

Rochester Institute of Technology

## RIT Digital Institutional Repository

---

Theses

---

4-25-2024

### Among Cypress and Sawgrass

Chandler Michael Culotta  
cmc7222@rit.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.rit.edu/theses>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Culotta, Chandler Michael, "Among Cypress and Sawgrass" (2024). Thesis. Rochester Institute of Technology. Accessed from

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the RIT Libraries. For more information, please contact [repository@rit.edu](mailto:repository@rit.edu).

# RIT

## **Among Cypress and Sawgrass**

by

**Chandler Michael Culotta**

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Art in Photography and Related Media

School of Photographic Arts and Sciences

College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology

Rochester, NY

April 25, 2024

## Committee Approval

---

**Joshua Thorson**

**4/25/2024**

Director

MFA Photography and Related Media

---

**Juan Orrantia**

**4/25/2024**

Assistant Professor

MFA Photography and Related Media

---

**Gregory Halpen**

**4/25/2024**

Professor

MFA Photography and Related Media

Copyright 2024

By

Chandler Michael Culotta

All rights reserved

## **Abstract**

*Among Cypress and Sawgrass* is a photographic series that explores the region I have come to call home, the Florida Everglades. This series explores the vast diversity of species and the ecosystem as a whole, but also speaks to the threats it has faced and continues to face that could devastate it forever. The series brings attention to the importance of this ecosystem, vocalizing support for its preservation, something we often depict in a phrase regarding the entire state; “Keep Florida Wild”.

The series brings together photographs of the natural world and photographs of the ways humankind has influenced and altered this landscape. An image of a wood stork sits idly in the rain as a neighboring image depicts the burning of a sugar cane field. An alligator floating peacefully in the reflected clouds on the water's surface is placed next to a chair abandoned in the wetlands, with its owners nowhere to be found. Photographs such as these are placed on top of a life sized mural of a cypress dome, immersing the viewer into the Everglades and creating an experience of being within this wetland biome, while also showing the disruptions and threats this ecosystem faces.



Figure 1: *Untitled*, 2022

In the summer of 2022, I ventured deep into a wild and aquatic landscape, with waters nearly as high as my waist with a close friend (fig. 1). Within this landscape, the sounds of birds, the wind, and water splashing as animals moved both under and above its surface surrounded us. We found ourselves in a peaceful yet exciting and mysterious world, one that we both have been drawn to for its natural beauty. With each step, we discovered new sights, sounds, and smells, aiming our cameras at different angles and details within the scene. As night fell, the environment began to change, as nocturnal creatures began to emerge. The reflective eyes of ten-to-twelve-foot reptiles shone brightly from the light of our flashlights and headlamps. Distant calls and sounds echoed through the night as unseen animals moved about. We became engulfed by the landscape, experiencing the often-hidden world of one of the most unique regions in the United States.

In the most southeastern area of the United States there lies a region teeming with life, natural beauty, and mystery. This region is unique for its wide fields of flooded sawgrass prairies

that are dotted with pockets of cypress domes, tropical hardwood hammocks, and dry pineland forests. Within these ecosystems, a multitude of species of flora and fauna are found scattered and mixed throughout. My photographic series, *Among Cypress and Sawgrass*, explores this region, a region I am proud to call home: the Florida Everglades. This series explores the vast diversity of species and the ecosystem as a whole, but also speaks to the threats it has faced and continues to face that could devastate it forever. The series brings attention to the importance of this ecosystem, vocalizing support for its preservation, something we often depict in a phrase regarding the entire state: “Keep Florida Wild”.

This series is created to exemplify two differing perspectives, the natural and the intrusions by humans. By capturing the natural wonders of this environment, I strive to envision a world where this environment has remained untouched and unharmed. I photograph the natural residents of the Everglades, the ones who have been here longer than any human. I seek out fine details within the landscape; reflections on water, the aquatic vegetation beneath the surface, the posture a bird holds when hunting, and the union of different plant species as vines wrap around trees and ferns grow from old trunks.

These natural elements, of flora and fauna, come together to create an interconnectedness in the environment, showing the ways that it combines to create this beautiful oasis. The diversity of the wildlife, with the many forms and sounds within it, mix together with the wide range of flora that dots the wetlands, all meeting together to create the landscape. However, the intrusions of humans break-up this cohesion, dismantling the natural order of the environment.

