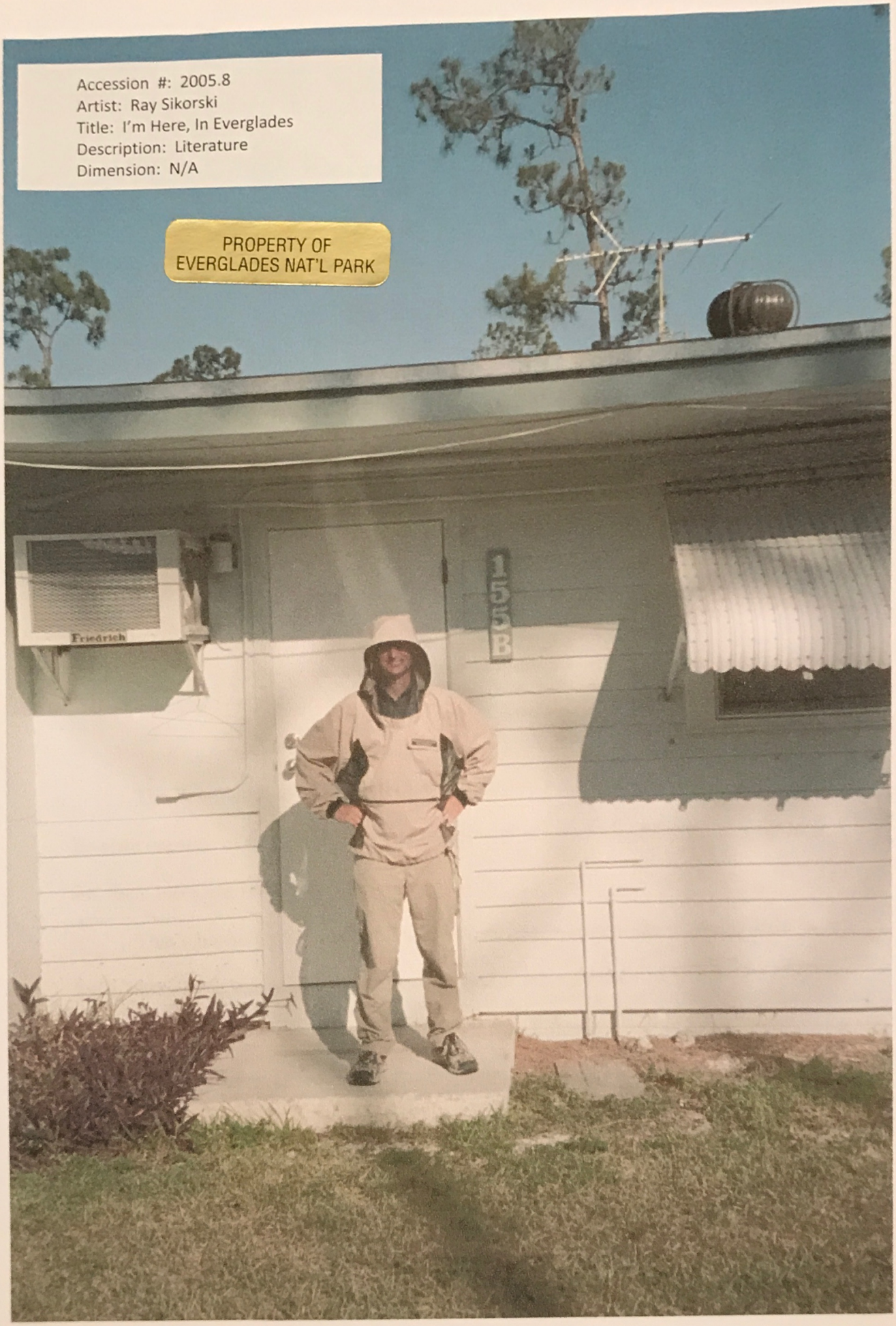
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Artist: Ray Sikorski
Title: I'm Here, In Everglades
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PROPERTY OF
EVERGLADES NAT'L PARK
Friedrich
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I'm Here, In Everglades

The start of an adventure! Yesterday I flew to Fort Myers from San Francisco, and stayed with my parents.

Welcome to the Everglades

HERZLICH WILLKOMMEN!
BIENVENUE!
BENVENUTI!
(a bunch of Japanese characters)!
¡BIENVENIDOS!

The Everglades in April are far from beautiful, but it's not that kind of park. A desolate expanse of saw grass, with a clump of trees breaking the monotony every now and then. Florida's version of Kansas.

That's how it looked to me when I first set foot in Everglades National Park in April 2005. April, the month that marked the bridge between the lovely dry winter and the miserable wet summer seasons, the month the mellifluous "river of grass" turns into a crusty prairie. In April, the birds that flocked to the abundant pools in the winter months start looking for better pickings elsewhere. It's when the tourists stop coming, the winter residents go home, and the seasonal Park Service employees pack their bags for their summer stints in places like Yellowstone, Crater Lake, and Denali National Parks. April

is the month that waits apprehensively for the oppressive heat, the suffocating humidity, and the bloodthirsty mosquitoes that will surely come. It's only a matter of time.

