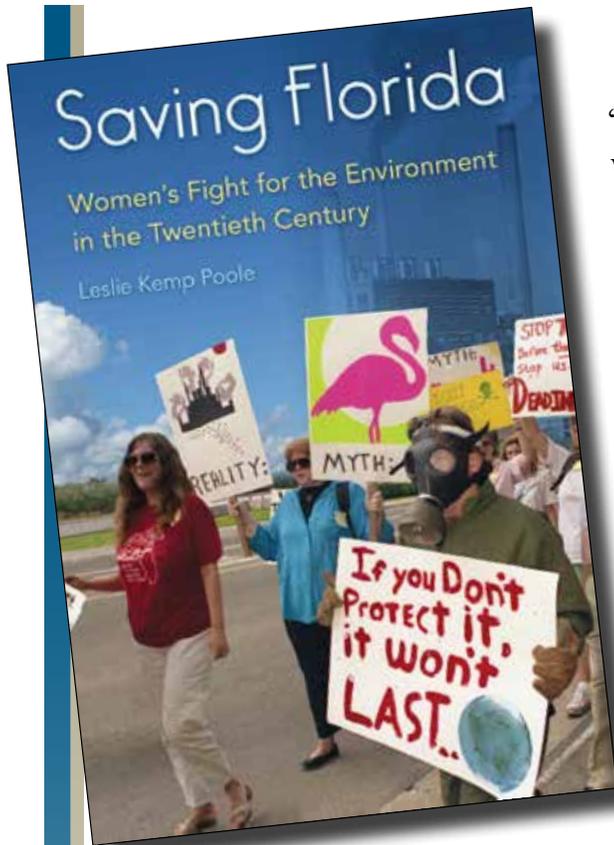


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**SAVING FLORIDA**  
*Women’s Fight for the Environment  
in the Twentieth Century*  
LESLIE KEMP POOLE

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**LESLIE KEMP POOLE**  
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# Q & A with LESLIE KEMP POOLE

author of

## Saving Florida

*“These women are a testament to the power of grassroots activism and how seemingly powerless people can accomplish great things by working with others.”*

### How did you develop an interest in this topic?

In my previous life as a newspaper reporter, I wrote about a number of environmental problems and solutions in Florida. Women were always active participants in such issues, but whenever I picked up a Florida history book (published pre-1980) I was surprised how few women were mentioned. This spurred my interest in women’s roles in the environmental movement, along with my fascination about how they achieved their objectives while facing an overwhelmingly male power structure that often gave them little credit—at first. Their persistence, however (one woman called it “sandspur” tactics), and working in community created change that has benefited us all.

### Many of the women in your book were previously unknown despite their importance in Florida’s environmental movement. Why do you think that is?

Many of these women were prominent during their eras in dealing with conservation and environmental issues but it wasn’t until the late twentieth century that historians began giving them their due. This coincides with a greater interest in environmental and women’s history, now better reflected in today’s modern histories. In 1940 Lucy Worthington Blackman complained that Florida histories “deal with men only; their authors seem to have been oblivious to the fact that in all these years there have been women in Florida, as well as men, and as many of them, and that these women have taken part—in some instances, indeed, a conspicuous and memorable part, and in all cases certainly an essential part—in the development of the state.” She had a valid point.

Another reason is that many women were working toward the environmental good of their communities and were unconcerned about whether they were presidents of groups or could put their name on a project. They weren’t interested in getting credit—they simply wanted to get things done. And many found power in being part of a group, which took the credit rather than the individuals involved.

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### **What do you most admire about their environmental work?**

I admire that they got things done, despite many obstacles. Before women could vote they were successfully lobbying state government to get protections for plants and wildlife; clubwomen created the first state park in Florida in 1916—well ahead of suffrage. They found strength in numbers through garden clubs and women's groups and, later, proved to be strong leaders of cross-gender alliances.

I also admire their motivations. Women worked for environmental improvements because it was the right thing to do—the right thing for their families, the community, and the state. They weren't swayed by arguments from male-dominated business and political interests that put profits ahead of aesthetics and biology. As one woman said, you don't mess with a “mama bear” when she believes her health and that of her family is threatened. Many of these women were tenacious, ferocious “mama bears” who committed their time and talents to saving Florida's environment.

### **You interviewed two dozen still-living activists while writing this book. Which interview was most memorable?**

That is a hard question to answer—so many of these women have dedicated their lives to helping Florida's wildlife and natural systems and I admire them all. Joy Towles Ezell stands out as a woman who has fought for decades to clean up the horribly polluted Fenholloway River. Jeannine Economos has worked for years to help farmworkers whose health has been affected, even destroyed, by exposure to agricultural chemicals. Judith Delaney Vallee found a calling in saving manatees. They are not working for the greater glory of themselves and are true heroes.

