

Redemption & the River of Grass

TWENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, a bankrupt commercial photographer from California did what so many other down-on-their-luck Americans have done when they needed to make a fresh start. He packed all his stuff into a truck, loaded up his family, and drove down to Florida.

Clyde Butcher had earned his living mass-producing color lithographs of natural scenes for American living rooms. Sold through J.C. Penney, Sears, and other department store chains whose sales records told him what photos would sell—seagulls yes, mountains no—some of Butcher's images would sell 250,000 times over. But the man so good at making beautiful pictures was not so at finances. Things as mundane as accounts receivable brought him down, even as his photographs sold by the thousands.¹

A cross-country road trip with their nine-year-old daughter and seven-year-old son was not a bad thing for Clyde and Niki Butcher. They were hippyish nature lovers who had lived in a tent trailer in California's state parks when the kids were babies, aboard a twenty-six-foot sailboat when the children were a little older and Butcher was making money. The couple wanted to find a place where they could sail with their son and daughter, and where Butcher could take the sorts of sun-

Redemption and the River of Grass

set-and-seagull shots that make Americans reach for their wallets. South Florida had the seagulls and the sunsets. And it was a sailor's paradise, with quiet bays and gentle waters compared to California's violent waves.²

The Butcher family's early years in Florida were not smooth sailing. As everyone who runs to Florida figures out eventually, you cannot leave your troubles at the state line. When they first arrived, in 1980, creditors from California tracked them to Fort Lauderdale. Repo men hauled off their car, van, and motor home.

But over time, with the help of a friend, they started selling Butcher's photographs once again. Back then, his photos were known for little clocks mounted in the corners. He and Niki cranked them out in a rented garage in Lauderdale. Eventually, the Butchers turned to the art-show circuit, selling the clock pictures at weekend festivals up and down the eastern United States. The family began to thrive again. They settled in Fort Myers, on Florida's southwest coast.

Butcher did not get much satisfaction from his work. He knew his pictures were sappy and commercial. He also was not enamored with Florida—except, that is, for the sailing. “Whatever there once was of value,” he used to say, “had been turned by the plow or paved over.”³

But Butcher was not a big complainer. He and Niki had everything they moved to the Sunshine State for: the sunset-that-sells scenery, the sailing, the closeness (sometimes too much) with children Jackie and Ted, now teenagers.

They would have all that until Father's Day in 1986, also Clyde and Niki's twenty-third wedding anniversary. The knock on their door came at midnight. Their son, the sweet and introspective Ted, was dead at seventeen. He had been killed in a car crash, by a drunk driver.

The story of Florida's vanishing water is not just one of senseless waste. It is also a story of redemption. Redemption can take many forms. For some, it is as easy as a baptism in the Suwannee River, an instant washing away of sins. For others, it is a lifelong struggle. Some find redemption in a child, others in a church. Still others find it in nature.

Clyde Butcher found it in the Florida Everglades.

In the weeks following Ted's death, Butcher began to wander Big Cypress National Preserve, taking solace in its beauty and solitude. He found a Florida he never knew existed: waves of marsh grass as far as he

M I R A G E

could see; cypress stands as stately as California's Avenue of the Giants; the huge, primeval tree islands and the tiny, delicate orchids; all under a sky as wide as an African savannah.

After enduring funerals for first his son and then his father just two weeks later, Butcher gathered up his life's work—color negatives and prints worth more than \$100,000—and tossed them. He bought an eight-by-ten-inch box camera that he could not afford. And he started shooting the Big Cypress in black and white. It was the way he used to shoot California's mountains when he was young, before J.C. Penney told him that mountains do not sell.

Butcher's new, oversized photos of Florida were haunting and primal, not a seagull or a sunset in sight. The first time he showed them in public, at an art festival near Orlando, people swarmed his booth. "Is this Africa?" they would ask. "Is this the Amazon?" And he would answer, "No, it's just out in the Everglades."

"People had never seen pictures that allowed them to feel the Everglades," Butcher says. And the pictures sold. Better than his sappy, clock-affixed pictures ever had.