But I didn't know what April meant. I had spent a lot of time in cooler climes like New York, Montana, and northern California, and to me it just sounded like a good in-between time – not too hot, not too cold. And when I first arrived in the park, it was perfect. A bit warm inside the white concrete cinder block structure that was to be my home for a month, but nothing that a little creative rearranging of fans couldn't solve.

My job was to be the Everglades' artist-in-residence for the month of April. I had never been artist-in-residence of anything before, least of all the Everglades, and I wasn't sure what it was supposed to entail. My parents became seasonal residents of South Florida a few years earlier, and the last time I came to visit I took a trip to Everglades National Park – a November boat ride around the 10,000 Islands at the park's northwestern boundary. I found an element of wildness to the park that surprised me. I mentioned that in my application, although I didn't know exactly what my project would be, there in the Everglades. I didn't write about landscapes or wildlife, I wrote about people. I told them I wanted to write about the people who lived in the park. Someone had been interested, and I had been chosen.

Ranger Alan Scott, the lanky Chief of Interpretation, acted as my host at the Ernest F. Coe visitors' center near the park's east entrance. He told me that most of the past artists-in-residence were either painters or photographers; they'd had a few poets and a young adult author, but writers were pretty rare in general.

He issued me an article of clothing the likes of which I had never seen before: a lightweight, hooded jacket, with a no-see-um mesh completely covering the face area.

"This is your bug shirt," he said.

* * *

Let me just thank you, Mom, for driving me out here, buying me groceries, and being good to me in general. It is very much appreciated.

Bearing that in mind, please forgive this following critique. I mean no harm by it, but I think it's worth pointing out.

First of all, I understand not wanting to be stuck in rush hour. I hate it myself. I also understand not wanting to drive in the dark. But how often do you get to drive your son to the Everglades for a month as Artist-in-Residence? How often do you even get to the Everglades at all?

See, there was an opportunity here. You could have spent an enjoyable, relaxing day driving along the Tamiami Trail, maybe stopping at a few interpretive sights along the way. We could have relaxed, had a leisurely lunch, learned a little about the 'Glades, and really thought about what kind of groceries I'd need for a month with no access to a store.

Instead, we sped along the un-scenic route, going 70 all the way, rushed through lunch and groceries, and dropped me off with the haste of Namath avoiding the blitz.

It may come as a shock to hear it, but I would have woken up an hour or two earlier to avoid that.

Yes, believe it or not.

I suppose I had imagined an artist's residence to be comfortable and cozy, perhaps a little cabin with a wood stove, or maybe something more modern, designed in an environmentally sensitive way to blend in with its surroundings. But no.

My new neighborhood was known as Pine Island, although it wasn't an island in the traditional sense — at least not in April. During the wetter months, the saw grass prairies became inundated with water, and its few inches in extra elevation is enough to keep Pine Island high and dry. The same held true for Lone Pine Key, Mahogany

Hammock, Royal Palm — just enough of a rise to allow tall trees and a lush landscape to thrive among the saw grass.

The National Park Service housing complex at Pine Island was a ramshackle assortment of utilitarian pre-fab bunkhouses and concrete one-story apartment blocks, haphazardly dispersed between the slash pines and palm trees, but painstakingly landscaped with the same sort of lawns you'd find in any south Florida suburb. My one-story four-plex was a white lump in the landscape, but it was built to last and I appreciated that. It made it through Hurricane Andrew in 1992, and there was something to be said for that.

So here I am, first day in Everglades, staring up at the ceiling fan, wondering what's the point of it all, if it will be worthwhile. Is this what it means to be a writer?

The fact that I learned this here, in this igloo, is worth pondering. I call it an igloo because I am surrounded by white cinder blocks. There are no pictures or painting in this apartment, just these bare white walls. There is no sense of coziness whatsoever – except on the screen porch. I shall make of point of spending time out there, although I hate being on display.

Back to my point about the igloo. I've only met Darrell (Ranger Darrell Street) so far, but I sense that this place is more about real-job security than, say, Yellowstone or Grand Teton. Of course, I didn't really hang out with park rangers in those places... but the ones I did know were pretty cool. Not that Ranger Darrell isn't cool, but he is a bit stiff. I like his line about snakes: "Black, red, and yella can kill a fella."

Back to my point. I'm concerned that a certain youthful vitality is slowly slipping from my life. Where are the young kids? The seasonal employees? People who don't give a damn about a real job, or security? Am I allowing this to happen to me? Can't I have it every way – a kid and a grown-up all at once?

So here I sit, in the confines of my igloo, wondering if this is indeed my fate – a hermit in my igloo, with too much time on my hands.

I remember those first few days; I was like a child, looking for other kids to play with. I had borrowed a bicycle from my father, a Huffy Verona cruiser bike, and I pedaled three miles against my first Everglades headwind to visit the Anhinga trail.