### **What do you think is the most compelling reason for preserving Florida's environment?**

Whatever happens to Florida's environment affects all of us. We can't survive without clean air or clean water. It's that simple. Humans do not live apart from nature so however we treat it is how we are treating ourselves. The health of future generations depends upon this.

### **How can people become more involved in saving Florida's natural resources?**

There are many wonderful groups that are addressing environmental issues in Florida. Join one! It is a great place to get training. Or organize your own. Find something that you are passionate about and gather others into a grassroots effort to get your voice heard. March on city hall. Contact your governmental representatives. Write letters to the newspaper. Invite a television crew to your protest. You'd be surprised how few people take these steps—and how they can be very effective ways to get your issue aired. And never, ever give up on your cause.

### **What can these Florida women teach us about grassroots activism and leadership?**

These women are a testament to the power of grassroots activism and how seemingly powerless people can accomplish great things by working with others. The Cross Florida Barge Canal was considered a “done deal” until Marjorie Harris Carr led a grassroots charge against entrenched powers like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and stopped what proved to be an enormous

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financial and environmental boondoggle. She gathered together professors, birders, clubwomen, environmentalists, and people who simply loved Florida's nature into a powerful coalition that stopped the project through media savvy, political pressure, and facts, facts, facts. Marjorie Stoneman Douglas started Friends of the Everglades with a single \$1 donation and it grew into a powerful advocacy group because it represented many people—and voters—when pressing government to preserve the fragile wetlands. The power of one person is magnified greatly when joined with others in community and action.

### **What is the #1 threat to Florida's natural environment today?**

I believe there are two major threats to Florida's natural environment today—climate change and diminishing water resources. If our country and the rest of the world continue to drag their feet to address climate change, Florida will be ground zero for some of the most devastating damage caused by sea level rises. The Everglades, Biscayne Bay, the Keys, and many coastal areas will be inundated—an unspeakable loss. People living on the coast or reliant on coastal commerce and fishing may be devastated and our urban areas, most located on coastlines, will have difficulty dealing with the consequences.

Water is another immediate issue. We have been using underground water resources for decades, knowing that the supply is threatened and yet the state has done very little to address it. Our springs are evidence of the pollution of underground supplies and yet we continue to allow large-scale pumping of these resources without instituting serious water-saving regulations or promoting lifestyles and landscapes that reduce water usage. Our children will pay the price for our inaction.

### **Where do you go to enjoy the outdoors in Florida?**

I go to places where I can breathe in Florida wildness—kayaking on freshwater rivers and saltwater lagoons, hiking in state parks and preserves, and birding in wildlife refuges. It is amazing (and soul saving) to me how quickly I can leave crowded urban areas and be in a place of quiet splendor. Despite Florida's rampant development, we have had the foresight to preserve many wonderful places that are within quick reach of urban areas. Favorites: Wekiwa Springs State Park, the St. Johns River, the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge, and Paynes Prairie.

### **What do you hope readers take from this book?**

I hope readers gain an appreciation for the variety of work and battles that Florida's women engaged in during the 20th century to help save the state's natural areas and wildlife. They created parks, fought billboards, planted trees, marched in protests, wrote articles and books, held office, and eventually helped run some of the state's most powerful environmental bureaucracies. I also hope by telling the individual stories of these women that today's generation will be inspired and empowered to take on environmental problems in their communities. Many of these women simply wouldn't take "no" for an answer—and we should learn from them and carry on their legacy.

## Introduction

The scene is breathtaking and remarkably soothing. A long stretch of tan, sandy beach disappears into mist and glare. Surf that alternates between sapphire and aquamarine rhythmically pounds the shore. Sun worshipers lazily examine wave-tossed shells as wading birds hurry to catch silvery baitfish. Birds flit among vegetation-crested dunes, at the base of which thousands of sea turtles have nested, their young now hatched and swimming in ocean currents.

This is Canaveral National Seashore, the longest undeveloped public beach on Florida's east coast. It is a twenty-four-mile refuge in a state where critics joke that the official bird should be the construction crane. Once upon a time, however, this beautiful beach was in jeopardy, threatened by development projects and cars that plowed through its dunes.

Then Doris Leeper got involved.