The Everglades is a vast expanse of freshwater marshlands found in the Southern tip of Florida. These marshes connect and link to create a sheet flow of water that moves south from Lake Okeechobee across the entire southern tip of the state, forming what environmentalist and

champion of the Everglades Marjory Stoneman Douglas called the “River of Grass”. This so-called river produces the lifeblood of the entire region, hydrating the mix of marl prairies, sawgrass marshes, tropical hammocks, swamps of cypress, pinelands, sloughs, and lakes that produce a highly diverse confection of wildlife and plant-life alike.<sup>1</sup> These wetlands have come to be the living grounds of several unique species, some of which are only found within this region.

Within the animal kingdom, one of these species is the rare and highly endangered Florida panther. With an estimated population of just over 200 left in the wild, they are the most endangered species in all of Florida, and one of the most endangered in the United States.<sup>2</sup> These graceful felines once prowled this land in great numbers, reigning as an apex predator of the swamps. Now their existence is like ghost stories and fables, rarely seen and elusive. Another such spirit of the Everglades is the ghost orchid, a brilliant white flower that only blooms in June and July. These flowers have now become hidden gems of the wetlands, as they have slowly disappeared from the thicker forested areas they are usually found. The Bachman’s warbler once visited the Everglades on its annual migrations, calling this region home in the winter months. However, as time went on, the songbird’s numbers began to dwindle and become more and more rare. The warbler was last seen in Florida in 1977. On October 16th, 2023, the Bachman’s warbler was declared extinct. What all these species share is the threat that has dwindled their numbers: humankind.

Poaching of species for their skins and feathers pushed many species to near extinction. Global climate change has led to rising sea levels that cause coastlines to slowly disappear.

---

<sup>1</sup> Jack E. Davis, *An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century*. (Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009), 27.

<sup>2</sup> *Path of the Panther*, directed by Eric Bendick (Grizzly Creek Films, 2022), <https://www.disneyplus.com/video/8234adba-c8b2-4ab4-a135-6822edc29033?distributionPartner=google>

Invasive species, such as the Burmese python, have found their way into the swamps, pets whose owners no longer wanted them, with sightings dating back as far as 1979. These owners release their pets into the Everglades, casting them out into an unknown world. This careless act creates a disruption in the natural food chain, causing these invasive species to multiply and ravage the natural species. This issue was increased further after Hurricane Andrew ripped apart a python breeding facility in 1992, releasing possibly hundreds of these snakes into the wild.<sup>3</sup> Due to the rise of these destructive species, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission passed new laws and regulations on ownership of these non-native species in hopes of reducing any further rises in invasive species populations.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 2: *A Conversation With A Wood Stork*, 2022

---

<sup>3</sup> Ethan Freedman, “Long-Held Myth Says Hurricane Andrew Sparked Florida’s Burmese Python Problem. Is It True,” *LiveScience*, July 31, 2023, <https://www.livescience.com/animals/snakes/long-held-myth-says-hurricane-andrew-sparked-floridas-burmese-python-problem-is-it-true>.

<sup>4</sup> “Regulations for Nonnative, Conditional, and Prohibited Species,” Florida Fish And Wildlife Conservation Commission, accessed April 28, 2024, <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/regulations/>.

On December 26th, 2022 at exactly 5:07 in the afternoon, I found myself locked in the gaze of one of the most wondrous creatures of the Everglades: the Wood Stork (fig. 2). These endangered birds have become one of the most protected species in the Everglades outside of the Florida Panther, with their nesting areas being completely blocked from the public. This stork, sitting casually on the side of a dirt road deep in the Big Cypress National Preserve, stood tall and strong in the rainstorm passing overhead. At this moment, I found myself caught and frozen in awe at its presence. I took this photograph while standing only just ten-feet from the avian, capturing the emotions and energy of the moment. As it turned its head to me, I felt as if we were in a conversation. Through its eyes I felt as if I could understand generations of struggle and survival, from the days that it was hunted for its plumage, hearing its desire to remain in our world and seeing its determination to not be stomped like ashes in a fire.

Before the “conquest” of the Everglades began, the region was only populated by the native wildlife and the residing Seminole tribes of Florida. This region holds some of the first evidence of organized civilizations in the entire country, with the signs of ancient humans living among the wetlands in what little dryland they could find. These early groups of humans lived in harmony with the landscape, respecting it for what it provided and not feeling the need to control and dominate it. It was not until the 19th century that the effects of colonization began to spread to this landscape.

