

January 3, 2024

Subject: Concerns Regarding Proposed Wilderness Designations in Big Cypress National Preserve

All,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to bring to your attention the pressing matter of proposed "Wilderness Designations" in the Big Cypress National Preserve (BICY) and to share our concerns on behalf of the Bergeron Everglades Foundation, as gladesmen and gladeswomen, and as landowners bordering the BICY.

Recent discussions surrounding these designations have raised substantial apprehensions among various stakeholders, including members of the Miccosukee Tribe and the Florida Fish & Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). It is imperative to consider the cumulative impacts of such designations, particularly in conjunction with the proposed Western Everglades Restoration Project (WERP). Stakeholders expressed adamant opposition during the South Florida Ecosystem Restoration Task Force Meeting held in November, citing concerns about potential hindrances to natural resource management, invasive species control, and restrictions on public access.

During this meeting, stakeholders, including the Miccosukee Tribe, unanimously voiced their opposition to "Wilderness Designations" in BICY. Gladesmen and gladeswomen, including those with deep historical ties to this land, spoke up against this proposal. Additionally, the FWC, a key agency responsible for natural resource conservation, has consistently expressed adamant opposition, citing concerns about potential hindrances to natural resource management, invasive species control, and restrictions on public access.

While some advocate for "Wilderness Designations" as a conservation tool, it is crucial to recognize that BICY is already shielded from development by the enabling legislation of 1974. The compromise allowing specific activities within the Preserve is now under threat from proposed "Wilderness Designations."

Furthermore, such a designation will impede critical conservation efforts and the responsible management of the preserve. Those who frequent the preserve understand

the delicate balance required to maintain its health. Present and past staff from the Department of the Interior (DOI), National Park Service (NPS), and the US Geological Survey (USGS) have expressed their concerns. Former NPS employees have conveyed their frustration regarding the intricate procedures associated with obtaining a "Wilderness Permit," which obstructs vital studies and resource management efforts.

Whether it be researchers studying local flora and fauna, conservationists striving to control invasive species, or individuals working to ensure the well-being of the ecosystem, unrestricted access is crucial for effective management.

Real-world examples, including the experience with the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness in Everglades National Park (ENP), underscores the likely unintended consequences of "Wilderness Designations." The multiplication of invasive species, such as the Burmese Python, has been exacerbated by the protection provided by wilderness designations, truly serving as prime and protected breeding grounds for Burmese pythons, hindering our ability to effectively manage and control their populations-- resulting in severe declines in native wildlife populations.

Florida, already grappling with over 500 nonnative species and an annual cost of over \$500 million due to invasive species¹, cannot afford to overlook the potential long-term implications of such designations on the fragile Everglades ecosystem.

In conclusion, we urge you to carefully reconsider the proposed "Wilderness Designations" in BICY, and to take into account the concerns raised by various stakeholders, the potential hindrance to effective land management, and the real-world examples that highlight the pitfalls of such designations. The delicate balance between conservation and access, as initially envisioned in the enabling legislation of 1974, must be protected.

In 2011, former Superintendent of BICY and current Superintendent of ENP, Pedro Ramos stated: "There's some old-timers that are still around that were in the trenches making sure that this place would be protected to perpetuity because it is so special that tell me today that without that compromise, and the vision that some had to think about this new concept of management, the preserve concept, this place would have never been set aside," the superintendent continued. "So it was a place that was created and founded on this concept and promise of compromise, where everybody has a place, where conservation is important. But having access is also important. If we forget that, and if we are not true to the intention of Congress and the mandate that they gave us to the act, we would not only be breaking promises made that resulted in the creation of the place, but we would be violating law, the law that created the preserve, which ultimately is what it all boils down to." ²

¹ Report Invasive Species By Kyle Grammatica <https://wildlifeflorida.org/report-invasive-species/>

² Big Cypress National Preserve Superintendent Defends "Addition" Lands ORV Use By Kurt Repanshek, January 3, 2011

<https://www.nationalparkstraveler.org/2011/01/big-cypress-national-preserve-superintendent-defends-addition-lands-orv-use7414>



We must honor the Big Cypress National Preserve in the way in which it was forever intended to be.

Thank you for your time and consideration of this critical issue. We look forward to hearing your thoughtful response.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in brown ink that reads "Diamond Bergeron" with two asterisks at the end.

Diamond Bergeron
Vice President, Bergeron Everglades Foundation

