The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness: An Introduction

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

South Florida Natural Resources Center
Everglades National Park

"The forces of nature were too violent for human contentment. The sheer wildness of the country excludes mankind except for a transient sojourn. After a visit of a few days you emerge from its fastness bewildered by electric lights and the speed of autos. Like many lost lands of the tropics it sleeps in peace unknown and alone except for the roar of wind and wave."

– John C. Gifford on the Ten Thousand Islands, Everglades National Park. *Rehabilitation of the Florida Keys*. 1934

What is Wilderness?

Close your eyes and try to imagine "wilderness." What sorts of images come to mind? Some might picture towering mountains, dense forests, and rushing rivers. Others might envision the desolate arctic tundra or long stretches of arid desert. Though settings may differ, the concept of wilderness evokes myriad images of remote places that are both alluring and somewhat foreboding. For most, the vast expanse of the Florida Everglades can be seen in this light.

Though the idea of "wilderness" is understood differently by many, Federal agencies must manage wilderness areas using the clear, legal definition set forth in the Wilderness Act of 1964, which states:

> *"A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions..."*

Under the Wilderness Act, roughly 86 percent of Everglades National Park has been designated the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness. Recognizing the unique character and biological importance of this landscape, Congress saw fit to afford it the highest level of protection possible.

A Changing View

From high atop the observation tower at Shark Valley, visitors can see one of the rarest sights in south Florida — a seemingly endless, encompassing landscape that bears no visible signs of human presence. Historically, all of south Florida was a wild, subtropical wetland. The waters of the Everglades flowed from the Kissimmee River, through Lake Okeechobee, and to the south — inundating the landscape and providing an environment perfectly suited for the diversity and abundance of wildlife that thrived there.

Since before recorded history, indigenous peoples depended on the untamed "River of Grass" for their very existence. The eventual arrival of explorers and settlers brought new interpretations of the south Florida landscape. Some viewed the wild Everglades as a source of hope and promise — an endless bounty of resources. Others saw the area as a welcome respite from life elsewhere. Still others saw the mysterious Everglades as a place to be avoided — a veritable wasteland that promoted nothing but disease and death.

Over the past century, much of the south Florida landscape was manipulated to accommodate the many needs of an ever-growing human population. As vast swaths of wild land were irrevocably converted to urban landscapes, the need to protect wilderness values became increasingly clear to many. In 1947, Marjory Stoneman Douglas published *The Everglades: River of Grass*. Capturing her unrivaled appreciation for the area, the book would come to change forever the way the world viewed south Florida's natural legacy.

Lower Shark River Slough
Photo by William Perry, ENP

Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness

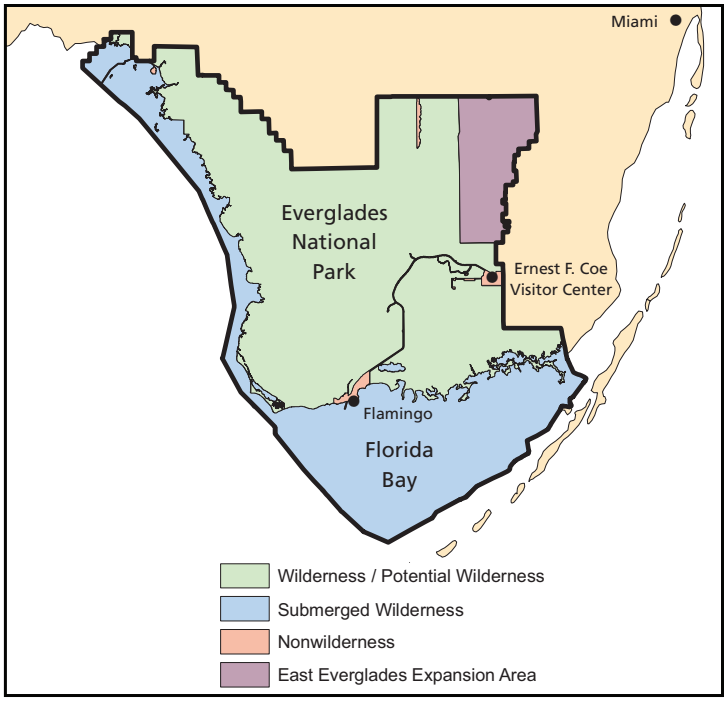
Everglades National Park boasts the largest protected stand of sawgrass in North America, the largest protected mangrove ecosystem in the western hemisphere, and important habitat for 21 federally threatened and endangered species. Recognizing such values, Congress designated nearly 1.3 million acres of the park as wilderness in 1978. In a nod to her tireless work, the entire area was christened the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness in 1997. An additional 109,000 acres added to the park in 1989 under the East Everglades Expansion Act are also currently being considered for inclusion in the wilderness area.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness represents the largest such area east of the Rocky Mountains. Here visitors are afforded the chance to forge new experiences in an undeveloped, "wild" landscape. Unparalleled opportunities abound for viewing wildlife, embarking on a rugged adventure, marveling at dark night skies, or simply enjoying quiet solitude in a vast expanse of land and sea. Time spent in wilderness offers important recreational, cultural, emotional, and spiritual experiences.

Still, one need not venture into wildlands to enjoy the full suite of benefits they provide for human populations. The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness serves as a vital recharge area for south Florida's drinking water supply, an important line of defense against the devastating winds of tropical storms, and an indispensable nursery ground for marine species of recreational and commercial importance.

The many benefits we enjoy today emanate from the foresight of those who realized the need to preserve such areas. What values and importance will we place on wilderness in the future? In order to afford future generations the same opportunities we currently enjoy, we have an obligation to preserve the health and integrity of all designated wilderness areas.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness



Visiting the Wilderness

Important guidelines must be observed when venturing into any designated wilderness. In the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness, all overnight camping requires a backcountry permit; pets are prohibited throughout the backcountry; and, as with all such areas, the use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment (portable generators, etc.), and mechanical transport is prohibited.

The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness is unusual, however, in that nearly one-third of its acreage is submerged. While the sea floor that underlies coastal park waters is designated wilderness, the water column itself is not. This provision allows for the continued use of motorboats in these areas, provided it does not impact the wilderness. It should also be noted that most islands in Florida Bay are closed to all visitor access for the protection of nesting birds.

Because these regulations are complex, two important publications provide detailed information. The *Wilderness Trip Planner* can assist visitors intending to make overnight forays into the backcountry. Visitors planning on boating in Florida Bay can learn navigation tips from local experts in the *Florida Bay Map & Guide*. In addition, several maps, charts, and guidebooks are available for purchase. The more you know about the area before venturing into it, the better prepared you will be and the more enjoyable your visit.

A Special Note to Scientists

Research permits and/or collecting permits are required of all individuals seeking to conduct scientific studies within Everglades National Park. For more information pertaining to scientific research in wilderness, please see the companion publication *The Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness: Research*.

Leave No Trace

Just as it is important for park visitors to return safely from a wilderness experience, it also is important that the wilderness remain unharmed during your visit. Although not official park regulations, the seven Leave No Trace principles will help you get the most out of your wilderness experience while preserving the park's unique values for other visitors, both today and in the future.

For more information on the seven Leave No Trace principles, and links to additional resources about the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness, please visit the park's wilderness page at:

www.nps.gov/ever/wilderness.htm