

RESTORATION RALLY CRY FOR THE BIG CYPRESS SWAMP

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The Big Cypress Swamp of Southwest Florida has historically been perceived as a lower urgency subarea of the Greater Everglades Restoration effort. Factors contributing to this perception include its geographic separation from the highly-managed main Everglades flow way, its mosaic of smaller natural flow ways, an assumption that land conservation alone was enough to protect the area, and the widely held misconception that its hydrology has been less impacted than within the footprint of the Central and South Florida Project to the east.

A more accurate assessment reveals an area where conservation alone has fallen short of achieving and sustaining the ecological health of the swamp ecosystem. Instead, a network of legacy and now aging drainage infrastructure has caused widespread disruption of the swamp's characteristic sheet flow regime. Major impacts include severed inflows, interrupted overland flows, shallower surface water depths, seasonally shortened hydroperiods, degradation of wetland habitat, increased exposure to exotic biota, decreased freshwater contributions to estuaries in downstream Everglades National Park and Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Refuge, increased vulnerability to saltwater intrusion, and rising frequency and intensity of ecosystem-damaging and financially costly wildfires.

Restoring hydrologic regimes represents the next vital stewardship step for the Big Cypress Swamp. An overarching plan is needed to bring the area's legacy drainage infrastructure up-to-date with modern engineering and water conservation principles, to revitalize a hydrologic regime which achieves and sustains the swamp's ecological health, to unite resident watershed stewards under a common restoration umbrella, and to assimilate this renewed vision into Greater Everglades Restoration planning circles. Left unchecked, the current status quo will continue to imperil the swamp, increase its vulnerability to new threats and leave potential corrective actions unfulfilled.

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