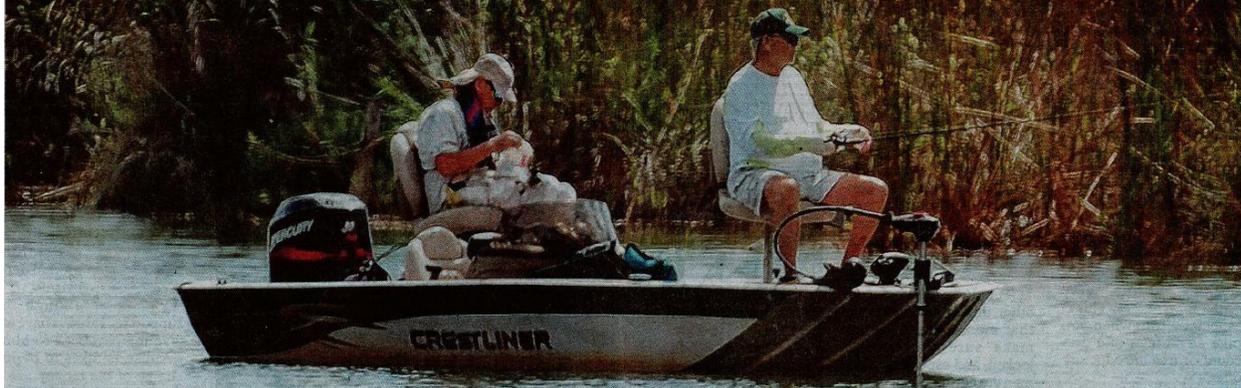


## TROPICAL LIFE

The Miami Herald



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# WILD TIMES

**375,000 acres of woods,  
waters, wetlands and  
prairies await outdoor  
enthusiasts, courtesy of the  
South Florida Water  
Management District.**

BY SUE COCKING  
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Between Orlando and the Keys lies about 375,000 acres of public land in 16 counties where you can hike, bike, fish, camp, hunt, paddle, ride horses or just look at wildlife. Admission fees range from free to low.

Most of your outdoor adventures here will be self-guided because these are not parks with lots of rangers and concessionaires hanging about. Welcome to the recreation lands of the South Florida Water Management District.

Between fulfilling its flood-control mission and helping to execute the ambitious restoration of the Everglades, the district works with cities and counties and federal and state agencies to open its woods, waters, wetlands and prairies to the public.

"Some are project lands. Some are conservation lands. We try to open lands to the public for appropriate recreational uses," said Jason Smith, who manages 70,000 acres in Miami-Dade County.

Among the highlights:

One of the best and most popular duck hunting areas in the southeastern U.S. is found in a 52,000-acre network of manmade marshes in Hendry and Palm Beach counties called stormwater treatment areas. The STAs were created in the mid-1990s to remove phosphorus from runoff from cities and farms before it reaches the Everglades. STA-5 in Hendry County also is a prime site for winter bird watching.

At the DuPuis Management Area on the border of Palm Beach and Martin counties, visitors can engage in geo-caching, a sport in which GPS is used to locate hidden "treasure" sites. There are also



**ON THE C-111 CANAL:** A bald eagle lifts off, above, anglers try for bass, top, and a gator swims in Miami-Dade's 32,000-acre Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental Area.

• TURN TO WILD TIMES, 4E





PHOTOS BY TIM CHAPMAN/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

## WILD TIMES

## It's not a park, it's a water management district

• WILD TIMES, FROM 1E

40 miles of equestrian trails and a campground. And handicapped hunters have the place to themselves during a special deer season.

In South Miami-Dade



### If you go

To learn more about recreational opportunities on South Florida Water Management District lands, call 866-433-6312 or 1-800-432-2045 or visit [www.sfwmd.gov/recreation](http://www.sfwmd.gov/recreation).

County, there's the 32,000-acre Southern Glades Wildlife and Environmental Area that borders Everglades National Park to the west. Currently, visitors must share the landscape with workers using heavy equipment on the western phase of the C-111 spreader project to increase freshwater flows across the Everglades into Florida Bay. But once you leave the roar of the machinery at SR 9336 behind, 13 miles of South Dade Greenways trails run along the Aerojet Canal for hiking, biking and fishing.

On a recent outing to the Southern Glades, visitors were thrilled to spot a bald eagle, numerous ospreys, hawks and herons flying over the canal or roosting beside it. Across the open prairie in the distance, they could see the abandoned Aerojet buildings — remnants of a 1960s rocket-building company that once barged its aeronautical equipment to Biscayne Bay and north to the Space Coast. In and along the canal, several alligators lazed, eyeing the passersby warily.

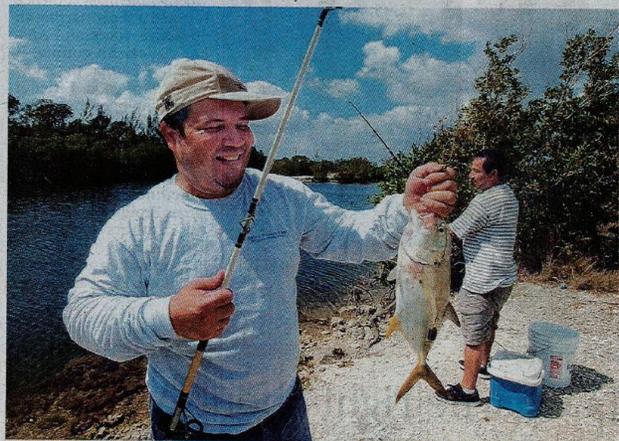
According to Smith, the

region is home to the endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow, American crocodile and more than 20 other threatened or endangered plant and animal species. One of them, a wood stork, stood calmly by the canal as the group went by.

The C-111 northwest of U.S. 1 is considered prime fishing grounds for largemouth and peacock bass. Hollywood bass guide Billy Bob Crosno and a customer waved to passersby from their boat and boasted of having just released a nine-pound largemouth.

It was the first time in quite a while that Crosno or any other would-be bass catchers were able to fish the canal in large motorboats. The primitive boat ramp on the southeast side of U.S. 1 next to the S-197 water control structure was closed for several years while the Florida Department of Transportation widened the highway. Late last month, construction crews finished work on a new boat ramp, dock and small parking lot.

Continuing along the levee past the floodgates, the



**HOOKED:** Alan Lopez admires the jack he just caught on a fishing trip with friend Ewin Paz along the C-111 canal, where the wood stork, left, and gator, top, were also sighted.

visitors passed several anglers stationed on the banks between the mangroves, fishing for saltwater species such as snapper, trout and jacks. Some of them were successful.

The levee road ended at

Manatee Bay, where there were remnants of an old campfire. Whoever had built it would have had to tote all his or her gear on foot or by bicycle.

Said Smith: "If you're looking for somewhere you

can drive up and get right out of the car door, that's not the primary purpose of these lands. But if you're willing to work a little harder, you can [get away] from a lot of people who just want to drive up."