As colonialists encroached further and further south into what is now the state of Florida, they found it difficult to traverse the landscape. Efforts were soon made to drain the Everglades, drastically reducing the flow of water so that land could be developed for human use. Napoleon Bonaparte Broward, Florida’s 19th governor, was quoted as saying “drain that abominable pestilence-ridden swamp” when he sought for a future in South Florida as an “Empire of the

Everglades”.<sup>5</sup> Much of this focus on “taming” this landscape came from the desire to use it for agriculture. Vast areas of wilderness were cleared and terraformed to create the largest production of sugarcane in the United States, one which remains to this day, albeit at a smaller scale than it once was. Massive amounts of habitat destruction would lead to the decline of many species’ populations.



Figure 3: *Once Grass, Now Gravel*, 2024

To speak on the intrusion of humans, I add in photographs of signs of human interaction. These photographs disrupt the viewer’s experience of seeing the environment, much like how these interactions have disrupted the natural world. The towering crane of a mine (fig. 3) looms over the landscape and is photographed from the State federal preserve that it borders; a reserve that has become protected land for its denizens of gopher tortoises, a protected species by law in Florida. These mines wipe out large amounts of forests, destroying natural habitats and turning the lush woods into barren flatlands, dotted with machinery and piles of rock. These machines

---

<sup>5</sup> W. Hodding Carter, *Stolen Water: Saving the Everglades from Its Friends, Foes, and Florida*. (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 78.

replace the natural inhabitants of the ecosystem, now towering over the landscape, unlike the animals in other photographs. These mines clear out these forests for a very simple resource, gravel. This industry also develops over the planned Florida Wildlife Corridor, causing many endangered species, such as the Florida panther, to not be able to move and traverse across the landscape. Through this development, roads are built through vital habitats causing a rise in vehicle strikes that threaten the population numbers of endangered species.<sup>6</sup>



Figure 4: *Untitled*, 2023

My images show a natural world and a world altered from the intervention of humans. In some images, the Everglades is displayed as wild and untouched, with no evidence of humankind in the photographs. In others, the photograph features the scars created by humans. Highways carve lines and borders into the grasslands and swamps, creating barriers between the natural and man-made. And in other photographs, the signs of failed civilization can be seen, where the

---

<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Tobias, "Preserve or Develop? The Race against Time to Protect Florida's Wildlife Corridor," *Florida Trident*, May 6, 2024, <https://floridatrident.org/preserve-or-develop-the-race-against-time-to-protect-floridas-wildlife-corridor/>.

natural world defeated the destructive powers of humans. Abandoned pieces of homes or trucks used for carrying lumber can be seen lying in the swamps (fig. 4). The skeleton of the truck tells the story of nature's victory over man, as these remains find themselves overtaken by the wetlands, as flora sprouts through its frame and grows around it.

In both aspects of my project, the natural and manmade, I create the photographs in high detail and clarity. Within nature, I seek to portray the wonder and beauty of the environment. Each image shows the animal or plant to the smallest of details, such as the way feathers overlap on a bird. In photographs of human intervention, I look to display the details in how the landscape has been altered, such as the ways that a highway cuts lines across the wetlands or how the mines destroy the vibrant and lush forests, or the smoke from the burning fields of sugar cane blotting the horizon.

The cultivation of sugar cane would cause the greatest damage to this ecosystem, from both the mass amount of destruction that was required to build the fields to the harmful chemicals used in the fertilizers. The same water that flowed south from Lake Okeechobee was, and still is, the same water used to irrigate the sugar cane fields. As the water flows through these farms, harmful traces of chemicals found in the fertilizers, such as phosphorus, are carried south into the deeper interiors of the Everglades, poisoning the plant-life and freshwater that many organisms rely on.<sup>7</sup> The pesticides used on the crops, both sugar cane and others, are harmful to both the environment and nearby communities.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> William R. Lowry, "Restoring Water to the Everglades", in *Repairing Paradise: The Restoration of Nature in America's National Parks*. (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009), 112.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962. Reis. 2002), 31.



