

THE UNIQUE EVERGLADES

The wild areas of the world are vanishing so fast, and with their going will disappear forever so much of the delightful and the romantic and the educational, that it is incredible we should not yet see the handwriting on the wall.

To anyone who has travelled widely the shrinking of the wildernesses of the world is such an evident thing that when the question of saving a large area of the Florida Everglades from destruction was proposed, I scarcely dreamed that there could be a difference of opinion with regard to its answer.

But I soon discovered what I should have known before; that prejudice and not wisdom rules the world. Almost the first letter in response to our plea for its preservation was like a slap in the face, and it came from a man whom I knew had never even seen the region. Then came another and still another until I had to rub my eyes and try to realize that some of the foremost men in America were ready to make up their minds with regard to the advisability of saving this great area without ever having seen it or studied up about it.

Thanks, however, to there being men who did know it well and who had travelled widely and who stood at the very top of that great group of naturalists who are systematically studying the wild life of the world, support was not long in coming and, at last, even many who had at first written positive letters of disapproval felt they had been a bit hasty in writing them.

Then it dawned upon me that the reason for the objections lay in a complete misunderstanding as to what the Everglades really are.

I had been coming to Florida since 1898 and the Everglades were just as familiar to me as the plains of Kansas or the woods of Michigan where I spent my childhood and youth. I had come to think that everybody knew what the Everglades were like and that the early pictures of it as a great jungle of tangled lianas and giant forest trees had faded from peoples minds; but I was to learn that those false images which the woodcuts of old text books and books of travel had made, still lingered in the minds of many middle-aged persons who had not crossed the State of Florida on the wonderful Tamiami Trail.

There are many areas in America which have a beauty that will satisfy the great average of taste of the American people better than the Everglades can, for that taste has been accustomed to hills and valleys and pastoral scenes which are within the comprehension of even those with the most primitive appreciation of landscape beauty. The average person will find more thrill in a country of sharp defiles, of steep declivities, or the rush of waters over precipices than in the Everglades which are as flat as a dining room table. The forested areas of the north, through which one can wander and pick wild flowers and watch the squirrels chase each other up the beech tree trunks in early spring are much fuller of the romance that budding youth admires, than anything the Everglades can show.

The Everglades, with their hundreds of square miles of almost perfectly level land, constitute in the rainy season, perhaps the greatest shallow swamp in the world. In the time of the highest water, the Indians pole their canoes across it for days on end. In spring the water recedes and the mud dries up and one can travel on foot, back and forth across it and easily get lost among its thousands of so-called "hammocks," those bits of higher, forested land dotting the vast level glades.

It is the presence of these hammocks, which, when the water is high are really islands, that constitute the Everglades' unique landscape charm. At midday these little hammocks of indeterminate size and shape, with their stunted trees may seem flat and rather uninteresting, but seen as the sun is rising over the eastern border or setting over their western rim they create a landscape akin to that one sees in the forested regions of England where the openings (glades) in the woods are surrounded by oaks and undershrubs. "Everglades" might be translated into the idea of glades succeeding one another to the horizon and even, in one's imagination, to a limitless space beyond.

Over this wide landscape the sweep of the sky seems more vast than it does even at sea, and great masses of clouds continually shift and change their shapes.

It is in these hammocks that are to be found the rare palms and

air-plants, the curious tree-snails, the deer and wild cats and panthers, not to mention the snakes.

Where the land touches the Ocean or the Gulf of Mexico, the land is fringed with mangroves -- those curious trees found almost everywhere along tropical coasts - that step out into the salt water on stilt-like roots; actually land-builders are they, for mud and drift material of all sorts find lodgement among their roots, gradually building up a soil. There is nothing in a temperate-zone forest to compare in strangeness with the weird, unreal fascination of a mangrove swamp

To understand why these Everglades, or a part of them, should be preserved, I think it is quite essential that one should come and see them and study them. Otherwise, almost anyone accustomed to northern landscapes will find it difficult to comprehend how a perfectly level plain area can be unique in a country with so many millions of acres of level "prairie".

It is the most nearly tropical area in the United States. Its plants and its animals are essentially stragglers from the great Caribbean tropical basin. When I say tropical, I mean that they are not accustomed to cold weather. This does not seem much, perhaps, to one who has not seen a region where only the most occasional frosts occur, but the difference between it and a temperate region is enormous. One steps over the frost line from a land where trees drop their leaves are green and the trees do not even make their wood in annual rings as they do in the regions where frosts occur and the trees have to go into winter quarters.