The Anhinga trail is Everglades at its best, if not its most natural. The trail is part of the Old Ingraham Highway, which at one time was the main route from Florida City to the bottom of Florida's peninsula. The old highway had been defunct for years, and in many places no longer existed at all. At the Anhinga trail, a section of the old road lived on as a walking trail that ran alongside a trench dug years ago as a source of road building material – hence the name "borrow pit," referring to the rock that was "borrowed" for the highway.

I had seen my first alligator, a three-foot-long adolescent, lying statue-like in the muck beneath a bridge on the way to the trail. I can't say it was thrilling — the animal might as well have been dead. But any sense of disappointment didn't last long, because the man-made borrow pit along the Anhinga trail has water in it year-round, and it's a sure spot to find lots of wildlife.

Within moments of arriving I saw half a dozen alligators. They were swimming in the water, sunning themselves on the banks, even traipsing close to the trails – much to the delight of the tourists, who were also abundantly represented. Within the clear water, snorkel-nosed soft-shell turtles, as well as non-native Oscars and tilapias, swam precariously close to the unmoving gators. Anhingas, ibises, herons, and egrets patrolled the waterlines.

It was at the Anhinga trail that I met Ranger David Grimes — or simply "Grimes," as he liked to be called — a tall and gangly blond-haired country boy, who had the job of interpreting for the visitors to the Anhinga trail. Any interpreter who leads his charges around the trail's boardwalks is obliged to talk of the anhingas' fishing ability, to tell a little bit about the plan to restore the Everglades, to explain how the gators eat only

once a week (which gives the other animals the confidence to swim close by, until that one moment hunger strikes, and then Wham! – it's all over), and to encourage participants to reach through the wooden railing to take a blade of saw grass between their fingers, and feel how its serrated edges grab and bite when fingers move downward, but not upward.

Grimes, who had been doing this several times a week for over four months now, did it with enough enthusiasm that I didn't feel like it had grown old for him at all – maybe he was just a good actor? He had probably answered most of the questions dozens of times.

But when a bird with a fighter-plane wingspan shot past high overhead, he couldn't conceal his excitement. "Wow, a swallowtail kite! What a beautiful bird," he said, automatically launching into an explanation of how the endangered black-and-white birds not only hunted and ate without setting foot on the ground, but mated, as well.

* * *

David Grimes
From Colorado
Interested in the conflict between the "top-down, military-style power structure" of the park service vs. the free spirits who choose to join it

* * *

I spent those early days riding up and down the main park road, huffing against the headwind, trying to explore as much as I could. I rode twenty miles to Mahogany Hammock, slathered in sunscreen and bug repellent, to see if I could figure out what I was supposed to be seeing. Trees? Birds? I had worked as a waiter in Yellowstone, Grand

Teton, Glacier, and Denali National Parks. In those parks the point was obvious – they were stupendous. High, snow-capped mountains, spewing geysers, grizzly bears, amazing views in every direction.

Everglades was different. Alan Scott warned me about that when I showed up: It's not about scenery. Everglades was the first place designated a national park not for its views, but for its biological importance. I was out of my element in more ways than I had anticipated.

I spent my evenings cooking and furiously jotting down notes from my forays into the park. I felt odd, alone among the Park Service employees who wore uniforms and punched time clocks. I had barely any idea what my job was, and if I was doing it. I sat on the screen porch and stared at anoles, the little lizards that puffed out their bright red dewlaps and did an energetic dance that resembled push-ups.

Being back in a park, I realize I do miss this simple lifestyle. I'm not on a meal plan, which makes it a bit tricky since I don't have a car, but even that is kind of refreshing. As in New Zealand, it's all about survival – the questions are so basic. Do I have enough food? Will I be okay until I'm next able to go to town? Having no car forces me to interact with others... and people are open to that.

If I had a car it would open a vast number of options, options I'm not too interested in having right now (maybe later, when I run out of cookies).

* * *

I felt a bit lonely and depressed today, but I think I have to go through those phases to be able to write.

* * *

At some point I realize it's going to be about me.

* * *

I learned that it was swallowtail kite mating season, and wildlife photographers were all aflutter over it. On the road from the Park Service housing later that week I met one of them, who had her pink cruiser bike propped up on the road's shoulder.

I stopped to chat with her a bit, to see what she was so adamantly chasing after. She was a little sprite, in her mid-forties, with fair hair and freckles – the type that needed to make sure to apply an ample amount of sun block before going outside. She had spent all day watching and shooting the swallowtail kites.

It turned out she was another artist-in-residence. "A biologist posing as a wildlife photographer," she told me, but I had seen her work on display in the visitor center — I knew she was good. I noticed that she had the same kind of camera that I did: an old Pentax K-1000, a totally manual 35mm SLR. I had purchased mine used for $125 several years earlier for a photography class I had taken, and an 80-200 zoom lens was thrown into the deal. As someone who just likes looking through a big lens from time to time, I was pretty happy with my setup, but I figured everyone was shooting with digital nowadays, especially the pros.

"I'll never go digital," she said. "A long as they keep making film, I'll keep shooting it." It wasn't that digital could never match the quality of film, she said. I think she just liked being old-fashioned.

