on board to lead a region that encompasses such diverse ecosystems was a perfect fit.

Melissa is a conservation scientist and accomplished biodiversity explorer, with over 15 years of experience in nonprofit and private sector leadership roles. She earned her doctorate in biology (focusing on forest ecology and conservation), and both her master's and undergraduate degrees in environmental studies and science. A native Floridian, Melissa has spent thousands of hours conducting field research documenting biodiversity and examining ecological interactions (especially the plant and bird life) within ecosystems. Her work has

Melissa is an enthusiastic, passionate conservationist who believes “the joy of time outdoors and the wonder of scientific discoveries can ignite excitement in the next generation of park protectors.” Her favorite park, Big Cypress National Preserve, is not far from her home in Miami, where she loves being part of a diverse city culture yet living only a stone's throw from a swamp walk in subtropical cypress domes. Melissa is thrilled to work with an incredible team of professionals at NPCA to continue bringing about authentic and lasting protections for our treasured national parks.

Above: Melissa E. Abdo, Ph.D., Sun Coast Regional Director alongside a Dade County slash pine
©Melissa Abdo | NPCA **Below:** Roseate spoonbill lands in Florida's state tree, the Sabal palm
©Harry Collins | Dreamstime





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The consequences of this broken water system have devastated the habitat and wildlife of the Everglades and continue to threaten the water supply of eight million Floridians in the region. Polluted discharges from Lake Okeechobee that cannot flow south to the Everglades are instead discharged to the Caloosahatchee River to the west and the St. Lucie River to the east, leading to toxic blue-green algae and red tide blooms that threaten public health and the economy. The result is an Everglades ecosystem in decline and built communities in crisis.



The good news is that we have a plan for restoration. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) identifies over 60 individual projects that will work together to improve the hydrology of the Greater Everglades ecosystem, which includes Everglades and Biscayne National

It will take sustained high-level funding to continue the momentum and complete the much-needed projects that promise relief for the ecosystem.

Parks and Big Cypress National Preserve, among other public lands.

When CERP was authorized by Congress in 2000, the goal was for the federal and state governments to each contribute \$200M to CERP progress each year. Unfortunately, CERP funding has been inconsistent and insufficient, leading to blown deadlines, missed opportunities and a water crisis that can no longer be ignored.

Thanks to the advocacy of NPCA, our partners in the Everglades community, and many

passionate stakeholders, elected leaders at the state and federal level now recognize the undeniable need to invest in the Everglades and Florida's water, as witnessed by the boost to CERP funding in 2019.

It will take sustained high-level funding to continue the momentum and complete the much-needed projects that promise relief for the ecosystem. NPCA will continue to work with our national, state, and local leaders to support full funding of CERP until the River of Grass again flows freely through America's Everglades.

Above: Everglades National Park ©Michael Gordon | Dreamstime **Bottom Left:** American alligator in Everglades wetlands ©Goldilock Project | Dreamstime **Center:** Improving water quality, quantity, timing, and distribution are key to Everglades restoration ©Gynane | Dreamstime **Bottom Right:** Barred owl in Everglades National Park ©Romrodinka | Dreamstime



National Parks Connect with Communities

By Jacqueline Cruet

Since 1919, we have witnessed time and again park successes borne of a unified and engaged supporter base. The past century proves that parks remain protected only so long as there is a knowledgeable and active community willing to delve into the civic processes that determine their fate. In the Sun Coast region, we keep this understanding at the forefront of our work.

A key aspect of our success, therefore, involves working on the ground in communities to educate people about our national parks and empower them to take action to protect them. Here in the Sun Coast, this means we partner with other non-profits, educators, community groups and veteran service organizations to inspire them to become active agents of change in our shared effort to protect South Florida's wildlife and the Greater Everglades ecosystem.

Since mid-2018, the Sun Coast region has provided civic engagement workshops, recreational experiences and volunteer opportunities to nearly 2,400 people, collaborating with about 30 local groups, from universities and non-profits to city governments. This work creating authentic connections in communities fosters a sense of ownership of the parks and sets the stage for an even brighter future for park advocacy in the region.