The strong-minded, straight-speaking Leeper hassled the business community, gathered like-minded area citizens, and pressed federal officials for help, leading to the establishment of the national seashore in 1975. Four decades later her name is missing from the seashore's history and website, but those who witnessed the fight know that Leeper's footprints are permanently embedded in the park's very existence.

Farther south, near Florida's peninsular tip, the Royal Palm Visitor Center hosts visitors to Everglades National Park who come from around the world to see alligators, birds, and sawgrass wetlands. The site has few of the stately trees for which it is named—most disappeared after decades of hurricane damage. But if you concentrate on the few that continue to sway in the subtropical breeze, it is wonderful to imagine when 168 cars filled mostly with clubwomen traveled to this hammock, a rise in the vast wetlands, to celebrate the 1916 dedication of Royal Palm State Park, the first state park in Florida. Under a

November sky, these women, clad in long skirts and wide-brimmed hats, celebrated the culmination of years of efforts to save a piece of Florida they feared would disappear.<sup>1</sup>

Men who ran the state legislature had regularly ignored their efforts and refused to fund a park in what they viewed as “wastelands.” But the women saw something different—a unique refuge of colorful birds and striking plants that they crusaded to save until legislators caved in to their demands. Three decades later Royal Palm became the core of Everglades National Park, biologically one of America’s richest national parks. Women, before they could vote, had forced action to save the state’s natural beauty.

Today these sites are the tangible remainders and reminders of a century of work by Florida’s environmental women. Others are found in parks, jungled rivers, nature preserves, and the continued presence of endangered species, their very existence due in part to these women’s insistence that humans curb imperiling behavior. Their legacy also lives on in ways that most Floridians take for granted—bays made safe from untreated sewage, estuaries protected from dredge-and-fill development projects, and air safeguarded from poisonous industrial discharge. And their work continues in efforts to stop pollution of the Fenholloway River, to get medical attention and treatment for pesticide-exposed farmworkers, and to eliminate a dam that for too long has blocked what was once one of the state’s most scenic rivers.

This book offers a comprehensive study of Florida women’s conservation and environmental activism across the twentieth century, synthesizing previous scholarship with the untold stories of women who were vital forces in these movements. I investigate what it meant to be a woman involved in these efforts, using their written, reported, and recorded words. The book charts how women navigated difficult and often biased social structures to be heard and to effect change. As the movement evolved—absorbing new understandings in ecological science and taking inspiration from the century’s other social causes—so did the role of women, who had their own sensibilities and concerns. Along the way multiple surges in the women’s equality movement eliminated a number of societal constraints and brought new opportunities to exercise power. Together, the women’s rights and environmental movements forced a more open and aware society, advancing new visions for the state’s natural systems, including the new idea of sustainability. The intersection of the two makes for a fascinating and significant history.<sup>2</sup>

To be clear, not all Florida women were involved in such efforts. And the ones who were often had complex relationships with the landscape. Many prof-

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## The Three Marjories. Rachel. and the Rise of Ecology

When it comes to saving natural Florida, one name outshines all others: Marjory. Or Marjorie. It depends upon which of three exceptional women is concerned: author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, whose storytelling taught a nation to love the state's rural scrub lands; Marjorie Harris Carr, who proved that a group of scrappy activists could halt big government boondoggles that threatened sensitive areas; or Marjory Stoneman Douglas, a long-lived writer-advocate who, though diminutive in size, could instill fear in a roomful of developers or politicians with whom she disagreed. Taken together, their work, infused with fervor, intellect, and immense quantities of talent, spanned the twentieth century and changed attitudes about Florida's wildlife and landscape.

The latter two inspired generations of activists as well, setting the stage for a new way of approaching environmental issues through groups that included men and women working side by side to address crises. Employing the principles of ecology, a new term for most Americans, they used science to understand, explain, and defend the complex relationships of plants, animals, and resources in the natural world. They also led efforts that included grassroots uprisings and proved the power of many voices to defeat the financial and political gain of a few.

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her husband Charles made the adventurous move to Florida from Rochester, New York, in 1928 to pursue the literary life. The couple bought seventy-two acres in the rural hamlet of Cross Creek that included a white wooden cottage flanked by orange groves. The fruit, they hoped, would supplement their writing incomes. As an increasingly unhappy Charles worked to produce magazine articles about the state, Rawlings ex-

plored the people and landscape around their home, finding inspiration for her writing. Two years later Rawlings sold her first story, which led to novels and the 1939 Pulitzer Prize for fiction for *The Yearling*, the tale of a young boy, a pet deer, and his family's struggle to survive in the sandy scrub lands that Rawlings visited. In 1942 Rawlings published *Cross Creek*, a meditation about the hardy folk she now called her friends and the terrain that shaped them.<sup>1</sup>