Just then her bike fell over, and what I imagined was a very expensive telephoto lens fell onto the pavement. She shrugged. "Happens all the time," she said. She bent over to pick up the lens, and rotated the dials back and forth. There was a slight grinding sound.

"Doesn't sound too good, but it looks like it still works."

She propped the bike back up, and got back to chasing the birds.

This was Mitzi Van Slyke.

* * *

"*In heaven God will wipe away your tears and you won't get hurt.*"
–Mitzi Van Slyke.

Mitzi knew more about the flora and fauna in the park than most of the rangers. I walked with her along the Anhinga trail and she pointed out the fish that take their newborn offspring into their mouths when danger lurked. The babies, swimming alongside their momma, were barely big enough to see. "They all have hearts and brains and skeletal systems," she said, as if she needed to convince even herself of such an amazing fact.

She told about glands in anhingas' butts that secrete oil to keep them warm in the water, and how the mid-air snail kite mating rituals all happen on one day: "If you miss that special day, it's over and you never get to see it."

She knew how the Everglades functioned ecologically, she knew the history of the park, she was an active and effective environmental campaigner. She understood that a lot of the problems the park now faced had to do with the levees and canals designed to "drain the swamp" years ago, but she refused to administer blame. She felt people didn't understand environmental cause and effect like they do now, and that based on what they knew they made the right decisions for their time.

She was also a born-again Christian, and, based on a Biblical passage called "Balaam's Ass," believed that animals could talk. She longed for the day when animals would no longer eat each other.

Weird, but sharp. She offered me Pop-tarts. She was perfect.

* * *

I repeatedly rode the three windblown miles to the Anhinga trail, following different rangers, sitting in on various question and answer sessions. I took copious notes about everything: plants, animals, people I met, the text of interpretive signs, the contents of my refrigerator. I overheard Park Service employees debating the merits of Tom Jones versus Englebert Humperdinck, and I took notes on that.

I can't help feeling insecure when people inquire about my work. It's not that I don't think it's good enough; it's just that sometimes I feel they chose me for this gig by accident, or default. I feel I should be writing haikus about anhingas drying their wings in the breeze, but here I am writing about what I had for lunch, or whatever. What I did on my Everglades vacation. Does it really count? Is anybody keeping track of this?

Haikus *splendiferously*
1 2 3 4 5

Anhinga

An anhinga spears
A little fish
Through the guts
Splendiferously

The Brazilian Pepper Plant

Non-native
Has no green card
As far as
The Everglades are concerned

CERP

Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan
Is a haiku
Too

When I wasn't making forays into the park, I spent time in the visitor center, trying to learn as much as I could about how the Everglades worked. I understood the basics, how south Florida was like a giant, slightly tilted tabletop that drained water from Lake Okeechobee into Florida Bay. I understood that the whole system was threatened by pollution from the sugar industry near Lake Okeechobee and the ever-encroaching population of newcomers teasing at the park's eastern and western boundaries, and I was fascinated with the bold, expensive plan to restore the traditional water flows to the Everglades. I talked with Mitzi, Grimes, other rangers, anyone who had any information. Basically, the story went like this:

A hundred years ago, the Everglades formed a fifty-mile wide river of grass, which traveled slowly south from Lake Okeechobee through the almost imperceptible decline of the saw grass prairies. The leisurely pace allowed moisture to be absorbed into the aquifer beneath the limestone, as the water made its hundred-mile journey to Florida Bay. Summer storms sent torrents into the prairies in summer, and the dryness of winter parched the landscape months later. The seasonal extremes worked well for the birds, alligators, raccoons, and other mammals, because the gradual drying of the marshes concentrated fish, frogs, and other reptiles into shallow pools, which made hunting easy. Deer, panthers, bears, and other wildlife also flocked to the area.

But that natural system of floods and drought, which was so beneficial to the wildlife, had the opposite effect on humans. In 1926 and 1928 hurricanes resulted in killer floods, prompting the diking of Lake Okeechobee. Two other hurricanes in 1947 led the Army Corps of Engineers to build a massive system of canals, levees, pump stations, and storage reservoirs. The intention was to drain the swamp as much as possible so that the land could be put to human use.

It was successful. The system saved south Florida from flooding, it helped create rich farmland for the lucrative sugar industry, and it made possible a massive real estate boom.

The system also completely altered the way the Everglades worked. It diverted huge amounts of fresh water away from the Everglades and into the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. The Everglades no longer answered to the natural dictates of summer storms and winter droughts, but to human dictates: moist farmland, green golf courses, dry living rooms. Just as a turn of the faucet brought water to sprinklers in Fort Lauderdale, a turn of a much bigger faucet brought water to the Everglades.

The Everglades are now half the size they once were; the rest has become farms and suburbs. The wading bird population, which once was said to blot out the sun, is now one-tenth its former glory. Dozens of native animals landed on the Endangered Species List, and the Florida panther became virtually extinct, now numbering only in the tens. Exotic plant and fish species have been crowding out the native ones. And, in the late 1980s, algae blooms and hypersalinity started affecting marine life in Florida Bay, at the bottom tip of Florida's peninsula, turning it a murky green.

