Florida International University

University Graduate School

Doctoral Dissertation Defense

Abstract

Sociocultural Complexities of Ecosystem Restoration: Remaking Identity, Landscape and Belonging in the Florida Everglades

by

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The Florida Everglades is a highly diverse socionatural landscape that historically spanned much of the south Florida peninsula. Today, the Florida Everglades is an iconic but highly contested conservation landscape. It is the site of one of the world’s largest publicly funded ecological restoration programs, estimated to cost over $8 billion (U.S. GAO 2007) and it is home to over two million acres of federally protected lands, including the Big Cypress National Preserve and Everglades National Park. However, local people’s values, practices and histories overlap and often conflict with the global and eco-centric values linked to Everglades environmental conservation efforts, sparking environmental conflict.

My dissertation research examined the cultural politics of nature associated with two Everglades conservation and ecological restoration projects: 1) the creation and stewardship of the Big Cypress National Preserve, and 2) the Tamiami Trail project at the northern boundary of Everglades National Park. Using multiple research methods including ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, participant observation, surveys and semi-structured interviews, I documented how these two projects have shaped environmental claims-making strategies to Everglades nature on the part of environmental NGOs, the National Park Service and local white outdoorsmen. In particular, I examined the emergence of an oppositional white identity called the Gladesmen Culture. My findings include the following: 1) just as different forms of nature are historically produced, contingent and power-laden, so too are different claims to Everglades nature; 2) identity politics are an integral dimension of Everglades environmental conflicts; and 3) the Big Cypress region’s history and contemporary conflicts are shaped by the broader political economy of development in south Florida.

My dissertation concluded that identity politics, class and property relations have played a key, although not always obvious, role in shaping Everglades history and environmental claims-making, and that they continue to influence contemporary Everglades environmental conflicts.

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Department: Global and Sociocultural Studies
Major Professor: Dr. Laura A. Ogden