

Who Was Marjory? Part II

During the 1930s, Marjory Stoneman Douglas's writings took on Florida's environment/development issues. She wrote the foreword to the Work Projects Administration's Guide to Miami and Environs as part of the Federal Writers' Project's American Guide Series of the New Deal.

She was commissioned to write a pamphlet supporting a botanical garden in South Florida that resulted in establishing the Fairfield Tropical Botanic Garden devoted to conserving tropical plants. She called the garden "one of the greatest achievements for the entire area."

By the 1940s, the Everglades would dominate most of her works. She became deeply concerned about the critical importance of the Everglades on the environment of South Florida, and what little was known about this "vast, buggy tract of wilderness."

She was the leading member of the committee that lobbied for the establishment of Everglades National Park. Forty years hence, the National Parks Conservation Association would establish the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award to "honor individuals who often must go to great lengths to advocate and fight for the protection of the National Park System."

Preserving or developing the Everglades was not new political dialogue. The initial decision to drain the Everglades occurred in the early 1900s. Her father, as editor of the new newspaper, had written a series of editorials on the topic during the new century's first decade. Though not against progress, they basically cautioned how development would be impossible without a system of scientifically studied drainage information to avoid irreparable damage.

The Everglades are the southern extension of a critical water system that begins with the Kissimmee River in central Florida and empties into freshwater Lake Okeechobee with some natural spill into the freshwater Everglades.

In 1941, the year her father had passed away at age eighty-four, an editor asked if she would be interested in writing a book on the Everglades. She spent five years researching the ecology and history of the Everglades and South Florida with geologist Garald Parker who had discovered that South Florida's sole freshwater source was the Biscayne Aquifer, and that it was filled by the Everglades.

She took what she learned and wrote her book, *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947) in which she proclaims the Everglades to be a treasured river, not a worthless swamp. Her book's first line, "There are no other Everglades in the world," has been called the "most famous passage ever written about the Everglades." She described the Everglades as an ecosystem worthy of protection and in the last chapter "The Eleventh Hour," she outlined its imminent disappearance.

The text significantly impacted the environmental history of Florida by redefining the Everglades as a source of free flowing fresh water essential to both the people and wildlife of the region. *The Everglades: River of Grass* galvanized people to protect the Everglades.

It sold out its first printing in a month, and still sells some 10,000 copies a year. It has been compared to Rachel Carson's 1962 exposé of the harmful effects of DDT, *Silent Spring*. Both books are "groundbreaking calls to action that made citizens and politicians take notice."

The Everglades: River of Grass was published when Douglas was fifty-seven years old. It began her second career as an activist, a spokeswoman and a champion of conservation for her next fifty-one years, while she continued her activism against social injustices.

The two main themes of her writings on into the 1960s publicized Florida's environmental concerns and discriminatory race relations' concerns.

In 1948, she served on the board of the bi-racial Coconut Grove Slum Clearance Committee that lobbied for the establishment of indoor plumbing for all residences in Dade County, including the segregated areas which she learned had no running water or sewers. The committee's work resulted in another book, with fellow committee member Elizabeth Virrick, *Cities Against Slums* and a 1950's article in the Ladies Home Journal: "Communities Face Slums in Coconut Grove."

In 1969, she was seventy-nine. It came to her attention the Everglades were in danger of imminent damage from real estate and agricultural development plans to construct a jetport that would have catastrophic environmental effects. To protest this construction, in a monumental effort to save the Everglades, she began a campaign of outreach to muster support to stop the project. She traveled extensively throughout the state giving speeches and recruited 3,000 members with whom she founded a grassroots member organization, The Friends of the Everglades, whose mission is to preserve, protect, and restore the only Everglades in the world. The jetport project was abandoned. It was 1969, she was seventy-nine.



Her advocacy for the preservation of fresh water, central to all of South Florida for its drinking water, literally for all its water, continued well into the 1970s, 80s and beyond. A subsequent bill in 1972 was introduced to curb development in South Florida and ensure the national park would receive the amount of water it needed. In 1978 Everglades National Park named 86 per cent of the park, 1.3 million acres, the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness Area.

In 1990 when she was blind, she continued her work by supporting the passage of legislation and the formation of programs, all supporting environmental protective projects and preservation. That year, the Army Corps of Engineers turned from constructing dams and canals to purely environmental projects. Also that year, a new high school was named in her honor.

Her awards, accolades and tributes, too voluminous to list here, are duly noted on the Wikipedia link below.

That said, on her birthdays, instead of gifts and celebrations, Douglas requested trees be planted. Thus, over 100,000 trees have been planted across the state including a bald cypress on the lawn of the governor's mansion. And, on her 102nd birthday, the South Florida Water Management District began removing foreign, exotic plants from the Everglades.

In 1998, Marjory Stoneman Douglas died peacefully in her home at age 108. Her ashes were scattered over the 1.3-million-acre Marjory Stoneman Douglas Wilderness Area in the Everglades National Park.

Marjory Stoneman Douglas was, and forever will be immortalized as, the woman who saved the Everglades - the only Everglades in the world.

Sources:

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