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Miami New Times
Tim Elfink

Rick Persson founded a group to save the canals.

Pahokee Mayor Wayne Whitaker worries about how his town will survive without sugar jobs.

Everglades restoration, Okeelanta, Pahokee, South Bay, L-67A canal, Big Sugar, Florida Crystals, U. S. Sugar

A clump of iron wires dangles from a boat in the cool brown canal. On this breezy April morning, a few hundred volts crackle through the metal strands into the water.

Barron Moodysweeps a net through the murk and pulls up six bass. The stunned fish shimmy side to side in slow confusion, their wet scales refracting yellow and blue in the sun. Moody tosses them into a half-full holding pool and grins.

'It's unbelievable, right?' Moody asks.

Moody is a biologist for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, and it's his job to keep an eye on the birds, alligators, and bass that live here in the Everglades.

In a few hours, Moody will count up the fish in his boat. A few years ago, his colleagues found 8,000 fish in one stretch of this 26-mile canal just north of the Tamiami Trail. Fishermen were hooking almost two bass every hour, pretty much negating the old joke 'that's why they call it fishing and not catching.'

You might not know it by its name, but the L-67A canal, just 30 miles west of downtown Miami, is one of the best fishing holes on planet Earth. Every weekend, anglers from as far away as North Carolina and New Mexico haul their boats here to float over the cattail-choked culverts and reel in the big bass.

But it might not survive the next generation. If Everglades restoration projects go forward as planned, this canal will be backfilled with dirt.

'It's a shame,' says Rick Persson, a retired Miami Beach firefighter leaning on the wheel of his sleek boat. He smiles at Moody's bounty of fish. 'Kids now won't be able to enjoy this when they're my age.'

Persson has fished the L-67A for more than 30 years. The Miami native used to hop in a pickup with his dad every weekend, hitch up a rusty old sloop, and drive home nine hours later sunburned and stocked with bass dinners for the week.

'When I came out here in the '70s with a johnboat and a 10-horsepower motor, the canals were totally clear,' says the 69-year-old Persson. 'No one had quite caught on to how good the fishing was.'

Now that he's retired, Persson travels the country to fish in big-money tournaments. Whenever he's home, he drags his new yellow and black Skeeter bass boat to the waters where he caught the fishing bug. And most days, he ends up with a better haul than at all the more famous lakes and rivers he visits on the road.

With all the news about the billion-dollar Everglades restoration plan, you don't hear much from people like Persson, who think the project as it stands might actually do more harm than good.

Folks like Persson don't dispute that the Everglades needs saving. One hundred years of men digging ditches, poaching gators, and paving suburbs farther and farther into the swampland has left one of America's most important ecosystems in peril.

Everglades restoration has suddenly become a national priority under President Obama. Just last week, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar rode an airboat through the swamp and bragged about $200 million in new federal funding.

But as environmentalists absorb the biggest infusion of cash in a decade from the federal government, Persson and like-minded activists around the Glades are raising some inconvenient concerns. They question whether the new purchase will accomplish anything and worry about the jobs it will cost in the poor towns around Lake Okeechobee. That's why I've hitched a ride on his boat this afternoon and why, over the next several weeks, I will travel hundreds of miles to visit others who could lose out on Glades restoration in places such as Okeelanta, Pahokee, and South Bay.

Their fight over the future of the Glades is the latest in a centuries-old struggle between man and nature, a battle that was seemingly won a hundred years ago, before we realized the cost of our victory.

Now, as we backpedal and try to undo what we've done to the River of Grass, it's worth asking how far we intend to go. Will we ever return the land to the way it was 300 years ago? Would we really want to?

For Persson and others like him, the answer is no. There's room, they say, for man and nature in the Everglades.

Okeelanta

The directions are easy.

'Drive north until you see something,' the Florida Crystals rep says. 'Then turn left.'

Cruising up U.S. 27, the 50-mile ribbon of asphalt bisecting the Everglades between Alligator Alley and Lake Okeechobee, I see what he means.

There's nothing out here. Flat acres of saw grass and dry brown shrubs stretch to the sky on either side. There are no billboards. And no signs for gas stations or rest stops, because there aren't any.

It's easy to see why this desolate landscape tempted the first white settlers who ventured into South Florida. It looks like a useless swamp. And the urge to turn nothing into something is powerful, especially in America.

In its natural state, the Everglades was actually more a massive, molasses-slow river than a swamp. All the water in the Kissimmee Valley poured into Lake Okeechobee. From the vast shallow

pool, water seeped south across millions of acres of muck. The land was just a few inches above sea level, high enough for water to creep toward Florida Bay a few feet a day.

The solution for how to fix this mess of a wasteland seemed easy: Dam up Lake Okeechobee so it would quit overflowing, and build canals to shunt its waters west and east to the Gulf of Mexico and the Atlantic Ocean.

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C. Stiles
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There's a long list of famous men who went broke or died trying to make this "easy solution" work. Hamilton Disston, heir to a saw-making fortune, dredged the first ditches in the late 1800s before he lost thousands of dollars and died of a heart attack before reaping any real profit. Henry Flagler, oil magnate and father of South Florida, ultimately declared even his massive fortune was insufficient to battle the Glades. And Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, the fiery, floppy-mustached governor, had gallstones that killed him before his dream was realized.

"Yes, the Everglades is a swamp. So was Chicago 60 years ago," Broward once said, laying out all the American hubris toward the Glades.