That last fact is what spurred real action. South Florida's sport fishing industry was dependent on a healthy Florida Bay, and all of a sudden environmentalists were joining together with real estate developers and farmers to help restore the Everglades.

It culminated in CERP (rhymes with "slurp"), the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, which was signed into law by Bill Clinton on December 11, 2000. The plan allocated $7.8 billion, split between the federal government and the state of Florida, over the course of thirty years to help restore the Everglades. It was supposed to be the biggest restoration plan of all time, and it was applauded for its unprecedented multipartisanship.

I asked the rangers and Mitzi what they thought of the plan, and everyone was skeptical. The National Park Service, as well as most south Florida environmental groups, supported the plan, but I couldn't find anyone who would give the plan a raving endorsement.

At first, I thought the plan seemed all right. After all, it was supposed to restore the Everglades to eighty percent of its traditional water flows, and to double the wading bird population. But closer inspection showed some flaws. The big one was that the plan did little to restore by the traditional definition, meaning bringing things back to the way they were before all the dikes, levees, and canals were built. To do that would be virtually impossible, since millions of people have moved to the area once claimed by the river of grass. Instead, the plan has the Army Corps of Engineers – the same folks who built the levees and canals that caused the problems in the first place – building additional levees and water storage areas, some using technology that has never been tried before. The idea is to capture the water that would normally get flushed out to sea, store it in new

reservoirs and deep injection wells, and distribute it to farmers, people, and the Everglades.

On top of that, the plan promised to double the human population of south Florida in twenty years; it was already at 6 million and growing exponentially. That's the part of the plan that made the least sense to me. Somehow Everglades restoration turned into the greatest gift not for wading birds or panthers, but for real estate developers.

* * *

I took a pre-dawn Park Service employee carpool ride to the Flamingo area on Florida Bay, forty miles southwest of Pine Island. There, the stocky, glasses-wearing interpretive ranger Maureen McGee-Ballinger showed me around and told me of the regenerative qualities of hurricanes — how they act as a cleansing agent for Florida Bay, and are a necessary part of the whole equation. She took me to the edge of the bay and showed me where the previous year's hurricanes caused the tides to wash up onshore — dead, reedy vegetation went as far as thirty feet inland, but there were signs of it starting to grow back. "The earth has an amazing ability to heal itself," she said.

For Maureen, this perspective seemed to extend into her thoughts about the earth in general, from resource depletion to the ozone hole to global warming. "The earth will be fine," she said. "We won't be around forever. The earth can heal itself."

I found a certain nobility to this, but also a certain head-in-the-sand recklessness. Did it mean humans were free to do anything to the earth, because it would surely recover? She told me of damage to the park from Hurricane Andrew in 1992, when tall

pine trees and man-made structures like boardwalks were devastated, but the smaller trees just flexed in the wind. "The Everglades were fine," she said.

Maureen, in Hurricane Andrew

Brought from Flamingo (which ended up not getting hit) to Pine Island. Fell asleep in room with 5 others, exhausted from rushing to close down Flamingo – bringing in boats, filling them with water, removing outboard motors, etc. Due to a communication error, everyone but them got evacuated to the sturdiest brick buildings when the storm was upgraded from a Category 2 to Category 5 hurricane. They were forgotten in their prefabricated one-story bunkhouse. They all somehow slept through half of it, and were awoken with a horrible, loud sound – probably the roof coming off. They all woke up at that point, and all of them had to do everything they could to keep the place together. At one point they were using screwdrivers to poke holes in what remained of the ceiling, to keep the water flowing through so the roof wouldn't come crashing down on them. Water was coming in everywhere, through the edges of the windows, the electrical sockets... One of the boards blew off a window, and they tried putting a bookshelf up against it to keep glass from entering the room, but it kept blowing over. Finally they removed screws from the furniture, and used those to fasten the bookshelf to the wall.

The worst part, she said, was the waiting. She'd waited out tornadoes before, and those went pretty quickly. Hurricanes are different, and Hurricane Andrew took 5 or 6 hours to pass over completely. That time was filled with pelting rain, whistling wind, and the sound of something beating repeatedly against the metal roof.

Some of the people she was with still get spooked when they hear the wind. Not Maureen. For her, a constant, repetitive rapping noise gives her chills down her spine.

* * *

Maureen off-handedly mentioned that I must be a good writer, because it's really hard to be selected as Artist-in-Residence. I kind of played it down, which seems to be instinctual with me. I should just say thank you.

* * *

I saw a crocodile at Flamingo, but it was no match for the fear I felt when I saw a cockroach in the laundry room the other day. Scariest animal so far.

* * *

By the way, Mitzi Van Slyke is not her real name. I can't tell you her real name, because she specifically asked me to leave it out of anything I wrote. She said it had nothing to do with her radical ideas regarding evolution (she doesn't believe in it) or animal communication (animals are able to talk but we just don't understand them), which could jeopardize her reputation as a biologist. That didn't bother her as much as a more mundane fear, that of an ex-husband who might try to stalk her. So she became Mitzi Van Slyke.