Figure 5: *The Burning Canes*, 2024

The connection of the Everglades to the sugar cane industry is brought forth in images of the burning fields found in the Everglades Agricultural Area (fig. 5). These fields are regularly burned during the harvest season to remove leaves from the cane before they are harvested, which negatively affects the environment, and even health, to those living around it. In Florida, the sugar cane is harvested using the burnt cane mechanical method. This method burns off the tops and leaves of the sugar cane to speed up the process of harvesting. This burning releases over 2,800 tons of hazardous pollutants per year into the air of the surrounding microclimate.



Figure 6: Close-up of Sugarcane Paper

In many other areas in the world, farms utilize burn-free green harvesting that avoids this negative effect. The green harvest method re-uses the normally discarded parts of the crops for other purposes, such as a natural fertilizer for the soil or produced into new materials. The paper that I use (fig. 6) for the photographs is made from green-harvested sugar cane, gathering and reusing bagasse fibers. These fibers are found in the tops and leaves of the sugar cane, the same parts of the crop that are burned off in the harvesting process in Florida. In using this paper, I speak to the ways that the sugar cane industry could be improved, as the idea of wholly dismantling it is a long and arduous uphill battle.

In 1948, efforts were finally undertaken to help preserve this environment. The U.S. Congress authorized the Central and Southern Florida Plan to help rebuild the water flow to the region. At the time, the water flow was pushed west and east of Lake Okeechobee, while strict amounts were set and controlled to flow south only for agriculture and development at certain

times of the year.<sup>9</sup> This original plan was later improved upon in 1994 with the Everglades Forever Act and in 2000 with the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan, and even more with recent efforts and plans devised. These plans saw the water return to the Everglades and the agricultural industry reduced to a small area in the now Everglades Agricultural Area.

The Everglades stands as an important symbol of Florida, for it represents the “Old Florida,” a wild and untamed region where Florida’s original residents roam free and unhindered by the hand of man. It is an ecosystem that supports a diverse group of species, many of which are unique to this region alone. Even though humankind’s impact has been intrusive and destructive, the Everglades still provides for its human residents. Beneath the southeastern region of the peninsula lies the Biscayne aquifer, a natural source of fresh drinking water. This subterranean water source supplies the drinking water for a quarter of all Floridians. The Everglades is the spirit of natural Florida.

The Everglades itself symbolizes concepts of life and death, mystery, wonder, beauty, and the natural vs. manmade. The Everglades, in the natural world, does not follow laws and guidelines. It becomes a world where the desire to exist and to avoid dangers powers over all its inhabitants. The dense pockets of cypress domes, pine flatlands, and flooded grasslands create an air of mystery, as wildlife and plants blend together and become hidden to the untrained eye. Yet above all this, it still remains as a sense of the natural beauty of the world, and most importantly, Old Florida. It reminds us of what came before us, what thrived before the desire to control and dominate. This sense of controlling it, the natural vs. manmade, is seen in its history and in the modern day, as powerful individuals try to push their way in to build new “empires” or abuse it for resources. On the end of the scale, however, the Everglades plays a new function in the focus on human intervention and preservation. Environmentalist Joe Podger once stated, and

---

<sup>9</sup> Lowry, “Restoring Water to The Everglades”, 110.

popularized by Marjory Stoneman Douglas, “The Everglades is a test. If we pass it, we may get to keep the planet”.<sup>10</sup> It becomes a testament to our aim and dedication to protecting the planet. Success in its protection shows we have the strength to right our wrongs and allows us to lay the groundwork for preserving other threatened landscapes around the country, and even the world.

In regard to the Everglades as a symbol, one of its natural residents also acts as a symbol on its own: the American alligator. The alligator has become an important symbol of Florida and Floridians. It is used as mascots for sports teams, on signs on billboards and posters, and more. Even in the Seminole Heights neighborhood of Tampa, the folktale of a two headed alligator is made to represent the neighborhood. It is an incredibly important animal as a cultural symbol, so much so that laws have been put in place to protect it from being harassed by humans. The alligator exemplifies the extensive untamed wilderness and swamps of Florida.