Today, Butcher is one of the best-known photographers in the United States. His work hangs in the homes of movie stars and U.S. senators. When *Popular Photography* recently asked, "Who is the next Ansel Adams?" the magazine named Butcher one of the nation's four "keepers of the large-format flame."⁴ His business, now run by his daughter Jackie, has grown as large as his photos, as big as his three-hundred-pound frame.

But for Butcher, photography is no longer business. As he trudged deeper and deeper into the Everglades, he came to see that the swamp was dying—a victim, like his son, of human carelessness. In this case, Butcher might be able to do something about it.

In the 1870s, landscape artist Thomas Moran's paintings of Yellowstone cinched the campaign to make it a national park. In 1938, Ansel Adams's book of wilderness photographs, *Sierra Nevada: The John Muir Trail*, helped convince Franklin Roosevelt's administration that national parks should support wilderness, not resorts.⁵

Butcher's Everglades photos became popular just as the notion of "Save Our Everglades," Governor Graham's restoration project, was taking hold in Tallahassee and Washington, D.C. Butcher became a champion of Everglades restoration, a particularly effective one because he

Redemption and the River of Grass



The Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, the last northernmost portion of the unique Everglades, was named for the crusading biologist who convinced Florida’s politicians that the great swamp could be restored. (Photograph courtesy of Clyde Butcher.)

could show someone who would never step foot in the Glades why they were worth saving.

As he sold thousands of prints, Butcher also gave his photos away to any environmental organization or government agency that needed them for education or promotion. His ancient-looking forests, rivers, and prairies helped change the way Americans saw the Everglades. The photos were too beautiful to reveal the destruction of the ecosystem—even his photos of cattails, which signal pollution. But they made people fall in love with a swamp that previous generations had disdained and destroyed.

It was, for Butcher, redemption. “Before the death of our son, the images were products,” he says. “After Ted’s death, they became art that could educate people about the loss of the world around them. When something like that happens, you can either become positive or negative.

“If you become negative, you’ve wasted a soul.”

Today in the Everglades, in the ambitious experiment to try to undo 150 years of draining, channeling, polluting, and other abuse, the Florida and

M I R A G E

U.S. governments are flooding former cattle lands, blowing up dams, and building huge reservoirs, all part of the largest public-works project in the history of the world. The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan was, at last count, slated to cost \$10.5 billion and to take at least thirty-five years.

Fixing the Everglades was a chance for redemption. It was a chance for South Florida's local government officials to show they could stand up to political pressure and stick to the development maps they had drawn. It was a chance for Jeb Bush to prove his intentions to protect Florida's environment were equal to those to find water for growth. It was a chance for the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to demonstrate the agency that had done so much harm to America's waterways was capable of a turnaround: "We are putting the best and the brightest minds and everything we've got into getting this right," said Colonel Robert Carpenter, Corps commander in Florida.⁶

In fact, restoring the Florida Everglades was a chance at redemption for all America. If the country could fix its worst water screwup in the eastern United States, it could fix the others, too. If Florida could get thousands of acres of wetlands back, Louisiana could get thousands of acres of wetlands back. If parts of the Everglades could look like they did a century ago, so could parts of the Chesapeake Bay. Some Everglades scientists had headed to the great Pantanal, ten times bigger than the Glades at 36.5 million acres, to help people in Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil avoid America's ecological mistakes.

If, with a combination of conservation and sound water-supply projects, South Florida could come up with its own water for growth, people in North Florida could put up their shotguns. Great Lakes environmentalists could take down those "back off suckers" billboards. In fact, if the Corps' engineers could turn the C-38 canal back into the meandering Kissimmee River, who is to say that engineers cannot someday restore the Colorado River to its free-flowing state, a dream of the board of the Sierra Club?

Those, of course, are a lot of "ifs." At this writing, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, signed into law with so much bipartisan good will and hoopla on the very same day in 2000 that the U.S. Supreme Court was deciding *Bush v. Gore*, seemed to be stuck in the muck.

