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Guest commentary We must grab this chance to restore Everglades water flow

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My family connection to South Florida and the Everglades began with my grandparents, so when Nathaniel Reed asked me to join the Everglades Foundation to help with restoration, I was honored to say yes.

Albert Gammage, my grandfather, was a circuit preacher in South Florida. In 1921, soon after my mother Alice was born in Tarpon Springs, he moved his wife and eight children to Miami to start a permanent church there.

The Everglades were, for the most part, in a natural state when they arrived and created a wilderness boundary to the west of Miami. Change was coming quickly to the Everglades. The drainage project that would transform the "River of Grass" into productive agricultural land was under way, along with construction of the Tamiami Trail, which would cross it. Soon the shallow and slow-flowing, 100-mile-wide river from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay would be strangled.

The Glades weren't widely regarded as beautiful or wondrous then. They were "God-forsaken," "hellish" and "mosquito-infested" in the common sentiment of the time.

When I was a young boy in the 1950s, my father and uncles would take me fishing in the mangrove creeks and backwater sloughs of the Ten Thousand Islands. We launched our wooden skiffs from Chokoloskee, Everglades City and Marco Island. We fished for snook and spent at least part of the day lost in a confusing, but beautiful natural maze.

To get there, we crossed the Everglades on the Tamiami Trail west from Miami. I didn't know at the time that the road we traveled was blocking the water flow and backing it up to the north, drowning ancient tree islands and wildlife. The Trail, along with miles of dikes and canals, was choking off the life-giving flow of fresh water supplying Florida Bay, to the south.

By then, Lake Okeechobee was firmly under man's control and no longer flooded its banks to the south as it had forever; most of its waters were diverted through canals east and west to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

As a child, nature seemed to me immense and indestructible. As an adult, I've come to know how vulnerable it is.

I've learned that without a flow of fresh water, Florida Bay, the sprawling estuary at the southern tip of the state, has become too salty. The bay historically had a mix of fresh water from the Everglades and salt water from the Gulf of Mexico and was the perfect nursery for shrimp, lobsters and reef fish of the Florida Keys. The entire ecosystem now teeters on collapse.

I've joined with my fellow board members of the Everglades Foundation who share my commitment to restore the flow of fresh water.

The engineering to do it is not technically difficult: Build water storage facilities to amass enough water to replenish the ecosystem and construct filtering marshes into which the floodwaters of Lake Okeechobee would be directed and cleansed. At the same time, build a bridge over a portion of the Tamiami Trail to allow that water to flow south.

The actual work is simple. The hard part is convincing some of our policy makers that it must be done.

You've probably heard a lot lately about the plan to purchase U.S. Sugar Corp. land by the South Florida Water Management District. If you fly over the land south of Lake Okeechobee, you'll understand why Gov. Charlie Crist is so strongly in favor of the plan. Where once were only Everglades, today is mostly sugar-cane fields.

The plan would take some 73,000 acres of agricultural lands out of sugar-cane production and convert them into water storage and filtered marshes. The marshes would be flooded with water, allowing the natural process by which plants take up nutrients to remove the high levels of pollutants. The cleaned water would then flow south out of the marshes, eventually ending up mixing with the salt water of Florida Bay as it did for eons before man interfered.

To realize this goal, we have to cross a political minefield. Opposition to the plan comes from a handful of powerful interest groups. The role of the Everglades Foundation is to counter the opposition with science-based advocacy. Our mission is to engage and motivate people to restore the Everglades, the only natural system of its kind in the world and America's only subtropical national park.

We have a briefly opened door to acquire the land we need and should do so. If we miss the opportunity, we risk losing one of the last great places on Earth.

Duke, president of Jacksonville-based Off Road Holdings, is an industrial designer and entrepreneur whose business life has involved various manufacturing activities as well as a partnership in an advertising agency. He is a third-generation Floridian. He maintains a family farm in New Jersey as well as Florida timberland. The Everglades Foundation is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit, charitable organization "dedicated to protecting and restoring one of the world's unique natural ecosystems that provides economic, recreational and life-sustaining benefits to the millions of people who depend on its future health." For more information, visit www.evergladesfoundation.org