---

<sup>10</sup> Robert McClure, “The Everglades Is A Test - If We Pass It, We May Get To Keep The Planet.” *InvestigateWest*, May 20, 2010, <https://www.invw.org/2010/05/20/1048/>



Figure 7: *Floating in the Aquatic Clouds*, 2023

The photograph of an alligator swimming through reflected clouds builds on this symbolism, while also creating a sense of tranquility (fig. 7). The alligator is seen in its natural habitat peacefully gliding through the waters. The photograph does not reveal any intervention of humans, much like the alligator itself being the symbol of the untamed wilderness. It is only the reptile and its home. As it is surrounded by the reflections of the clouds, it creates a sense of peacefulness, as the animal is unbothered and unhindered by human interaction.

This idea of evoking mood in a landscape photographer has been spoken about by Clyde Butcher. Butcher is perhaps the greatest known Floridian photographer who has dedicated much of his work to working within the Everglades and advocating for its support. He was drawn to this region after the death of his son, who was struck by a drunk driver. Butcher found that the Everglades helped him cope with his grief and restored his soul. He found this landscape elicited

emotions and moods within himself. Butcher has spoken before on creating mood within his landscapes, working with aspects such as the weather, light, shadows, and more to create a depth in his images.<sup>11</sup> In my own work, I choose to create these highly detailed images of the Everglades to show the viewer the awe and wonder of this region. The images capture the essence of seeing this ecosystem as if the viewer is there in person. Sunlight shining across the sawgrass, shaded pockets of cypress domes, and even the gaze of the wood stork (fig. 1) convey senses of serenity, reflection, inquiry, and more. The viewer is immersed into the world that I have come to love and respect.

I traverse through each location, from exploring on foot, paddling through waters in a kayak, or taking the rough road through old, muddy paths. To create the images, I insert myself far from the comforts of civilizations. Wading through waist deep waters with my bag held above my head, I connect myself to the landscape, becoming engulfed in it and curious of what I may find before me. I lie in wait for a passing animal or for the light to shine just right through the trees. I examine the seasons as they change from the humid and rainy summers to the dry and cooler winters. As these seasons change, so does the mood and aura of the environment. The rising water levels of the summer wet season covers much of the landscape, adding a hint of mystery to what is below, yet showing a shimmering and reflective landscape full of wonder. The dry winters reveal the forest and prairie floors and the cool temperatures bring more wildlife out into the sun and in the open.

I believe that the act of photographing in the Everglades is an act of preservation. It creates records of the landscape and preserves the beauty of the region. The photographs can

---

<sup>11</sup> Clyde Butcher, "Clyde Butcher about 'Mood' in your Landscape Photography", Youtube, March 10, 2016, educational video, 3:04. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=it4NQkh12zo>.

show others what makes this landscape so unique and important, creating an understanding of why it must be protected as the “Gem of Florida”.

When it comes to ideas and notions of environmentalism, photography becomes an important tool when advocating for this subject. An environmental photographer can create striking images of wondrous landscapes or stunning wildlife that evoke a sense of wonder and awe in viewers, but also create images that display the course of industrialization that has plighted so many ecosystems. This idea of photography in environmentalism was used strongly by Ansel Adams in his work of the National Parks. Through his photographs, Ansel Adams was able to push the United States government into turning King’s Canyon into a national park. His photographs depicted the grandeur of this landscape, striking a chord in many government figures’ hearts that inspired them to take the necessary steps to preserve this landscape.

As the rise of ‘resortism’ appeared in the National Parks, highways, parking lots, and other facilities began to be erected in these protected areas. Adams' work was meant to show these locations as undisturbed by the industrialization of humankind.

Adams stated that the rise of “resortism” in national parks could take away from one of the fundamental principles in creating these landmarks, which is to maintain the unimpaired form for the use of the parks. Adams went on to state that the emphasis on scenery could become exploited as parks become treated as if they are resorts, causing harm to the wilderness as it becomes developed to be more accessible to humans.<sup>12</sup> Through understanding this, I believe that our treasured landscapes can still be admired without the need to demolish or alter them. We can immerse ourselves without building long paths, parking lots, and other massive tourist

---

<sup>12</sup> Robert Turnage, “Ansel Adams - the Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement,” The Ansel Adams Gallery, Gallery accessed March 2024.  
<https://www.anseladams.com/ansel-adams-the-role-of-the-artist-in-the-environmental-movement/>.

attractions. We can allow the environment to provide this sense of attraction to us, by taking in only the natural.