"What an odd name," she said when I told it to her. She didn't seem pleased at all. But she didn't ask me to change it, either.

Mitzi was my neighbor in the Park Service residence complex. Amid the hodge podge of one-story bungalows and prefabricated bunkhouses was the RV Park, where Mitzi parked her brand new $78,000 Chevy Roadtrek 190 recreational vehicle – basically a full-sized fully self-sufficient Chevy van. She left the rig's air conditioning on all the time, so the place would stay cool enough for her cat to stay comfortable during the day.

She showed the van to me with a hint of apology in her voice; she had grown up poor in rural Pennsylvania, and recent financial successes were welcomed, though something of an ill fit. She and her husband owned a business that provided environmentally-friendly solutions to South Florida developers; her workdays were spent figuring out ways for the ever-advancing hordes of people seeking paradise in Florida – to the tune of 900 new residents a day – to coexist with the plants and animals who were here first. And I imagine she was very good at her job – she boasted that her client included names like Donald Trump and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines.

What's In Mitzi's Roadtrek 190 Popular?

A lot, lot of stuff.
The place is crammed full.
There's even a cat, named Fudgie (real name).
Mitzi said when she was young
she fancied herself as Mary Ann,
*But now she's become Mrs. Howell.**

** These are references to the Gilligan's Island TV show.*

Some things about Mitzi:

She makes her own pottery, soap, butter, and rope. She knits. She had cancer since 2001, and had successful surgery last year. She likes the Three Stooges. She overcame an abusive stepfather who frowned on her schooling. She was debating either running for political office or applying to become an ambassador to the Czech Republic.

I could write an entire book just about her.

* * *

Eco Pond contains re-used water from the Flamingo Sanitary Treatment Plant

Eco Pond contiene agua re-usada de la planta sanitaria de tratamiendo de Flamingo

Eco Pond beinhaltet auf bereitetes wasser von den Flamingo kläranlangen

Welcome to Eco Pond

Eco Pond is not natural but was built as the final stage for Flamingo's sewage treatment. Cleansed water pumped here returns to the ecosystem through natural evaporation and filtration.

Eco Pond provides a home for many wildlife species including alligator, birds, bobcats, marsh rabbits, and occasional snakes and lizards. During the dry winter season, the pond's fresh water attracts both resident and migratory species.

Like the Anhinga Trail, there is little that is natural about Eco Pond. As the signs indicated, the pond is part of the sewage treatment system — and a haven for wildlife. Mitzi, her husband, her brother-in-law, and I saw hundreds of ibises nesting in the trees there, not to mention alligators, the endangered roseate spoonbill, and a marsh hare. And swarms of mosquitoes; they were a nightmare. I used my bug shirt the way it was intended for the first time, zipping the no-see-um netting over my face.

Mitzi talked about her Everglades photo project that she had planned; there will be a section in it, based on an Old Testament story, in which animals speak. I'm not being funny of making fun – she will have a section in her photos of birds and other Everglades animals, in which she asks the viewers to imagine what the animals might be saying.

But, actually, it's not so silly; she simply believes that animals have the ability to respond to us in a way that is deeper than normally thought. Dolphins are believed to communicate – why not other animals?

* * *

Alan Scott arranged for me to accompany Park Service volunteer photographer Rodney Cammauf on a visit to the Shark Valley area on the park's northern boundary. A grizzly bear of a man, Rodney's cowboy hat, pot belly and bearded face didn't betray the fact that he worked for years as a network engineer, before finally getting laid off — the best thing that ever happened to him, or so he said.

Shark Valley is fifty miles from Pine Island; Rodney made sure to take me on a detour through Florida City, to look at the massive new housing developments that were going in barely outside the park's boundaries. We got out of his battered Jeep Cherokee and looked at what had once been wetlands, but was now buzzing with construction equipment.

"It'll never be anything but houses for people," he said, pointing out where wetlands had been filled in.

"Farmland – we need farmland."
Although they're farming smarter
Not give up anymore

Developers
Land destroyers
Don't want to work with abandoned bgs.
Want to work with virgin land
Shopping centers close down, new ones built

"take aeronautical intercourse with a piece of rotating pastry"

Real Developers
Put in something with an eye towards preserving the area around it
Voluntarily

"If God wanted this earth to be covered in concrete, He would have made it that way."

Chain-smoking off-brand cigarettes, Rodney talked a steady stream while he drove. I love people like this, who just spout off sound bites. He even let me write it all down while he was rambling (probably loved having an interested audience).

Alligators in suburban backyards:
What do people expect?
We're in <u>their</u> backyards

Growing up in Pennsylvania:
"Come back, clean your game, clean your gun, then you can eat."
"If you shot it, you ate it."
Don't hunt anymore, except with a camera
Believes in hunting

Jupiter:
(I think he's talking about a sci-fi book, not the FL city or actual planet)
Overdeveloped, destroyed ecosystem

Being a photographer:
Capture the beauty of nature, so others will want to preserve it.
A good photo shoot should

a) tell a story, and
b) beg a question
"I'd like to get both, or at least one."
Always have the composition so that the lines go to the right, because people read from left to right.

