

off the leaves. "You come out here and can't help but feel spiritual." It's a point of view echoed throughout the 'glades, a wilderness that still offers plenty of room for rugged introspection. "The Everglades is for people who want to be with themselves," explains national park ranger Tony Terry as he surveys Flamingo station, the far-flung ranger outpost where he has lived and worked for 16 years. "I love it here."

this year marks the 30th anniversary of the Everglades as a World Heritage Site. And though the area retains its outdoorsy charisma, it hasn't always been well treated by human hands. In the early days of the 20th century, overzealous plume hunters emptied avian rookeries for the sake of ladies' hats. In the 1920s, the construction of the Tamiami Trail dammed the natural flow of water that slowly rippled from the southern lip of Lake Okeechobee all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, nourishing more than a half-dozen ecosystems that served as home to creatures both perilous (black bear) and placid (manatees). In the past half-century, thousands of acres of industrial agriculture — sugar and citrus — have also had their impact, as have countless water

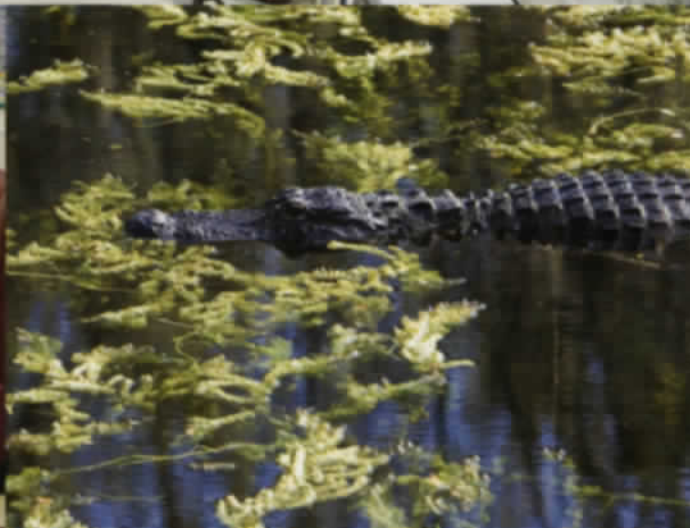
skyway that would allow for the free flow of water underneath. (The project is currently in need of funding.) In a separate action last summer, Gov. Charlie Crist announced a proposed \$1.8 billion buyout of nearly 200,000 acres of farmland belonging to the United States Sugar Corporation for the purpose of water management. The land, most of which lies south of Lake Okeechobee, is key to restoring the Everglades' historic flow.

But even if the buyout is approved (a process that will likely take years), it will not be a matter of just turning on the tap. Towns like Clewiston and Belle Glade stand in the way, as do the Seminole lands at Big Cypress. Any water traveling south will have to be regulated by a network of canals and locks. "This would be a managed flow system," says Dan Kimball, a hydrologist who has served as the superintendent of Everglades National Park for more than four years. "It has to be. Fifty percent of the Everglades have been paved over." The idea, however, is to re-create some semblance of the old north-to-south flow. And for the Everglades' more pristine areas to the south, which includes the national park, this is darn good news. Water is key to the survival of the hammocks, sloughs and rivers that feed and shelter the area's wildlife. And that wildlife is plentiful.

it's dawn and I'm at the national park's ranger station in Everglades City, pushing my kayak into the glassy water of Chokoloskee Bay. I'm headed into the Ten Thousand Islands to paddle around the patchwork of uninhabited mangrove clusters that make up Florida's southernmost fringe. Within 30 seconds, I've been treated to the sight of an alligator gliding nonchalantly across the bay. Within an hour, I've seen a manatee bobbing about one of the channels. By the end of the day, I've had a pair of bottlenose dolphins swim playfully within arm's reach of my kayak. In between, there's the spectacle of a roseate spoonbill wading around in search of breakfast and an aninga drying its wings. This is what's most awe-inspiring about the Everglades: Despite man's best efforts to drain the place and turn it into something

it's not, it has stubbornly held on. "The Everglades is resilient," says Kimball. "It's imperiled, but resilient."

The Everglades is a breathtaking blend of the resplendent and the preposterous. On the same stretch of road (Tamiami Trail), you'll find Clyde Butcher's photographic art gallery as well as Skunk Ape Research Headquarters, a stand devoted to cultivating the legend of Florida's very own Big Foot. One minute you can gaze upon photographs of Everglades landscapes. The next, you can stock up on shot glasses featuring an animal that — curiously — only the shop owner has ever seen. (The one available photo of the Skunk Ape reveals a creature that looks suspiciously like a guy in a Chewbacca outfit jogging through a marsh.)



PHOTOGRAPHY: JOE PATRONITTE, LARRY NIGUNSWANKEE (OPPOSITE)