In many of the protected areas of the Everglades, the organizations that run them, rather it is governmental parks programs or individual non-profit organizations, will often create their boardwalks or paths to avoid disturbing the natural environment. These paths and boardwalks still allow the public to enjoy the landscape without the need to alter or harm it. In some preserves, such as the Audubon-Corkscrew Swamp Sanctuary, the boardwalks are built to move between trees, often snaking through the wetland. In some cases, when a new tree sprouts underneath a boardwalk, the boardwalk itself is dismantled and rebuilt to avoid blocking the tree from sunlight and growing.

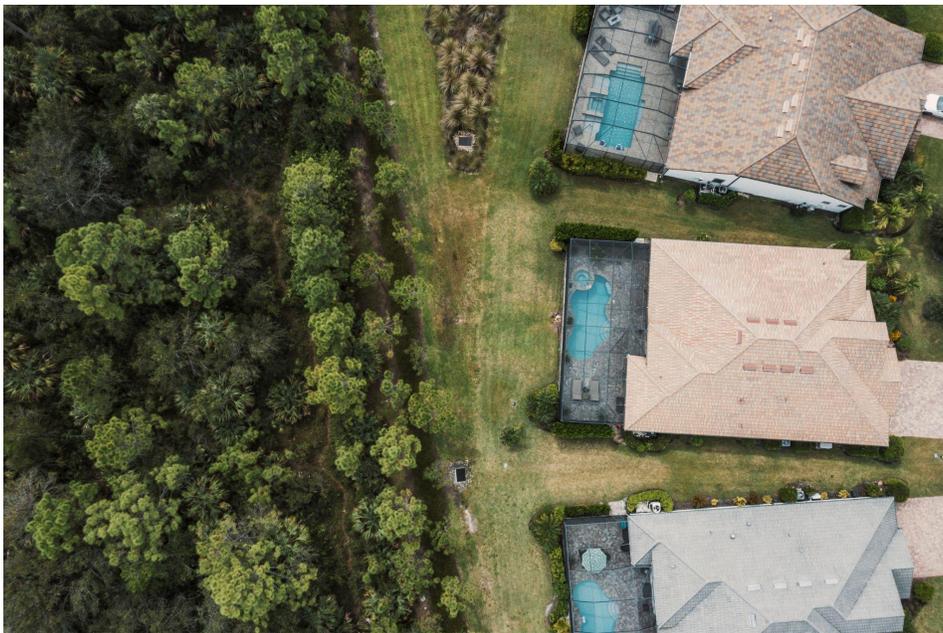


Figure 8: *Home*, 2023

While I have detailed the vast history and the importance of the Everglades on a natural and ecological scale, the Everglades holds its own importance in my eyes and mind; it is my home. Nearly one hundred feet from the backdoor of my house in Southwest Florida lies the

CREW Wildlife and Management Area, one of the many wetlands that dot the region (fig. 8). This area is even one of the major locations where the elusive ghost orchid can be found. Living adjacent to this wilderness, I often find myself in the company of the wild residents, as even my home, too, has played a part in the development of the Everglades. To some, these sights may strike fear and worry into them. For me, these native neighbors are welcomed as equals. They act as a reminder that we Floridians must remember that we live alongside these creatures. We must respect them as if they are our own kind. While it is important to acknowledge that even my own home has played a part in the destruction and development of the Everglades, I still believe that I can still support and advocate for the protection of this environment. The more who advocate for the preservation of ecosystems on a global scale, the more that we, as environmentalists, can help defend nature from those that wish it harm.

I have lived in four different states, yet the only one that has felt like home is the Sunshine State. From a young age, I was always exposed to the natural world. My parents carried me on hikes before I was old enough to walk on my own. Instead of bedtime stories of fiction, they would read from encyclopedias about nature to help put me to bed. My mother played a large influence in my interest in the environment, as she herself has made her own efforts to protect it. In Florida, she has sprung to action to rescue trapped animals and even hunt the previously mentioned invasive pythons.

This lifelong interest in nature can be credited for why this region has become home to me, and how it has influenced this project. As I've come to love this area, so too has my passion to protect it. Creating this project is also a way for me to advocate for the preservation of this ecosystem, for my home. It is a place that I wish to thrive forever and not be lost.