The botany of the Northern Hemisphere above the frost line is a poor one as compared with the botany of the tropics--poor in the number of species. In the great northern forests of pine and spruce and birch and fir, one can walk for miles and miles through vast areas composed of only a dozen species of plants. Nowhere in the tropics can one do this, for there are a hundred species there to one in the north. The region of the Everglades, although in the main covered with "saw grass" in its northern part and mangroves in its southern section, has yet in its thousands of hammocks so many different species that Dr. John K. Small, who is its greatest student, declares that it contains more species than any other area of similar size in America. A few of these are found nowhere else in the world, and most of them do not occur anywhere else in the United States. And yet, as I say this, I am conscious of giving to those who may come to the Everglades quite a false impression, for they may find that the vegetation looks much alike and that there is not the variety which they had expected; this is because to one who has not a trained eye, most evergreen leafy trees and shrubs look much alike.

The reasons why this area under discussion should be made into a park and protected by the Federal government might be given in logical form, the pros and cons arranged in parallel columns but would one then have anything more tangible to go by than if one were to line up the reasons for liking some masterpiece of architecture or painting? Is it possible to analyze the effects upon the spirit of a visit to a region? I love the bay of Naples, but if I listed my reasons for believing it to be one of the loveliest regions in the whole world, would that give anyone who had not seen it any particular longing to do so?

Is there anything more boring than a guide book if one tries to read it in cold blood? Words are the most feeble and imperfect medium imaginable through which to bring to the soul the impression of an experience. When I am asked to describe why I like the Everglades and think they should be preserved, I feel a shudder go down my spine, for I know that to convert a person by words to a point of view gained by experience is almost an impossibility. I have tried to convert people to a taste for the grape-fruit, the avocado, and the mango by words alone, but when they eat these fruits, they usually say that they don't taste at all as I said they did.

How this interesting region can be preserved, is the difficult question. How can any area be preserved and put to a use to which it was never put before, and yet be kept as it was? Are we not facing an actual paradox in this whole National Park problem? To make a wild area accessible, is to make it no longer a wild area. To show your friends a lovely bird's nest in the grass, is easy, but try to show it to a hundred thousand and see how soon you run into this paradox.

With this problem in mind, let us penetrate into the mangrove swamps of the Shark River region, which is called the region of ten thousand islands. Let us take boats into the region as far as we can

go, and then leave them and try to travel out of reach of the sound of their whistles into the tangled wilderness. The stilt-like roots of the mangrove make an impenetrable wall of gnarled and interwoven vegetation. To get into it even a rod or two, we should have to go on all fours, climbing as we might on a tangled mass of ladders thrown helter skelter about, now slipping a foot into the soft mud below, or standing to rest on a fallen tree trunk. And there are endless ladders stretching away into the distance as far as we can see. There is no hope of getting through them faster than we can climb on all fours.

Around on the soft earth and tree trunks are hosts of crawling tree-snails of brown color, and hermit crabs in droves, while flitting through the space above us as we sit on some stilt-like root, are tropical butterflies with their wings of black spotted with gold. If only there were a trail of some kind! It need not be wider than one's body is thick. It need not have an elevation above the mud of more than a foot. It could wind in and out of these mangroves for a hundred miles and more without approaching near enough to itself to make those traversing it aware of the presence of others traveling through. To leave the trail, one would have to go on all fours again. Parties meeting might pass, but they would soon be out of sight of each other. There in the middle of a mangrove swamp, one would be alone and quiet and in touch with tropical nature, with all of its draw-backs in the shape of mosquitoes and other insects. And it is not imaginable to me that the making of such trails would be a difficult or costly matter, nor their upkeep expensive.

That the urbanized "cliff dwellers" would frequent these trails I do not believe. At least, not until they were made popular by propaganda or fashion. But I know that they would attract and hold spell-bound such as had still a love of the forest left in their make-up, and these would bring others to see them.

The Ten Thousand Islands with their maze of waterways, which only experienced guides can find their way through, might swarm with boats without there being any damage done to the mangrove vegetation which lines the banks of the islands. There are not many beaches there to be ruined. Parties would sleep on their boats. The inexhaustible fauna of the waters could be easily preserved and the myriads of plume birds, which fly back and forth across the waterways, going to their roosting places at night or scattering to their feeding grounds in the morning, would increase until they formed one of the principal charms of the whole region.

The rookeries of the plume birds could easily be preserved. Visits to them by special parties, would not disturb the birds any more than they do at such a private rookery as that maintained by Edward McIlhenny at New Iberia, Louisiana, where the herons and ibis nest within a dozen paces of the roadway.