Above: NPCA's Sun Coast team utilizing Biscayne National Park as an outdoor classroom during a training with NPS staff, community partners and educators ©Jacqueline Cruet |NPCA

Meet the Staff | Cheryl Swaby

What is your job? I'm the regional office coordinator for the Sun Coast region. I have the honor of supporting my region's programmatic work of protecting America's national parks. I'm proud to be an ambassador for the national parks and what they do for people.

What is the best part of your work? Telling people about the amazing work NPCA does in my region and nationally! I love interacting with people who love and have a passion for our national parks. Hearing the diverse stories people tell about how they got engaged as park advocates reminds me of why this work is so important.

What is your favorite national park and why? Biscayne National Park! Apart from its natural blue-green beauty, this seascape is overflowing with unique biodiversity. Breathing in this terrestrial marine park, I feel connected to my home in Jamaica. As an island girl, this was the first national park I was able to visit when I migrated to the U.S. And, like all of us who have immigrated to this place and space, we have a history. Biscayne's story is one of color, both ecological and ethnic, and this diversity is what draws me to commune in this park over and over again.

Above: Cheryl Swaby at NPCA's Sun Coast region 100 year celebration in Miami ©Margarita Rentis



NPCA sincerely thanks our summer 2019 legal fellows for their hard work and passionate commitment to our national parks. This past summer, the Sun Coast team welcomed four fellows who contributed to our advocacy efforts while learning about national parks in our region.

Jason Clark: Throughout my entire life, I have always had a passion for protecting the environment. Being able to work with NPCA has provided me with a unique window into the role of public interest groups and the impact they have on major policy decisions that affect us all. From researching complex legal issues to snorkeling in Biscayne National Park, I could not have asked for a better experience with NPCA.

Kristi Pitts: I've always loved Florida's waters, so I enjoyed spending my summer with NPCA researching and learning about the effects we have on the them. I learned so much about Biscayne National Park and had a great time at the Sun Coast Regional Office!

Keeley Burgess: Since beginning law school, I've been really excited to get involved in environmental work. Spending time outside is how I release stress and inspire creativity. A personal goal of mine was to learn about relevant environmental issues in my area. I'm thankful to NPCA for providing me with my first experience working in the environmental field, and I can't wait to see where it takes me!

Devin Tibor: Working for NPCA over the summer gave me an excellent opportunity to immerse myself in this realm of environmental advocacy. I was able to spend my summer months learning more about Florida's unique and vibrant environment while working and inspiring others to help protect it.

Above: Legal Fellows in Biscayne Summer 2019 ©Cara Capp | NPCA

Biscayne's Fishery Management Plan, a Park Still at Risk

By Caroline McLaughlin

Heading out into Biscayne National Park on a sunny October day, I couldn't help but marvel at the glimmering turquoise waters and clear blue skies. Located in the backyard of one of the largest metropolitan areas in the country, Biscayne provides visitors with an opportunity to escape the hustle and bustle of surrounding Miami. Tourists and residents alike flock to Biscayne's waters to swim, dive, fish, boat and just relax.

Out on the water with me that day was Marty Arostegui, an internationally acclaimed angler, ardent supporter of marine conservation and member of Sun Coast's Regional Council. Marty had agreed to take me and a reporter from the Miami Herald out on his boat to talk about the health of Biscayne National Park. On the 8-hour boat ride, we snorkeled several reefs, hoping for a glimpse of healthy corals, native fish or even a sea turtle, as Marty shared about his long history diving and fishing in Biscayne's clear waters.

Marty arrived in Miami from Cuba as a teenager during the 1960s, a time when Biscayne's waters were teeming with life. He fondly recalled stories of flourishing coral reefs, abundant fish and diverse marine wildlife. As we strapped on our snorkel gear and hopped in the water, it was clear that conditions today are starkly different. Decades of overfishing, pollution, climate change, disease and other human-caused damage have taken their toll on Biscayne's marine ecosystems. What were once vibrant reefs are now piles of rubble. While we don't have an exact figure for Biscayne, a 2019 estimate from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration puts live coral cover at around 2% in the nearby Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (historically, healthy reefs in the Florida Keys had about 30-40%). And that figure is dropping. Biscayne's fisheries are also declining. Legal-sized fish are few and far between, and some reef fish populations are on the verge of collapse.

