

How Coronavirus Threatens Everglades Restoration

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There is general agreement that once the coronavirus outbreak has subsided, many things we used to take for granted may be fundamentally changed. One thing that may be changed is the progress we have been making at restoring the Everglades. As explained in this article, there is a reasonable chance that the coronavirus could delay some key Everglades restoration projects.

The Era of Ditch and Drain

[A recent article](#) described some of the public health and environmental benefits that are associated with Everglades restoration. It also described the associated economic benefits and stated that under conservative assumptions, Everglades restoration will provide economic benefits of at least \$46.5 billion. Under less conservative assumptions, the benefits could be as high as \$123.9 billion. For these and many other reasons, Everglades restoration is critically important to the J.N. “Ding” Darling National Wildlife Refuge.

In his book, *The Swamp*, Michael Grunwald describes how back in 1848, Manifest Destiny was a cornerstone of James Polk’s presidency, and that included draining the Everglades. While that early discussion about transforming the Everglades never amounted to anything significant, it was soon followed by an ongoing series of projects each designed to ditch and drain some component of the Everglades. As described in *The Swamp*, most of the projects have the goal of taking land that was deemed to be worthless and turning it into something deemed to be valuable. As the book also describes, each project experienced a variety of unintended consequences ranging from flooding to [wide spread peat fires](#).

The majority of the projects to ditch and drain the Everglades never fully achieved their stated goal. However, the cumulative impact of these projects, combined with more than a century’s worth of extensive urban and agricultural development, has reduced the Everglades’ size in half, while providing constantly increasing nutrient loads that pollute the water and degrade the entire ecosystem. It has also fundamentally changed the flow of water within Florida. Water used to flow in sheets from the Orlando area down through the Everglades to Everglades National Park. Currently most of the water that flows south from Orlando gets only to Lake Okeechobee before it is sent either west down the Caloosahatchee River to the Gulf of Mexico or east down the St. Lucie River to the Atlantic Ocean.

Case in Point: The Kissimmee River

[Historically](#), the Kissimmee River meandered one hundred and three miles as it made its way from Lake Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee. In 1962, the Army Corps of Engineers began a project to turn the somewhat shallow, 103-mile meandering river into a relatively deep, 56-mile, straight canal referred to as the C-38 canal.

According to [one source](#), “After the river channel was straightened, 40,000 acres of floodplain below Lake Kissimmee dried out, reducing the quality of waterfowl habitat by ninety percent, and the number of herons, egrets and wood storks by two-thirds. While the Kissimmee was not a significant source of pollution for Lake Okeechobee before channelization, in the 1970s and later the river contributed about 25% of the nitrogen and 20% of the phosphorus flowing into the lake.”

Previous Attempts to Restore the Everglades

Just as there were repeated projects to ditch and drain the Everglades, there were repeated attempts to undo the harm of these projects. One of the earliest attempts began in 1983 when Florida Governor Bob Graham launched the [Save Our Everglades](#) program as a partnership between the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and federal and state governmental agencies. The goal of this project

was to make progress towards restoring the Everglades ecosystem so that by 2000 it would look and function much like it did in 1900. The Save our Everglades program contained a number [of key projects](#) that included acquiring conservation land, restoring the Kissimmee River, and enabling water to flow under the Tamiami Trail. The program was successful in acquiring tens of thousands of acres of conservation land, but it was not able to restore the Kissimmee River nor enable water to flow under the Tamiami Trail.

For more information on past restoration projects, see [here](#).

Current Attempts to Restore the Everglades

The [Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan](#) (CERP), which was approved by the U.S. Congress in 2000, is the latest attempt where the federal government and state of Florida work together to restore the Everglades. [According to the SFWMD](#), some of CERP's key projects are well underway and are expected to be completed within the next three years. They include:

- The Kissimmee River Restoration Project, which will restore more than 40 square miles of the river's floodplain, including more than 12,000 acres of wetlands and 40 miles of historic river channel.
- Old Tamiami Trail Removal, which will remove an approximately 6-mile section of the Old Tamiami Trail road in Miami-Dade County, which has been blocking the natural sheet flow of water south into Everglades National Park.
- The Caloosahatchee (C-43) Reservoir, which will store approximately 170,000 acre-feet of local basin stormwater runoff and releases from Lake Okeechobee. It will reduce the volume of discharges from Lake Okeechobee to the Caloosahatchee Estuary during the wet season and provide a source of freshwater flow to the estuary during the dry season to help balance salinity levels to protect plants and wildlife.

Time for Optimism or Concern?

On the one hand, this is clearly a time for cautious optimism. While the CERP projects that are scheduled to be completed in the next three years will not fully restore the Everglades, they will be a giant step forward. However, this is also a time for moderate concern. We have started many of these CERP projects before but have always failed to complete them. Completing these projects requires ongoing funding from both the state of Florida and federal government. The incredible impact the coronavirus is having on our economy and the huge amount of money the federal government is spending to combat the effects of the pandemic will cause governments at all levels to reassess their priorities. One must wonder if the necessary funding will continue to be there or if we will once again put off completing critical Everglades restoration projects.

In Case You Missed It: The Army Corps of Engineers issued permits to allow construction to move forward on the Stormwater Treatment Area (STA) component of the Everglades Agricultural Area (EAA) Reservoir Project. See [more](#).