

Wetland Tourism: USA – The Everglades National Park



*USA, The Everglades National Park, Mangroves
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The Greater Everglades Ecosystem

is a vital part of the economy of the state of Florida in the USA, as it is the primary source for all water needs to a large part of the southern part of the state. The ecosystem covers approximately 18,000 square miles (4.6 million hectares) and encompasses a broad range of land uses, including agriculture, recreation, conservation, retail, industrial, conservation, residential, and general community needs. The Everglades National Park covers approximately 2,400 sq. mi. (622,000 ha) and is located at the southern end of this vast ecosystem.

Recognizing the importance of this ecosystem, the state and federal governments have established the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) to address the decline of the ecosystem's overall health. The Plan outlines the world's largest wetland restoration project ever undertaken. It includes more than 60 elements and will require more than 30 years to construct at an estimated cost of USD 10.9 billion, and was authorized by the US Congress in 2000. Each year the state and federal government must prioritize projects within CERP and request funding to keep the program on track. Given tightening budgets and competing priorities, this is an annual challenge.

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Managing the water flows in the ecosystem is extremely complex as it is a compartmentalized system put in place in the 1940s to provide flood protection, water supply, and limited environmental benefits. That compartmentalized system currently makes it difficult to provide the right amount of water, of the right quality, to the right place at the right time. For example, increasing the flows into the Everglades National Park has been inhibited due to a highway in the way, acting like a dam, and to the absence of infrastructure in place to store volumes of rainwater effectively and then deliver it to areas of the system that may need it during droughts. Currently, managing the water regime on the wider Everglades ecosystem involves maintaining Lake Okeechobee at a specific level that may require sending pulses of fresh water into the estuaries along the coast, which causes

fish dieoffs and other problems. Clearly managing this system can include difficult trade-offs.

CERP provides a framework and guide to restore, protect and preserve the water resources of central and southern Florida, including the Everglades. The goal of CERP is to create a sustainable south Florida by restoring the ecosystem, ensuring clean and reliable water supplies, and providing flood protection. The majority of the new water captured and stored will be devoted to environmental restoration, reviving a dying ecosystem. The remaining new water will benefit cities and farmers by enhancing water supplies for the south Florida economy. The plan has major environmental as well as economic benefits, including provision of flood protection and maintenance of the region, and Everglades National Park, as important attractions for domestic and international tourists.



USA - The Everglades, American Crocodile

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USA - The Everglades, Cypress and Great Egret

Tourism is a major part of south Florida's economy, and the Everglades contributes significantly to this. A National Park Service (NPS) report shows that 915,538 visitors in 2010 spent USD 135,494,000 in Everglades National Park and in communities near the park.. That spending supported 1,956 jobs in the local area. One element of the CERP is a Master Recreation Plan that is designed to provide recreation opportunities that are compatible with the restoration purposes of the project.

The Everglades National Park is the largest subtropical wilderness reserve that has been designated on the North American continent. It contains a vast mix of subtropical upland and marine ecosystems that are characteristic of the Greater Everglades ecosystem and which include freshwater marshes, tropical hardwoods, rock pinelands, extensive mangroves and seagrass ecosystems that support world-class fisheries. Its relatively unaltered mangrove forest belt stretches between Florida Bay to Flamingo and Everglades City, and is one of the longest remaining in the western hemisphere. The Park includes sites of

cultural importance (Calusa Shell mounds in the Gulf Coast), natural beauty and diversity (Anhinga Trail), and historical importance (Nike Missile Base).

The Park also supports more than 20 federal- and 70 state-listed rare, threatened and endangered species, including Green, Ridley, Hawksbill and Leatherback turtles, the Everglades snail kite, the Wood stork, West Indian manatee (*Trichechus manatus*), Florida panther (*Felis concolor coryi*),

Red-cockaded woodpecker (*Picoides borealis*), American Crocodile (*Crocodylus acutus*), and Bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), and it provides important habitat for more than 400 bird species, as well as being a major corridor for migratory bird populations. The Multi-Species Recovery Plan, developed by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, provides a comprehensive strategy for addressing habitat needs of the 68 endangered species in the area, and it is integrated with the CERP.



USA, The Everglades, “After the Storm” photo by Brian Call, © National Park Service

The Park is at the southern tip of this huge system and has experienced negative impacts from being located downstream from several huge metropolitan and agricultural areas. Less than 50% of the Everglades which existed prior to drainage attempts remain intact today. Populations of wading birds dwindled 90% from their original numbers between the 1940s and 2000s, but are now increasing. As well as threats from water quality and pollution due to urban encroachment, the Park also faces threats from invasive non-native species with adverse impacts on key habitats and native species in the Everglades. These threats remain serious, but will be significantly reduced through the projects that form part of the CERP.

The Park’s nearly one million visitors each year come to enjoy tourism activities that include wildlife viewing, especially birdwatching, hiking, kayaking, and sightseeing tours by boat and tram. Some recreational fishing is also allowed subject to park regulations. The Park’s tourism facilities include 156 miles of trails (including canoe trails), five elevated boardwalk trails, two campgrounds providing a total of 400 camping spaces and a further 48 designated backcountry campsites that are accessible by boat, five visitor centres and two environmental education camps.

