

A New Place to Ride?

Fat Tires in the Everglades

By ALAN FARAGO

It was a gamble what time to leave Coral Gables. I would either make the meeting on the other side of the state or waste the day missing it.

A hundred miles away in Naples, Collier County commissioners scheduled a 9:00 AM public hearing on its growth management plan. Included, an item brought forward by Miami-Dade County commissioners: whether or not to amend their comprehensive growth map to create a recreational area for off road vehicles in the middle of the Everglades in land owned mostly by Miami-Dade County but on the border with Collier County and designated within the federal boundaries of the Big Cypress National Preserve.

Driving west down Bird Road then across to SW 8th, Tamiami Trail, toward the Everglades, more rush hour traffic. Cars seep in from everywhere, every subdivision, nook and cranny: hundreds of thousands of commuters pouring from the urban fringe and ring suburbs to jobs in Miami. The engineers, consultants, road pavers, construction crews, builders; they made their money upfront.

Most live in gated communities in Coral Gables or Pinecrest. Out here as the newest suburbs push against the housing crash, the world is clearer: at the edges of failing places, it is all hit and run. All about flood control. And, now, about giving people more space in wilderness beyond the last subdivision, an hour into the Everglades, a new place to ride.

The rock mines are on the north side of Tamiami Trail; the original way across the Everglades. The mines are hidden behind fences and stands of invasive exotics. Hundreds of acres of denuded and poisoned Melaleuca. Krome Avenue. A barbecue joint. Then the tribal lands of the Miccosukee Tribe.

From the roadway, you can't see the Everglades to the north. The Glades are obscured by a rock spoil dredged from the canal running the entire length of the Trail, except for breaks where water district pumps are built up on berms; their massive motors idle and quiet. To the south, off the road, are tribal villages and indifferent tourist traps of one kind or another, selling trips to view from airboats a damaged panorama.

There were two agenda items before the "recreational" issue I was gambling my day on, as volunteer conservation chair for [Friends of the Everglades](#). The planners urging the change were from Miami-Dade that shares a border with Collier. They had to cross the Everglades, too. Maybe they spent the night at a Super 8 in Naples or spent a few unpredictable hours driving across the Everglades like me.

When the road crosses into the Big Cypress National Preserve, the landscape changes dramatically. On this cold winter morning birds were huddled in the trees by the canal or at the shoreline, protected from a sharp northeast wind in the wide open just beyond sight. White ibis and herons, anhingas, wood storks, vultures and hawks, cormorants. As I sped by I spotted a kestrel perched high on a branch intently focused on a water bird in a lower branch drying its wings. Panther crossing signs. Mercury warning signs.

There it is: an hour from Miami, the road to the north for the Everglades Jetport. In the 1960's this was the dream plan to destroy the rest of the Everglades and deliver billion dollar increments of growth through a massive new airport serving both coasts of Florida. Although the massive runway was built in the middle of the Glades, the airport was halted by controversy, including the birth of Florida's movement to save the Everglades and the intervention of senators and a US president. It is used lightly, today, as a training facility

(called the Miami-Dade Collier Training Facility) and the entire area—the Big Cypress—is subject to forays by operators of swamp buggies with elevated platforms and huge, fat tires and smaller, more nimble off road vehicles, or ATVs like little raptors.

For decades, groups like Sierra Club have fought a simmering, low intensity war with regulators to control the access and destruction of delicate, fragile resources in the 700,000 plus acre preserve. Ochopee. The post office.

The wilderness gives way to signs of civilization. A development built in the euphoria of the boom on the Turner River, arcing off towards the Ten Thousand Islands. Signs for Chokoloskee, Imokalee, and Fakahatchee Strand.

These are famous places in Florida's short history of settlement. They are ancient places too that thrived not so long ago with a diversity of wildlife nurtured by the intersection of a vast flow of pure freshwater and the ocean and bays.

It will cost taxpayers twenty billion and counting to keep its beating heart alive. And in the middle, that's where local elected officials see nothing wrong with inserting a 1680 acre park with off road vehicles; controlled, it is claimed, by a visitor's center.

Suburban Collier County collides with the Everglades, forty-five minutes drive from the heart of the Big Cypress National Preserve. Tamiami Trail, on the other side of Florida, looks like every other place in Florida nurtured by the crack cocaine of the building boom.

The development on the west coast of Florida in the past decade has been even more efficient than in Miami where an urban development boundary and more intense flood control infrastructure at least checked leapfrog sprawl to a degree. Just like Miami-Dade, in Collier County the flatness of the landscape underscores the same mistakes of automobile centric growth. Strip malls. Shopping centers. Massage Envy. Mattress Giant. Nail Palace. All the appeals to what consumers want.

Traffic, on this side, slows to the same crawl. Soon enough, right on the Trail, the largest building of all: the seat of county government. Inside, a security checkpoint, officers with guns, an x-ray machine for briefcases, plastic containers for cell phones and metal objects: everything inspected for conformity and everything ordered by the protocol of risk.