One problem was that Congress had not anted up its half of the

Redemption and the River of Grass

restoration money. Congress was supposed to fund the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan regularly in its biennial Water Resources Development Act. But the nation's water bill had not passed for six years, from 2000 to 2006. Versions of the WRDA bill passed the House and Senate in fall 2006, and it was pending in conference committees as this book went to press. Water projects across the country sank as lawmakers argued for several years over Army Corps reform. And then, they were presented a far more intractable problem: how to restore coastal Louisiana and Mississippi in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

But the biggest threat to Everglades restoration was the one that led to the marsh's demise in the first place: the force of growth and development as that net total 1,060 people continued to move to Florida every single day. In South Florida, the force was so powerful that acreage targeted for environmental restoration was being bought up and paved over faster than the state could bid on it.

By the end of 2005, the state of Florida had purchased half the lands required for restoring the Everglades, about 200,000 acres. Development and price pressures were rapidly putting the other 200,000 out of reach. Scientists watched as lands identified for Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan projects turned to rooftops instead: Two hundred acres for a water-quality project in the Biscayne Bay Coastal Wetlands became suburban housing. Nearly two thousand acres for a wetland restoration project near the Indian River Lagoon became ranchettes.⁷

Meanwhile, local government officials in South Florida were back to pushing their urban growth boundaries on behalf of the powerful homebuilding industry. In one of numerous examples, Miami-Dade County asked state regulators to consider more than a dozen exceptions to allow the spread of suburbs outside its development line, including a 6,000-home development in a low-lying area between Biscayne and Everglades national parks. This is where the Army Corps gave a company called Atlantic Civil a permit to fill more than 500 acres of wetlands for agriculture. Three years later, Atlantic Civil instead filed plans for a brand-new town of 18,000 residents, including the 6,000 homes to be built by Lennar Corporation, one of the largest public companies in Florida.

It is more than a tad hypocritical, of course, to ask taxpayers spread across the nation for money to restore the Everglades when the local governments who live next door are not doing their part to protect the marsh. It is sort of like Florida demanding Georgia reduce its water with-

M I R A G E

drawals to set aside more of the Chattahoochee for natural systems downstream: Florida slurps up 8.1 billion gallons of water a day to Georgia's 6.5 billion.⁸

With the blessings of Governor Bush, state regulators advised against every one of Miami-Dade's proposed exceptions, saying, in part, that the county did not have enough water to supply the new growth. It was the first sign that Florida's new water law was having an intended effect, linking development to the availability of water.

That was just one in an unusual stretch of triumphs for Florida's environmental defenders. In late 2005, a federal judge halted the Army Corps' permit that gave the St. Joe Company developing Florida's panhandle broad latitude to wipe out 2,000 acres of wetlands. It was the third time in a year that federal judges overturned permits to destroy Florida wetlands for development and mining.⁹

Then the Army Corps—despite political pressure from U.S. Senator Bill Nelson, a Florida Democrat, and former U.S. representative Porter Goss of Sanibel, a Republican who later led the CIA—rejected a controversial golf course development near the Everglades that would have destroyed thousands of acres of wetlands. The 800-home Mirasol development in southwest Florida had won approval from local officials, state environmental regulators, and the South Florida Water Management District. Mirasol's houses and two eighteen-hole golf courses would have been built on 1,766 acres near Bonita Springs, 1,500 acres of which were wetlands. Mirasol would have wiped out 587 of those acres. Worse, a three-mile-long ditch to funnel storm water around its houses would have drained an additional 2,000 acres nearby, the EPA reported.¹⁰

Nathaniel Reed was the grand guard of Florida's environmental movement since the death of Marjory Stoneman Douglas in 1998 at age 108. Reed, former governor Kirk's dollar-a-year environmental adviser, had battled with the Army Corps for half his life. Yet he lauded Colonel Carpenter for bringing "vigor" to the Florida Corps, as well as "passionate, young, environmental-minded" engineers and scientists who were working to restore the Everglades.¹¹

The long century of abuses that destroyed Florida's Everglades, and the complicated efforts to restore the marsh, had short, simple lessons. Water is best stored in its natural systems: wetlands, streams, and rivers. Huge waterworks are not only the most expensive and environmentally

Redemption and the River of Grass

damaging solutions to water woes but they seem to cause more problems than they solve. Finally, it is easier and cheaper to prevent ecological damage than to reverse it.

Look at the Kissimmee River. Taxpayers spent \$35 million to turn the river into a canal, hauling in 3 million truckloads of dirt and building five dams. Taxpayers now are spending more than ten times that, \$500 million, to restore the Kissimmee.