All this begs the question: what has happened to our country's largest marine national park? And why hasn't the National Park Service done more to try to stem this decline? While many of the factors harming Biscayne's resources emanate from beyond park boundaries, there are concrete actions that the National Park Service can take to better protect Biscayne National Park.



For decades, NPCA has advocated for the creation of a no-fishing marine reserve in Biscayne, which would go a long way towards replenishing imperiled fish populations and protecting sensitive coral habitat from fishing impacts. In 2015, the National Park Service finalized a general management plan for Biscayne that included a marine reserve covering just 6% of park waters and about one-third of its coral reefs. And yet, in the four years since, the Park Service has not implemented the marine reserve.

Now, the Park Service is working with the state of Florida to implement a fishery management plan designed to improve Biscayne's fisheries. Unfortunately, the proposals on the table were not developed based on sound science and are not geared toward sustainability. Marine reserves aren't

even an option the agencies are considering, despite their effectiveness at protecting fish populations and habitat and despite the Park Service's mandate to protect Biscayne's imperiled marine wildlife. Weak proposals are becoming even weaker under pressure from industry.

We are left to wonder: where is the National Park Service? When will they finally take definitive action to protect Biscayne National Park for current and future generations? If they don't act soon, it may be too late.

Top: Woman kayaking in Biscayne National Park, Florida ©Francisco Blanco | Dreamstime
Bottom: Fisheries and marine wildlife in Biscayne are in serious decline and NPCA is working to protect amazing underwater biodiversity ©KGrif | iStock

Travel with Us

Join us on one of our small-group educational adventures, where you'll hit the trails or explore via small-ship cruise. Land tours are limited to just 16 participants plus two naturalist guides and include meals, accommodations and on-trip transportation.

Learn more about the full lineup of NPCA trips at npca.org/trips.

Hiking Utah's National Parks May 2-10 • October 4-12, 2020

This 9-day hiking-focused journey takes you off the beaten path through delicate arches, deep canyons and backcountry gulches in Utah's "Mighty Five" national parks: Arches, Bryce, Canyonlands, Capitol Reef and Zion.

Experience American Samoa October 15-20, 2020

(Spots fill quickly, so register soon!)

Halfway between Hawaii and New Zealand, you'll find the only U.S. national park south of the equator: American Samoa. Get ready to weave baskets from palm fronds, hike rainforest-lined cliffs, enjoy a feast made in an umu (earth oven) and snorkel some of the clearest waters in the Pacific!

Channel Islands National Park Small-Ship Cruise

April 25-29 • September 23-27, 2020

Channel Islands National Park—five islands off the coast of Los Angeles—is one of America's least-visited national parks. Kayak and hike unmarred landscapes, revel in pure nature, and rejuvenate mind, body and soul on this "wildness and wellness" cruise.

Left: Arches National Park ©Alesnowak | Dreamstime **Middle:** American Samoa ©S.G. Barmeyer | NPCA **Right:** Red Fox in Channel Islands National Park ©Kyle T Perry | Shutterstock



Climate Change Effects, Virgin Islands National Park

By Caroline McLaughlin

When we think of national parks, we often imagine the towering redwoods of Sequoia, the immense scale of the Grand Canyon, or the wild bison of Yellowstone. Seldom do we picture dense mangrove forests, grazing green sea turtles or ancient petroglyphs. Yet all this and more is preserved at Virgin Islands National Park on the tiny Caribbean island of St. John. Established by an act of Congress in 1956 after Lawrence Rockefeller donated 5,000 acres of land to the National Park Service, Virgin Islands National Park protects a sizeable portion of St. John's lands and waters, including dry tropical forests, sugar plantation ruins and coral reef ecosystems. Unfortunately, the compounding impacts of climate change pose ever-increasing threats to the park's natural and cultural resources.

A protected alcove nestled along St. John's east end, Hurricane Hole earned its name from its history sheltering boats from the battering winds and waves of passing storms. Hurricane Hole is home to a unique

assemblage of critters, including a variety of coral species that make their home in the tangled roots of coastal mangroves. Since 2016, NPCA has supported a team of student researchers from Santa Fe College in Gainesville, Florida as they document the unique relationship between corals and mangroves in this area.