Greed:
Yuppies
Come out, build more than they need to show themselves off
Developers
Make a buck at nature's expense
Sam Walton, creator of Wal-Mart
Drove an old pickup truck; no false pride

Indians:
Micosukkee and Seminole
Army never defeated them
They sank further back into 'Glades, and let animals (skeeters) do their dirty work
If we learned all the warfare that did the Indians good, why can't we learn the ecology of the Indians?
If you take care of Mother Earth, she will take care of you

His wife leaving:
"Thank God and Greyhound."
Offered to pay for the U-Haul

Everglades restoration:
"Whiz kids and their supercomputers."
"If they can do that, it's wonderful – but man has never been able to read Mother Nature's mind."
Man has no plan for the Everglades
Fire is beneficial
Hurricanes are beneficial
"We can't control the weather, thank God."

Quote:
"God is an acronym for Great Out Doors."

Rodney was on such a roll he ended up sailing past the Shark Valley turnoff and we had to turn around.

The Shark Valley trail is not unlike the Anhinga trail: it's a paved road that was built many years ago by an oil company that saw promise in the area, but abandoned when it didn't pan out. A borrow pit runs alongside the road, and there was definitely no shortage of gators on the day we visited: big ones, little ones, mommas with babies… they were everywhere, and Rodney clicked away. I clicked away too, with my old Pentax K-1000, but I had lost my zeal for it. I really only wanted one shot of every animal I ran into in the Everglades, preferably in focus, and I already had more alligators than I knew what to do with. And Rodney, with his state-of-the-art digital gear, must have literally had thousands of gator photos, if not tens of thousands – but that didn't seem to slow him down a bit. And if he had any fear of alligators, he didn't show it. Of course, the things rarely seemed to move at all… but he didn't want to get too close to the babies with the mother around.

"Danger zone – we are in it."

Gator opens mouth
"Do that again, baby! I will sit here and wait for that!"

Actually his assignment had nothing to do with alligators. He was supposed to shoot tourists and solution holes (the nutrient-filled holes that trees grow out of) along the Otter Cave Hammock trail, an offshoot of the Shark Valley trail. And we did do that – it's just that the gators were way more interesting. The wading birds, too.

Rodney seemed to know almost as much about wildlife as Mitzi. He talked to the animals just like she did… although he didn't profess to communicate with them. "Animals know what you're saying," he said, "if nothing else, by the inflection."

* * *

The bugs are definitely getting worse. Now I huddle in my screen porch like it's my cocoon, so they won't get me. Yesterday in the Flamingo area was terrible – I bought a sticker that says, "I gave at Everglades National Park," with a mosquito with blood dripping off his proboscis, superimposed over a red cross. It now decorates this notebook.

I hung out with Rodney the photographer today. There's quite a contrast between Rodney and Mitzi. They both have their good points and their bad points, and, like all of us, have their share of contradictions and hypocrisies. I found Rodney's take on environmentalism to be closer to my own than Mitzi's.

Mitzi is hard to put a finger on exactly, since she's kind of all over the map philosophically, particularly with regard to religion and evolution. I try to be open-minded, but some of that stuff is just out there to me.

Aside from that, though, her brand of environmentalism is what I'd call Big City environmentalism. Meaning, there is a certain disconnect from the wild: The City is where we live, and the wilderness is a wonderful place to go and hang out and take pictures of the animals, and of course it would be preserved because we need that. She is very active with environmental groups in the Fort Lauderdale area, speaks out about protecting the Everglades and the wildlife that calls it home, donates both money and framed photography to non-profit groups, and even runs – with her husband – an environmental landscape-consulting firm called [xxxx xxxx], whose clients include the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line and Donald Trump. She's also a biologist who has dedicated her life to studying wildlife.

I cannot fault Mitzi for any of this; people like her are absolutely essential to saving places like the Everglades, and have been since the beginning. Everglades would not be a national park without people like her advocating for it.

My concern is that for every person with money who's passionate about saving wilderness, there's several people with money passionate about making more money, wilderness be damned. If it's a battle between those two foes, the numbers don't look good.

Rodney is different; he's Thoreau to Mitzi's Emerson. He wants to be in the thick of it, relishing the battle scars endured by his $2000 Jeep Cherokee. He knows nature is not always pretty (in contrast with Mitzi, who envisions a heaven in which animals stop eating each other), and that humans, at their best, are just part of the food chain. Not any better than any other animal (perhaps with a little salt), just part of the whole blessed system.

I love that. Of course, I see myself as a Thoreau, as well. My question is: Will all the Thoreaus in the world always have to depend on the Emersons of the world? Will we always have to ask permission to camp out in the rich man's backyard?

* * *

I was reaching a sort of critical mass. I was collecting people, animals, plants, research, and I didn't know what I was doing with any of it. I was chosen to help grade a poster project in the visitors' center, with submissions from students studying various aspects of the Everglades at Florida International University. Every poster held more information than I was prepared to take in, from CERP to mercury levels to the effects of increased phosphorus levels on the park's plant life. One woman created a children's' book about the Hole-in-the-Donut restoration project, a plan to scrape away all the non-native Brazilian pepper plants that had invaded a section of the park.