The visitor centres and campsites are run by the park management, while the Park contracts with tour operators for boat tours and equipment rentals and shops. Significant restrictions are in

place for all facilities in the Park in order to maintain its wilderness character and balance visitor use with the conservation of cultural and environmental resources.

The average visitor group size ranges from 2.4 to 3.1 people (average 2.7 people), and the average length of stay in the local region on overnight trips is 3.5 nights. On a visitor group trip basis, average spending in 2008 was \$84 for visitors from the local region, USD 107 for non-local visitors on day trips, USD 117 for visitors camping inside the park, USD 654 for visitors camping outside the park, and USD 1,108 for visitors staying in motels or lodges outside the park. In 2002, an estimated 14% of all park visitors were international, though the figure has been estimated to be as high as 38% in prior years.

The main tourism activities in the Park are operated by three businesses that have leased concessions. These operators provide a range of accommodation, including houseboats; a marina, boat and canoe rentals; bicycle rentals; and naturalist-guided sightseeing tours by boat and tram. The Park benefits from the revenues it receives from these leases to tourism businesses and from entrance fees charged to visitors. Seven day passes cost USD 10.00 for a private vehicle or USD 5.00 for pedestrians and cyclists, and annual passes are also available for USD 25.00.

The Homestead Coe Visitor Center is the main entrance to the park and has the largest visitor centre open to the public. This entrance brings visitors to the beginning of the 38-mile main park road with numerous trails and excursions available. Flamingo is at the southern end of the main park road and offers a number of the activities outlined earlier, including another small visitor Center. The Shark Valley entrance is popular with west and east coast visitors as it is located between Miami and Naples along highway US41 (the "Tamiami Trail"). The Gulf Coast facility is the Park's primary visitor contact location on Florida's west coast. The main visitor activity there is concessionaire-led boats tours through Chokoloskee Bay to the Ten Thousand Islands and to nearby rivers and creeks. Together with

paddlers exploring the park's vast backcountry, these boat trips account for the majority of the Gulf Coast's 110,000 annual visits. District-wide ranger, maintenance, and interpretive operations are also located here.

Conservation education is an important part of the Park's work. A standard Park brochure is available in several languages free of charge to park visitors, and it includes the message: "Freshwater flowing into the park is engineered. With the help of pumps, floodgates, and retention ponds along the park's boundary, the Everglades is presently on life support, alive but diminished." The Coe Visitor Center addresses resources, visitor activities, and management issues park-wide. These same topics are addressed in a more localized way at Flamingo, Royal Palm, Shark Valley and Gulf Coast visitor centres and at trail heads and observation points throughout the Park.

Each year, the Park sponsors curriculum-based programs and visits, in cooperation with local public schools, that reach about 12,000 students (10-12 years old). Programs involve direct interaction with rangers and teachers for 1-day to 3-day overnight visits. The Park maintains two environmental education camps to support this program.

Tourism based around the Everglades National Park in 2009 generated around USD 450 million in economic activity for the regional economy covering Miami-Dade, Monroe, and Collier counties: about 7% of this is from expenditure in the Park itself, with 93% being spent outside the Park on accommodation, meals, transport and souvenirs, by tourists coming to visit the Park. The greatest proportions of expenditure were for lodging (42%) and restaurant meals and bar expenses (19%). Overnight visitors staying in motels or lodges outside the Park accounted for 85% of the total spending, with the rest coming from day visits by people travelling directly from their homes. This information comes from an analysis of visitor spending on the local economy that the NPS is required under legislation to carry out every five years.



A Ramsar Case Study on Tourism and Wetlands

A separate study has estimated impacts of the Park employee payroll on the local economy. In 2009, the Park employed 327 people with a total payroll including benefits of USD 22.1 million. The Park's budget was reported to be over USD 32.6 million for 2010 with just over half coming from the National Park Service, and the rest from various sources including CERP, donations, and other grants.

Although the NPS does not have any funding or mandate to run marketing programs, it does conduct many outreach and educational programs to the community to raise awareness of this important resource. In addition, the concessionaires in the parks and the local counties associated with the National Park have active marketing programmes that promote tourism and recreation in the Park.

Federal laws require the Park's General

Management Plan (GMP) to be updated every fifteen years. That Plan is presently being redrafted, with a public consultation on the redraft scheduled for 2013. The redraft will take into account restricted federal budgets, and within this it will include upgrading of the Park's visitor facilities at Flamingo and Everglades City. The upgrading will incorporate concessions that will be leased to the private sector to generate revenues and to provide opportunities for businesses to operate and provide additional employment in the Park, which help to spread the economic benefits of the Park to local people. The redevelopment of Flamingo has already been the subject of two recent planning efforts: the 2008 Commercial Services Plan (CSP) and the 2010 Flamingo Master Plan. An in-depth analysis in support of the next concessions contract is underway and is considering the public interest expressed during previous planning efforts and the decisions that were reached in the 2008 Flamingo CSP.



A Ramsar Case Study on Tourism and Wetlands

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