They all failed. But Americans are persistent. Eventually, the Army Corps of Engineers dammed the lake, dredged miles of channels, and reclaimed hundreds of thousands of acres of swampland.

Eventually the plan succeeded — but it came at cost, including killer fires, dust bowls, and saltwater-infested groundwater from Boca to Miami.

However, one industry benefited tremendously from man's victory over the Everglades: Big Sugar.

Florida's sugar industry has thrived thanks to the millions of dollars poured into drying out the swamp south of Lake Okeechobee. Once the Corps figured out how to keep the land wet and fertile enough, the thousands of acres known as the "Everglades Agricultural Area" became America's sugar breadbasket.

Have a cappuccino this morning? Some yogurt or granola for breakfast? Chewing on some gum? Pretty much anything sweet in your diet probably includes sugar cane grown here in the heart of the Everglades by U.S. Sugar, Florida Crystals, or a smaller co-op.

For anyone who cares about Glades restoration — or anyone interested in where people fit into the future of the River of Grass — the sugar companies are key. In fact, Tom Van Lent, chief scientist for the Everglades Foundation, says, "We're all at the mercy of the sugar growers."

Why? Because if the Everglades is ever to return anything close to its original flow, clean water will have to course south through these flatlands bristling with sugar cane.

After almost 50 miles, I finally see something. A 20-story smokestack shimmers in the heat to the east. I turn left past the Florida Crystals/Domino sign and meet Gaston Cantens, a slick politician with wide, watery brown eyes. Cantens spent a decade representing Miami in the Florida House. Since he left politics in 2006, he's been shilling for Florida Crystals, a giant that churns out 4 million tons of sugar a year.

To show me why the company so highly values its land here in Okeelanta, Cantens guides me by

the arm through the company's complex.

The sheer size is amazing. Florida Crystals has more than 150,000 acres, its own road system, and its own power plant that burns waste from the sugar harvest. There's a 185,000-square-foot warehouse manned by sleek robots that fill and stack sacks of cane so quickly they're difficult to follow, and two mills and a refinery just as large.

Cantens mentions the company's efforts to grow more organic sugar. He talks about the millions spent cleaning the farm's runoff, and all the energy produced by the sugar cane-burning power plant (enough to power 20,000 homes).

As he drones on with a friendly smile, I almost forget all the terrible things Florida Crystals have done over the years.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, dozens of former employees brought suit against the company, accusing it of abusing the poor laborers imported every year from the West Indies to hack down the cane crop. In the most famous case, the company settled with hundreds of workers it deported in 1986 after an impromptu strike.

In those same decades, Florida Crystals and its competitor U.S. Sugar flooded the Everglades with incredible amounts of pollution. Florida Crystals' owners — the Fanjul family, the richest Cuban-Americans alive — are notorious for their wide-reaching political influence, from the Clinton White House to every administration in Tallahassee. Patriarch Alfy Fanjul once interrupted Bill Clinton as he tried to break off his relationship with Monica Lewinsky and harangued him on the phone for 22 minutes about Al Gore's proposed sugar tax to fund restoration projects. Kenneth Starr detailed the call in his report on Clinton's scandal.

So it's not surprising that Florida Crystals is usually cast as the heavy in restoration stories. It's no different with the latest great hope for the Everglades, a plan so ambitious that Gov. Charlie Crist essentially threw $8 billion and a decade's worth of projects out the window to make it happen.

Until last summer, the Everglades' salvation depended on a plan drafted by Bill Clinton in 1996 and ceremonially signed into law four years later. The plan had three key steps: Dams and ditches would be removed, restoring some natural flow. Lake Okeechobee would be cleaned. And enormous reservoirs would be built to hold the lake's runoff in the summer and pour water south in the dry months.

Click here to read the rest of the story: http://www.miaminewtimes.com/2009-06-04/news/everglades-restoration-isn-t-good-for-everyone/1

EDITORIAL: The governor can't hide

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Palm Beach Post Editorial

Gov. Crist has built a solid environmental record for his Senate run. He championed the U.S. Sugar buyout to help restore the Everglades, and he proposed Florida's first renewable energy standards. He tarnished that record Monday by signing what the Legislature named the "Community Renewal Act" but what more accurately should be called the "No Growth Management Act."

Supporters say that Senate Bill 360 will improve the state's growth management efforts by removing unnecessary restrictions in urban areas. But the bill creates a ridiculous definition of "urban area." Tiny towns, such as 400-person Briny Breezes, qualify. So would rural areas along State Road 7. In all, eight counties and 245 cities qualify, including all cities in Palm Beach County along with Stuart, Fort Pierce and Port St. Lucie on the Treasure Coast.

In urban areas, developers no longer will have to show that adequate roads exist to serve their projects. Large proposals no longer will have to meet rigorous Development of Regional Impact standards.

The idea is to make it easier to build when the recession ends. That might help large developers who are likely to donate to Gov. Crist's campaign. But for the rest of the state, the loss of control over development will make it much harder to protect paradise. And does anyone blame Florida's economic woes on building too little? Since the Growth Management Act passed in 1985, Florida has added 7 million people.

The governor could be calculating that Floridians won't feel the damage from SB 360 until long after next year's election. But the governor who favors Everglades restoration and green energy ought to be the governor who also doesn't want a traffic jam at every intersection.