Do I have to know if the panther fence runs 100 miles, or just 50?
Do I have to know what canal will be diverted where and when for the 30-year CERP?
Do I have to know the name of the gland on the anhinga's butt that secretes the oil?

At Alan Scott's behest, I wrote an op-ed piece about CERP. He had envisioned me writing it for the Miami Herald, because he felt that even though Miami was only 50 miles away, few people there understood the complex issues of Everglades restoration. But after I labored over my research and finally put the whole thing together in a lean, mean 800-word package, I figured why not go straight to the top and e-mailed it to the New York Times.

Which naturally resulted in chaos among the Park Service bureaucrats. I kind of thought it was strange that nobody asked to read the piece first… and after they did they forbade me to send it anywhere else. Not that it was all that inflammatory — I simply surmised that the multi-billion dollar plan had quagmire written all over it, which even the Army Corps of Engineers was starting to say themselves — but the fact that "Artist-in-Residence in Everglades National Park" would be written under my name just wasn't going to fly. I was representing the park, so only officially approved messages would

work. Which, I guess, is understandable. I must have just misunderstood my directions. Alan apologized, saying that they rarely had writers in the program, and their role wasn't as clear as other artists.

The New York Times showed no interest anyway, and the earth continued to spin on its axis.

* * *

The park is vast, but in April exploration options are limited. There are barely any trails in the park, due to the fact that much of the year the saw grass prairies are underwater. There are the popular destination walks like the Anhinga trail, as well as a few lesser-known boardwalks and pinelands nature walks, or you can just take off straight through the saw grass in the crusty "marl," or mud. I tried that a few times for some kind of "more authentic" 'Glades experience, but the going was slow and the bugs were murder.

Instead, I found myself repeatedly returning to a section of the Old Ingraham Highway that was unmarked and seemingly untraveled. The road there had been built from limestone taken from a borrow pit that ran along the entire roadway; the pit was now a swampy canal running alongside the road. In one section wide swaths of water surrounded the road on both sides, and I could see far off into the distance. When clouds reflected off the water it was beautiful. I don't know why no one else came out here, but I enjoyed having it to myself.

I rode the bike down this road one afternoon, covered, as usual, in sun block and bug repellent, and I heard something slither and splosh into the water in front of me. I stopped the bike, and shivered.

It wasn't like I hadn't seen alligators before. By now I was used to them; they were everywhere on the Anhinga trail, and they never seemed to bother anybody. But now I was alone. It was different.

I rode on. A few hundred yards further down the trail, it happened again — an alligator sensed my approach and dove into the water. It's just such an unnerving sound. Again I froze, and again I shivered. An instinctual response, held over from the days when we weren't at the top of the food chain. The shivers down my spine were telling me something primal, that years of indoor living and supermarket food could no longer translate for me. Fight? Flight? I had no idea. I rode on.

I was alone and miles away from anyone, but something compelled me to continue. I decided I should be happy that this instinct still existed inside me – although deciding to be happy and actually being happy are two very different things.

I had no real destination in mind; I wanted to reach the end of the 11-mile road, but only for the sake of saying I reached the end – I don't think the end had anything worth seeing that was any different from the rest of the road. It probably didn't even have a sign.

Then I came across, and almost on top of, another alligator. A big one, just off to the side, and close enough in color to the trailside vegetation that I didn't notice him till I was much, much closer than I wanted to be. This one didn't scurry off into the water. It just stood there, completely unfazed by my presence.

I, on the other hand, was fazed. I realized I had absolutely no idea what to do if it charged. If it were a grizzly, I'd curl up into a fetal position. That sounded like an awful idea. For mountain lions, I'd been told that the correct response would be to yell and throw rocks. That seemed like a stupendously bad idea under the current scenario.

Alligators aren't much interested in humans, was all I'd been told. There hadn't been an unprovoked attack in the Park's entire history. If Mitzi were here, she would try to talk to him. What to say? Apologize for the poor treatment humans had given his kind over the years?

I really had nothing to say. I thought it was better to keep mum, and just slowly walk my bike past him, giving him plenty of space.

He just remained frozen, like alligators tend to do. I was spared.

* * *

8 Days

Wow. 8 days.
That's how long it took me to fill up
my Mead 6x9 in
Greentint paper
80 sheets
Gregg ruled
Spell-write®
steno book
That's my notebook of choice, you see
It usually takes me
a month,
more or less,
To fill one of these things.
8 days
smashes all previous records
to smithereens.
Thank you,
Everglades
I'm the real deal now.

Mead

EVER-
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#15

book no.
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A

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B

bache-lor
bal-lot
ba-nana
bank-ruptcy
ban-quet
bar-ba-rous

I GAVE AT EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK. FLA.
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6 x 9 in
x 22.8 cm
43080

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/GREGG RULED

RAY SIKORSKI

April 5, 2005 –
April 12, 2005

EVERGLADES