One lesson Florida has not learned, and maybe it never will, is that increased growth and economic prosperity do not have to equal increased water consumption. Water use in the United States stopped rising in the 1980s, yet population as well as gross domestic product have grown steadily ever since.¹² Think tanks such as the Rocky Mountain Institute are brainstorming a “soft path” for water that emphasizes greater efficiency, more precise management systems to avoid waste, and better matching of water sources to their uses. For example, supplying drinking-quality water for consuming and cooking but not for irrigation or toilet flushing. Half of all water treated to meet federal EPA standards for drinking goes down the toilet.¹³

Since 1990, water use in Southern California has dropped by 16 percent, even as the population has increased by nearly the same figure. In Seattle, total water use has remained constant since 1975, even though population has increased by 30 percent.¹⁴

Water use in the greater Boston area hit a fifty-year low in 2004, following an aggressive conservation program begun in the late 1980s that has indefinitely postponed construction of a diversion from the Connecticut River and saved residents more than \$500 million in capital expenditures alone.¹⁵

“The fastest, cheapest, and most environmentally acceptable way to address water conflicts will in most cases not be an increase in supply, but improvements in efficiency to reduce waste and increase water supply reliability,” says Peter Gleick. “Realizing these savings will be faster, cheaper and more politically acceptable than any new supply option proposed, including new dams, desalination plants or long-distance aqueducts.”¹⁶

In October 2005, six weeks after Hurricane Katrina plowed into Louisiana and Mississippi and drowned more than one thousand souls, a hurricane called Wilma whirled into South Florida. Unlike the people of New Orleans and their neighbors, the vast majority of Florida’s subur-

M I R A G E

banites were spared calamity. A record 6 million people lost power, but most had a roof over their heads, running water, even open grocery stores. You would not know it, though, from the ensuing pandemonium. Despite all the standard warnings to gas up the car and have three days' water and groceries on hand, many South Floridians, just twenty-four hours after the storm, queued up in long lines to wait for water and ice. They idled at gas stations for hours to fill up their SUVs. "I think they've forgotten about us," cried a woman who waited two hours in suburban Kendall to buy gas for her generators that powered her two refrigerators.¹⁷

"We need food! We need water! We need checks!" said another woman two days after the storm hit, as she waited in line for three hours at Salvation Army to eat a lukewarm chicken breast. Her home, she said, had not been damaged.¹⁸

TV reporters interviewed middle-class guys standing in long lines for free water in a Wal-Mart parking lot, even though gallons were stocked and on sale in the store. Cameras captured others munching Burger King as they waited in line for free food. Florida, as seemed more and more common, became a punch line for the late-night television comedians, a punching bag for the daytime talk-radio conservatives.

Even the liberals had to nod their heads when Governor Bush observed: "People had ample time to prepare, and it isn't that hard to get 72 hours of food and water, to do the simple things that we ask people to do."¹⁹

Waiting by their cars in a Miami gas station line, a group of Haitian men chatted in Creole about how losing power would not have crippled them in Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. "We've been Americanized too much," said Jaques Edward. "If we were living like Haitians, we wouldn't be in trouble."²⁰

Indeed, these helpless, impatient Floridians had nothing in common anymore with their rugged predecessors who homesteaded the state a century and a half before. Those scrappy settlers faced down alligators, swarming clouds of mosquitoes, and worse as they worked under the Florida sun to tame a swampy paradise in the days before air-conditioning.

Floridians, it turns out, endangered more than the panthers and the plume birds when they filled in wetlands, paved over swamplands, drained ponds and lakes, bulldozed wet jungles, and tapped out ground-

Redemption and the River of Grass

water. They did not just get rid of the baby-fish nurseries and the bird rookeries. They did not only destroy their best tools for flood control and erosion. They did not simply wipe out their drinking-water supply.

Draining the water drained Florida's cultural identity and, it is no exaggeration to say, the spirit of its people.

Like many other Americans, most Floridians once had a daily connection with the water and the land even if they worked desk jobs. Driving across town, they would see a shimmering lake or the sea, tall pines and mossy oaks, a swooping hawk, a grassy marsh or two. By the twenty-first century, though, local government officials in most coastal counties had allowed so many tall condominiums on the beaches it was hard to remember Florida was a peninsula. Home builders had flattened so many native trees and built so many soulless subdivisions that pulling off Interstate 75 in Tampa felt no different from pulling off in Macon, Chattanooga, or Lexington.