Carlton Ward Jr., a southwest Florida resident and wildlife photographer, has become an iconic figure in the protection efforts of the Florida panther. Ward Jr. has created striking photographs of the cats as they travel across the landscape, documenting their beauty and grace, and using his photographs as a podium for the panthers to speak to us from. His photographs have helped researchers understand the panthers better and identify the locations they frequent to monitor their population's health. Much of his work is created in the Fakahatchee Strand State Preserve and the CREW Wildlife and Environmental Area, the same locations that I frequented when creating my own work. Through his photographs, I analyze the ways he has viewed the landscape and how he has managed to photograph these elusive creatures, comparing them to my own work and pulling from his into my own visions and compositions. In his exhibitions, Carlton Ward Jr. places images of wildlife moving through the landscape next to those of human interactions, such as highways, subdivisions and more. These images show how this environment is changing through human intervention, e.g., how parts of the Caloosahatchee River have been turned into canals, rather than the original form of a snaking river.

In 2006, Joel Sartore started his own personal project called "The Photo Ark".<sup>13</sup> He has dedicated much of his life to documenting as many captive-held and protected species as possible. At the current time, Sartore has documented an astonishing 14,895 individuals. Sartore seeks to create this documentation so that we may have detailed records of each of these species in the painful chance any of them go extinct, some of which already have. Sartore's photographs are incredibly vivid, displaying the finest of details of feathers and hair, that place the viewer eye to eye with these magnificent creatures. His photographs allow for a connection between the viewer and the animal, forming a conversation between the two where the viewer can feel the

---

<sup>13</sup> Joel Sartore, *The Photo Ark: One Man's Quest to Document the World's Animals*. (Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2017).

emotions of these animals, hearing their calls for help and their hope to remain. I see my series as my own “ark” of the landscape I have come to love and respect. I create detailed images of the Floridian wildlife that interact with the camera, and in turn, the viewer.

Having examined the elements that these photographers use in their work, I began mixing them into my own compositions. My process of creation relies heavily on understanding the area I am photographing and becoming immersed in it. I seek out fine details within the landscape; reflections on water, the aquatic vegetation beneath the surface, the posture a bird holds when hunting, and the union of different plant species as vines wrap around trees and ferns grow from old tree trunks. I use photography to depict a place with quality and clarity. The extreme detail of photographs allow for an immersive view of that world. Photographs can tell the viewer everything they need to know to understand the environment. Photography allows one to capture exact moments in time that often happen in the blink of an eye. Through photography, I can reveal the way I see the world, using all my senses to draw attention to the subtle details of my vision.

The work of Edward Burtynsky portrays the ways that humans have altered the landscape, contrasting the natural landscape found in the work of Adams. Burtynsky’s work acts as both a visual art form but also as a survey of the effects of industrialization. His photographs depict large areas of industrialization and how humans have terraformed the landscape for the extraction of resources or development. Burtynsky believes that his work can act as a body of evidence for lawmakers and politicians so that may use it as a form of promotion for slowing or reversing global warming and climate change, similarly to Adams approach with advocating for National Parks and protected orders on these environments. Through his body of work,

Burtynsky defines the Anthropocene epoch and extinction, a period of time in recent history that marks how humans have affected the natural environment.

Through all these combined efforts and examinations of the landscape, I photograph every unique aspect of the Everglades, and in turn my passion and respect for it. In a simple, surface level understanding of the photographs, they become a documentation. They show the differing species and various sub-ecosystems within. They document opposites, from the terrestrial landscapes of a cypress dome to underwater photographs of the aquatic world below the dome.

I feel truly at home when surrounded by our natural world. The Everglades is a place where I find myself at peace. I gain a sense of positive disconnection from the everyday anxieties of modern society. My mind becomes clear and open, allowing me to observe and take in every detail of the landscape. It becomes an escape from reality.



Figure 9: Installation

When it comes to the final physical display of the work, I take consideration of how I can fully give the viewer this experience and understanding of peace and beauty. On the base level of

the display, I use a large scale mural of a wide open landscape in a one to one ratio of the real location (fig. 9). This mural immerses the viewer into the Everglades, creating a feeling of being right there at the place I stood taking the photograph. The murals on a base level play with the sense of sight in the viewer, with other photographs used to invoke a reaction from other senses.