These books were enormously successful and opened the eyes of Americans to the wonders of Florida's nature. Rawlings described bear hunts, fishing trips, backwoods folk, and the stress and beauty of rural living "with something akin" to what famed nineteenth-century nature essayist Henry David Thoreau "realized at Walden Pond," the setting of his most famous work, writes Anne E. Rowe. "Although Rawlings' Florida was not a garden of Eden—it was replete with ants, skunks, and snakes—it was, nevertheless, a place where one could live in close accord with nature, attuned to the changes of the seasons, in complete harmony with the surroundings. For Rawlings life at the orange grove at Cross Creek was as close to an idyllic life as is possible on earth. Her Florida of groves, scrub, and rivers was a largely unspoiled paradise."<sup>2</sup>

Rawlings's Edenic view of Florida flowed freely from the beginning of *Cross Creek*, the first chapter of which is titled "For This Is an Enchanted Land." It reveals a spiritual connection that fueled her writing and passion for her adopted state. "We cannot live without the earth or apart from it, and something is shrivelled in a man's heart when he turns away from it and concerns himself only with the affairs of men," she warned. "Who owns Cross Creek? The red-birds, I think, more than I. . . . It seems to me that the earth may be borrowed but not bought. It may be used, but not owned. It gives itself in response to love and tending, offers its seasonal flowering and fruiting. But we are tenants and not possessors, lovers and not masters. Cross Creek belongs to the wind and the rain, to the sun and the seasons, to the cosmic secrecy of seed, and beyond all, to time."<sup>3</sup>

Rawlings died in 1953 at age fifty-seven, before major problems in Florida's natural systems were apparent. Even so, she made some observations in *Cross Creek* that show a growing environmental awareness. She noted that several species of wildlife were becoming rare, including the limpkin, a wading bird, and the Florida panther, which is now critically endangered. In *Cross Creek Cookery*, Rawlings acknowledges that black bears, once plentiful in Florida, "are becoming scarce. I see no reason for destroying the remaining ones, since they live so far from any domestic clearing that they are no longer a menace, as formerly, to stock." And yet she proceeded to offer three recipes for bear meat

to her cookbook's readers. Today Florida's black bears are protected by law and no longer hunted.<sup>4</sup>

Although she was not part of the corps of conservation-minded activists, Rawlings's books were steeped in descriptions of the rural North Florida environment, home to some of the state's largest forest stands, and she worried about wasteful forestry practices. In 1942, the same wartime year that *Cross Creek* was published, Rawlings agreed to write an article for the U.S Forest Service for *Colliers*, a national magazine, to raise conservation awareness. In the 1943 article, "Trees for Tomorrow," she objected to the clear-cutting of southern longleaf pine forests by timber companies, justified "at the time by the need to support the war effort." She asked a question similar to that of *Cross Creek*'s final page: "Whose trees are these?" and answered that 13 million Americans were reliant not only on the wood industry but on the erosion prevention, flood control, and water quality that intact forests provided. "They are my trees and your trees. They are our trees. No selfish minority, no careless majority can continue to jeopardize our common interests." Her response also claimed patriotism: "We are fighting today for many valuable things. We must fight also at this critical moment to preserve the God-given forests without which we should be helpless atoms on a sterile earth."<sup>5</sup>

After the article was published, Rawlings was solicited to write more about the topic. She declined, writing to her second husband, Norton Baskin, then serving overseas: "I feel if I could be of help in such a critical matter, perhaps I ought to. My literature is painfully likely not to be deathless, but I might go down in history as the gal who saved the nation's trees!"<sup>6</sup>

As historian Florence M. Turcotte notes, Rawlings's awakening was the realization that the "Florida that she had fallen in love with 20 years earlier was being transformed by a population explosion and human attempts to 'improve upon paradise.'" Today, Rawlings's home is preserved as a state park, and she is honored as a "First Floridian" who helped Americans discover the splendor of Florida's landscape. Saving it would be the job of other women who shared her passion. One of them would be Marjorie Harris Carr.<sup>7</sup>

Since Florida's earliest days, settlers had dreamed of building a canal across the state, linking the Atlantic Ocean with the Gulf of Mexico. It would shorten shipping times and avoid treacherous trade routes at the peninsula's southern tip. Several schemes came and went until a cold day in 1964, when an explosion of dynamite hailed the project's final incarnation: the Cross Florida Barge Canal. What enthusiastic promoters could not anticipate was that less than ten years later the project would die, largely through the efforts of Carr, who led a