The airplants, orchids and tillandsias, would be stolen, of course, to some extent, but with a prohibition against their being taken out of the park, the stealing would be cut down to a minimum.

The season of northern visitors would be the winter season, which is a rather short one. With the coming of warm weather and the increase of insects, would come better fishing, but greater hardships, and then only those who had really learned to love the strange wild life of the Everglades would be found there.

In fact, it seems to me that the wild life of this unique region can be more easily safeguarded than that of almost any other of our National Parks.

I have just spent a Sunday on the Tamiami Trail with an unspoiled girl of twelve, an American Marchesa who has lived most of her life abroad, and Mrs. Fairchild who loves any wild country better than most people do.

For hours we watched the wood ibis, the great white herons, the little Louisiana herons, and the pink-billed curlews feeding in the shallow water that covers the Everglades along the Tamiami Trail. Great flocks of these birds soared over us and landed in the short grass, and, without a sign of distress at our presence, showed us how they live their interesting lives. I recall to this day, the first time I saw a great blue heron in Michigan, and from her expressions of delight, I feel sure that my little friend, Gloria, will recall in her old age, those thousands of herons and ibis and curlews.

I have always maintained that there was nothing lovelier than a plume bird in flight, and the Marchesa who had visited all of the great art galleries of Europe, showed plainly that she too thought the

experience one to dream of when she was again under the grey skies of Europe.

It has been hard for me to believe that any boy or girl could grow up without ever having had the fun of catching a fish with a rod and line. But to see the Marchesa land a bream and a cat fish for the first time in her life convinced me that people can grow up without learning the technique of handling a fishing hook. I doubt if there is anywhere in the entire world to be found such a "place to fish" as the Tamiami Trail has become. For over eighty miles it is swarming with fish and the water is kept continually boiling with their fins, while at night as one drives along, one can hear their continual splashing and see by the light of the headlights the ripples in the water.

In studying the conditions which make these things possible, one is forced into a consideration of the chemical and physical factors of these Everglades. A vast level prairie of grass spread out to the tropical sun, covered one to two feet deep in the rainy season with water as fresh as that in a rain barrel and filled with an amazing growth of fresh water algae and insectivorous floating waterplants. Upon this mass of vegetation, increased through the action of sunlight and the formation of starch and protein compounds in incredible amount, live the myriads of fresh water animalculae which form the ideal food of the fishes. Myriads of insects lay their eggs in the water and from these hatch swarms of larvae, most of which go to feed the fishes. Snails of various species, particularly of the genus Planorbis, feed on the algae and bacteria of the glades and reproduce in immense quantities. Larger fish arrive to live on the tiny minnows and these in turn become the food of others still larger.

The wading birds are exclusively fish and snail eating creatures. They can no more change their tastes when left to themselves than can a Frenchman or a German or an American. They like fish and snails and nothing else. Take fish and snails off their menu and they die. With their wings they can soar over this vast watered plain a thousand square miles in extent, and when from the air, they see minnows or snails in abundance, they alight and begin feeding, with no more ceremony than a lot of barnyard fowl in a barnyard where the corn has been strewn.

When the shadows of late afternoon strike them standing knee deep in the sun-warmed water, they know it is time to fly home to roost and at hand are the hammocks with their circles of protecting water to keep away the rats that would otherwise annoy them. Being social in nature, they roost together, and in such numbers that they whiten the treetops with their brilliant white plumage.

Nowhere else in the world do these conditions prevail on so large a scale so that the bird life of the Everglades is absolutely unique. It is instructive to recollect that the slightest change in the conditions prevailing over this vast, shallow, grass-filled pond would change the algae that grow in the water and with this might come the death of the animalculae that feed on the algae and consequently the snails and the little fishes and the larger fishes and then the birds. The whole thing might go down like a house of cards.

And what could cause this change in conditions? The draining of the Everglades and their conversion into cultivated fields.

To the uninformed, who still think that there is a shortage of food in this country, it seems reasonable that the birds should go and crops should take their place, but to those who realize that there is already a destructive over-production in every kind of vegetable-growing, this argument does not appeal.

There are millions of other and better acres where the vegetables for our markets can be grown, but if once this great area of swamp land is destroyed, millions of the loveliest birds in the world would be driven away or killed by starvation and we should lose forever one of the most wonderfully beautiful sights which the human eye can see--flocks of curlews and ibis at sunset or moonrise soaring across the sky.