To draw the viewer further into the landscape, much like how I ventured deep into it, smaller photographs are placed on top of the mural. These photographs depict closer details from the landscape; insects, birds, reptiles, vines, flowers, and more. Combined with the larger mural, the photographs enhance the immersion of the work. While the mural first played with the viewer's sense of sight, the smaller images began to affect other senses. As the viewer inspects a photograph of a bird, they can then imagine the sounds of bird calls echoing through the mural, and the same with a photograph of a cricket or other noise-making insect. A photograph of a blooming flower invokes the sense of smell. A photograph of raindrops falling on water and lily pads adds movement and emotion to the area. Through these contextual clues, the landscape, even without physical representations of the sounds or smells, comes alive.

Building upon the desire to remain environmentally friendly, the mural too is created using recycled adhesive paper. This paper is made from recycled materials such as plastic bottles and coatings, much like the sugar cane paper being made from the byproducts of sugar cane processing. This adhesive paper saves energy, reduces greenhouse gas emissions, and diverts materials from landfills, which often poison the soil they are dumped on. In turn, this project becomes fully environmentally friendly, avoiding the use of materials that have harmful chemicals.

All the history, influences, concepts, and production of the work melds together to create this cohesive series on the place I call home. As these elements combine, the work creates a

narrative that the viewer can read to understand the Everglades in a visual form. The work allows me to share the place I love with others, and in turn give them the chance to feel the same love and respect as I do. The series creates what I personally hope for the future of the Everglades. It shows it wild and free, unharmed from the destructive hand of humans. An Everglades that is respected, loved, cherished, and understood by all. An Everglades that is no longer threatened, but instead allowed to exist in peace.

## Bibliography

- Bendick, Eric, dir. *Path of the Panther*. Bozeman: Grizzly Creek Films, 2022.
- <https://www.disneyplus.com/video/8234adba-c8b2-4ab4-a135-6822edc29033?distributionPartner=google>
- Blackwell, Geoff, and Ruth Hobday. *Human Nature: Planet Earth in Our Time*. San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2020.
- Butcher, Clyde. 2016. "Clyde Butcher about 'Mood' in your Landscape Photography." ALIVE Photo. March 10, 2016. Educational video, 3:04.
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=it4NQkh12zo>
- Carson, Rachel. *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002. First published 1962 by Houghton Mifflin.
- Carter, W. Hodding. *Stolen Water: Saving the Everglades from Its Friends, Foes, and Florida*. New York: Atria Books, 2004.
- Davis, Jack E. *An Everglades Providence: Marjory Stoneman Douglas and the American Environmental Century*. Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, 2009.
- Freedman, Ethan. "Long-Held Myth Says Hurricane Andrew Sparked Florida's Burmese Python Problem. Is It True?" *LiveScience*, July 31, 2023.
- <https://www.livescience.com/animals/snakes/long-held-myth-says-hurricane-andrew-sparked-floridas-burmese-python-problem-is-it-true>.
- Grunwald, Michael. *The Swamp: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006.

- Lowry, William R. "Restoring Water to the Everglades." In *Repairing Paradise: The Restoration of Nature in America's National Parks*, 107-156. Washington, D.C. Brookings Institution Press, 2009. Accessed September 19, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central.
- McClure, Robert. "The Everglades Is A Test - If We Pass It, We May Get To Keep The Planet", *InvestigativeWest*. May 20, 2010. <https://www.invw.org/2010/05/20/1048/>
- Misrach, Richard. "What the Landscape Tells Us." In *on Landscape and Meaning*, 52-55. New York: Aperture, 2020.
- "Regulations for Nonnative, Conditional, and Prohibited Species." Florida Fish And Wildlife Conservation Commission, accessed April 28, 2024. <https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/nonnatives/regulations/>.
- Sartore, Joel. *The Photo Ark: One Man's Quest to Document the World's Animals*. Washington, D.C.: National Geographic, 2017.
- Scarry, Elaine. *On Beauty and Being Just*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Tobias, Jimmy. "Preserve or Develop? The Race against Time to Protect Florida's Wildlife Corridor." *Florida Trident*, May 6, 2024. <https://floridatrident.org/preserve-or-develop-the-race-against-time-to-protect-floridas-wildlife-corridor/>.
- Turnage, Robert. "Ansel Adams - the Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement." The Ansel Adams Gallery, accessed April 29, 2024. <https://www.anseladams.com/ansel-adams-the-role-of-the-artist-in-the-environmental-movement/>.