Even the islands did not feel like islands. If you were blindfolded and driven to the middle of Marco Island, just a block from the breathtaking Gulf of Mexico, when you opened your eyes you'd have no clue you were anywhere near the sea. You'd see a tall wall of hotels and condos; that's all.

President Theodore Roosevelt always feared America's destruction of its natural places would bring about a national malaise. He believed, like Frederick Jackson Turner, that Americans' proximity to wilderness built a national character of ruggedness, resilience, and ingenuity.²¹ His study of U.S. history, along with his personal experiences hunting, fishing, and camping, convinced him that living with nature promoted "that vigorous manliness for the lack of which in a nation, as in an individual, the possession of no other qualities can possibly atone."²²

Roosevelt saw the importance of Americans keeping close to their environment as no less than a matter of national security. The modern American, he wrote in 1899, was in real danger of becoming an "over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues."²³

In his book *Last Child in the Woods*, journalist and child advocate Richard Louv weaves scientific research with the words of children to show how the absence of nature is aggravating some of the most disturbing childhood trends: the rise in obesity, attention-deficit disorders, and depression. Louv came up with the phrase "nature-deficit disorder" to



Water, water everywhere but not a drop to drink. Miami is surrounded by water but faces freshwater shortages due to overpumping of groundwater and population growth. (Photograph by Art Seitz/Silver Image.)



Fakahatchee Strand, adjacent to Big Cypress National Preserve, was plotted for a subdivision before the state and federal governments purchased it in the 1970s. (Photograph courtesy of Clyde Butcher.)

Redemption and the River of Grass

describe “the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.” In just one of hundreds of examples, Louv cites new research that suggests exposure to nature may reduce the symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and that it can improve all children’s cognitive abilities and resistance to negative stress and depression.²⁴

Such results make sense to anyone who has seen how an hour hunting shark’s teeth in a creek can calm, and conk out, a nap-fighting four-year-old. But too many kids have been cut off from creeks, wetlands, and rivers (not to mention treehouses and vegetable gardens, if they live in one of the many deed-restricted communities that prohibit those so-called eyesores). In Miami, a metro area surrounded by water, kids are so removed from nature that the Miami River Commission takes school-children on field trips to the waterway that they would never otherwise see, even though it runs through the heart of their city. For adults there, just getting to work on the massive concrete highway mazes can be so stressful and unsightly, even on days when everything is running as it should, it is no wonder the two-fridge soccer mom told a reporter that Hurricane Wilma’s power outage had caused her to have a panic attack.²⁵

From coast to coast, Americans have lost touch with their water. In California, the San Joaquin River no longer makes it to San Francisco Bay. In Florida, children no longer swim in Crystal Springs because of a water-bottling operation. This loss has consequences far beyond stress or aesthetics. It is a matter, as Theodore Roosevelt foretold, of our national heartiness, our fitness and vitality as a society. In the wake of a national disaster or a terrorist attack, who would you rather be with? The guy in the Wal-Mart water line? Or the Girl Scout who, having proved her knowledge of where local streams drain as well as how wastewater is treated, had earned her Water Drop Patch?²⁶

Ultimately, the choices we make about water will help determine how we fare as states, as a nation, as humans.

We can go on wasting copious amounts of water, using treated drinking water to quench suburban lawns, or we can appreciate its worth. We can keep giving water away, for free, to anyone with a business plan, or put a price on it to make sure water is protected and valued.

We can continue to bend wetlands and growth laws, or we can demand their consistent enforcement. We can spend more tax dollars on

M I R A G E

enormous water-diversion and other technological schemes that may be risky, or we can spend them on water-conservation, land-preservation, and restoration projects.

We can watch our children repeat the mistakes of America's water history: in the East, draining water and giving it away to all comers; in the West, damming it up and doling it out until there is not enough for people or nature.

Or we can teach them how lucky they are to have water—for drinking, for bathing, or simply for the sheer joy of plunging into an icy, clear-blue spring on a hot summer day.