Though they couldn't have anticipated it at the time, the students' research would serve as critical baseline data against which they would measure the impacts of Hurricanes Irma and Maria that devastated St. John in the fall of 2017. Hurricane Irma hit St. John as a Category 5 storm with wind gusts reported at over 250 mph, the strongest ever recorded in the Atlantic. Just two weeks later, another Category 5 storm hit. The scale of destruction was unprecedented. In Hurricane Hole, sheltered boats were ripped from moorings and scattered haphazardly along the shoreline, leaching gas, oil and toxic substances into the water. Cleanup efforts took months, and the damage was acute.

When the Santa Fe College students returned the following year, they were distressed by the changes. Mangroves had died, as had many small corals. There were, however, signs of hope. Last May, NPCA joined the researchers in Hurricane Hole to assess ecological recovery. Corals and plants were starting to return, and a number of rare corals had persisted. Because of the initial surveys completed in 2016, students were able to pinpoint exactly what had changed. While recovery may take years, their research highlights the importance of resiliency in our coastal and marine national parks. While we may not be able to prevent hurricanes themselves, we can take action to improve the health of ecosystems, ensuring they are better able to withstand the effects of a changing climate.

Despite the damage from the storms, Virgin Islands National Park continues its slow recovery while still protecting some of the most beautiful beaches and waters on the planet.



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community of Homestead, Florida to Biscayne and Everglades National Parks by launching the National Parks Trolley, the first-ever public transportation to the parks. We've empowered community members to advocate for parks through our Civic Voice Workshop program and led collaborative restoration projects with veterans and students to help rebuild parks in Florida, Louisiana and Puerto Rico.

These achievements demonstrate NPCA's commitment to meaningful, tangible impacts for the parks, wildlife and people in our region. We are only able to carry on this critically important legacy of park protection with your support. Please stay connected with us as we strive to protect and restore these amazing places. Together we can rise to the challenge, protecting these treasured ecosystems for another 100 years!

Clockwise: Biscayne National Park, our nation's largest marine park ©Rudy Umans | Dreamstime • The Mather Mountain Party in 1915 ©G.H Grosvenor • Boca Chita Lighthouse in Biscayne National Park ©Dr. Marty Arostegui • A woodstork, an indicator species for Everglades restoration ©Donyanedomam | Dreamstime • Inside the National Park Trolley to visit the Everglades ©Al Diaz | NPCA • Threatened wetland habitat inside Big Cypress National Preserve ©Rudy Umans | Dreamstime • A ghost orchid inside Big Cypress National Preserve, critical habitat for many rare species including the Florida panther ©Ggpalms | Dreamstime • NPCA Sun Coast team and supporters reenacted the historic Mather Mountain party in Miami in 2019 ©Margarita Rentis





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TAMIAMI TRAIL: Reconnecting the River of Grass

By Cara Capp

Great news for Everglades National Park: the final phase of bridging the Tamiami Trail has been fully funded! This achievement follows decades of work by federal and state agencies, and the advocacy of NPCA and our Everglades partners.

Tamiami Trail, the portion of U.S. Highway 41 connecting Tampa to Miami, has restricted the historic north-south flow of water in the Southern Everglades for nearly a century. For years, NPCA has advocated for the bridging of Tamiami Trail, which will allow water to once again flow through the ecosystem. The first one-mile bridge was completed in 2013, and the second 2.6 mile bridge phase is nearly complete. The third and final project phase involves additional road raising to maximize delivery of freshwater to Everglades National Park.

Bridging Tamiami Trail is one important piece of the restoration puzzle to ensure this valuable and unique ecosystem can receive the water flow it needs to sustain healthy ecological conditions. Florida Bay,

nearly entirely contained within Everglades National Park, is a treasure that must be protected and restored for future generations of park visitors who will swim, snorkel, and fish its waters.

Thanks to joint funding commitments from the U.S. Department of Transportation and the State of Florida, the final phase of this

critical project is now underway with expected completion in 2022. Once the bridges and road raising are fully implemented, the Tamiami Trail will no longer be an obstacle to the movement of clean water south to Everglades National Park.

Below: Tamiami Trail 2.6 mile bridge
©Cara Capp | NPCA



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