A stroke of good fortune. I arrive, at ten thirty, just as the off-road vehicle park in the Everglades is about to be heard.

A third floor hearing room, raised dais, television monitors, proscenium seating on a single level. Five commissioners seated behind their microphones and the quotidian exercise of municipal authority. Stenographer and the county attorney to one side. Planners and staff at the other side. Two lecterns for speakers, supplicants, and applicants.

On a table outside I leaf through the planning document. It is three inches thick with photos, testimonials, maps and engineering drawings; all prepared with great care and expense by consultants. Grist for the permitting mill.

A Miami Dade parks official gives a twenty minute presentation on the plan. Well rehearsed, fully briefed. Collier County planning staff has objected to the plan clearly and succinctly in its own written comments, ignored by Miami-Dade's representative.

So far, I've invested hours and days in conversations and reviewing documents. I haven't spoken to a single Collier County or Miami-Dade County Commissioner about the idiocy of putting loud off road vehicles in the middle of public lands that are designated with the highest standards of environmental protection.

The pretense of a level playing field is just so ridiculous, like an \$18 billion nuclear power plant on the edge of Biscayne National Park or an inland port and rock mines at the western edge of Palm Beach County: if a single person or even a dozen activists had five lifetimes, they still wouldn't be able to keep up.

I have three minutes to make my comments. It is eleven thirty. I won't return home until late afternoon. Three minutes.

I use two minutes to explain how forty years ago the disposition of this land embroiled the nation in one of the signature battles to protect and preserve America's fabled natural

heritage. Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who received the highest presidential medal for her work for the Everglades, founded the organization where I serve: Friends of the Everglades. I take a minute to be sincere and convincing when I state that on a scale of one to ten, that the objection to this plan is more or less, a ten.

Two decades ago, when I first began to speak in public hearings, I used to stammer with anxiety. I spent hours writing speeches that exceeded the allotted time for the public in public hearings. I rarely looked up from my pages, printed and covered in edit scribbles and notes.

By this point, having waited for hours to speak, I had already jettisoned paragraphs like bags from an over-weighted plane. I changed. Now I scribble a few phrases at the last moment. I might not even refer to my notes.

What I value as I speak—and I've become a connoisseur of this moment—is to look into the eyes of officials I am speaking to, for any sign of life. From the audience, or the view of a television camera, the local commissioners appear to be listening. That is a different matter from hearing.

In all these cases where the imperatives of the economy and of special interests conflict with the environment, at all these “hearings” where legal requirements are subject to the shadings of influence peddlers, the scripts are thoroughly written beforehand. The environmentalists ask for a stop to all damaging uses, a user asks for more. A commissioner smiles and says, ‘Don’t be greedy. This is a start.’

The county planning staff asks for protections that include “shall” in enabling language, the special interests push for “may”. Between “shall” and “may” a small fraction of birds and panthers occupy an irritating space that is nonetheless very good for the business of attorneys and lobbyists. It is a good space for consultants and engineers, and anyone banking the arbitrage between the intent and result of environmental rules and regulations. Now, as I look into the eyes of the county commissioners behind the dais, I can tell that each is as indifferent to what I am saying as someone navigating around an empty shopping cart trying to find their car in a Walmart parking lot.

The first step toward putting an off-road vehicle park in the middle of the Everglades passes by a vote of 4-0.

With the two other environmentalists in the audience, I adjourn for lunch in a strip mall across Tamiami Trail. There is no accommodation for pedestrians. Crossing eight lanes of traffic by foot makes you alert as a panther. As we step over low shrubs and pine bark chips in the median, I remark that this protected area is our own wildlife corridor.

The crab cakes covered in melted cheese and French fries taste like punishment. I clean my plate.

I'm halfway back across the Everglades before I realize it is so hot in the car because the temperature thermostat is turned up to 76 degrees. The birds by the canal haven't moved, dipping in the water, moving their necks like rubber bands or still and immobile as a painting.

Finally, the Christian broadcast channels—everywhere on the dial on the west coast of Florida—blessedly fade to static. There is a place where reception of public radio from the west coast of Florida ends and from the east coast, begins.

A moment of quiet. It is right about at the Everglades Jetport. I can't imagine truckloads of all terrain vehicles being hauled into this wilderness for riders to race their engines and such pleasures. Let them have at it at the edges of suburbia, with their gear and fat tires and engines or in the urban acres blasted by foreclosures and real estate pipe dreams and Glen Gary Glen Ross times 10,000.

However wrecked Florida is, however the most remote parts of the state are damaged by our persistent, invisible fingerprints: there are places we honor by shielding them, imperfectly, from our mudding, rutting, insistent desires.

Alan Farago, conservation chair of [Friends of the Everglades](#), lives in south Florida. He can be reached at: afarago@bellsouth.net

