

Introduction

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*I do not understand how any one can live
without some small place of enchantment to turn to.*

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, *Cross Creek* (1942)

With the dawn of each day, Floridians awaken to a rapidly diminishing future for the state's unique and glorious natural systems. As the bulldozers rev up, cars enter highways, and construction cranes begin to swing, our wild spaces become more precious and threatened. The loss is not only habitat for flora and fauna, but also reflects a darkening of the state's soul—a place built on the idea of finding Eden, health, and beauty.

What better way to understand and acknowledge the magnitude of such losses than to celebrate our wildest treasures? That is the goal of *The Wilder Heart of Florida*, a compilation of essays and poems—most of them never before published—in which thirty-four essayists describe places and events that spark their love of irreplaceable landscapes and seascapes. The first volume in this series, published in 1999, offered varied views of the state. Twenty years later, a new slate of authors adds to this conversation with old and new memories of how enfolding themselves in nature has enriched their lives.

They carry on the tradition of our country's greatest nature writers. John

Muir inspired the world to cherish the overwhelming splendor of Yosemite National Park, as well as Cedar Key, Florida, where he conceptualized the basis for his conservation ethos. Henry David Thoreau took readers along on treks in the Maine woods and to the shores of Walden Pond where he connected close observations of the wider universe with nature, including ice cut for the market and shipped to southern places, including Florida. In more modern times, Marjory Stoneman Douglas, featured in this collection, taught us how to value the vast Everglades and their biological richness despite the incessant bugs and seemingly monotonous sawgrass expanses that stretch to the horizon.

Writers in this new anthology also take readers with them, whether they are kayaking wilderness streams, seeking birds in coastal marshes, or hiking in piney scrub. Some tell of tangles with alligators and pythons, while others marvel at the beauty of flowing springs and sandy seashores. Others recall childhood adventures and trips that are written indelibly on their memories and hearts. With this affection comes the impetus to protect pristine ecosystems, and to bring back damaged ones.

Floridians largely agree. In 2014, voters, with a 75 percent majority, passed Amendment 1, known as the Florida Water and Land Conservation Amendment. It changed the state constitution to provide substantial funding for acquisition and protection of natural lands that are increasingly at risk. The substantial support from residents may reflect the hard truth that after living here a lifetime, or even just a few years, everyone has witnessed some place of beauty disappearing to the state's perpetual growth.

Two years after the Amendment 1 vote, the *Florida 2070* report, created by the 1000 Friends of Florida, the University of Florida's GeoPlan Center, and the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, predicted that the state's population—estimated at 21.6 million in 2019—will swell to 33.7 million by 2070, while development will consume some five million acres of rural, agricultural, and natural lands. That will amount to a mind-boggling loss of pastures, forests, and wetlands, vital to recharging the Floridan aquifer and moderating the regional climate, to asphalt, strip malls, and cookie-cutter housing, leaving the state at risk of becoming what author Carl Hiaasen has likened to “Newark with palm trees.” In the meantime, algae blooms appear more frequently in the state's fresh- and saltwaters, and luxuriant springs that once inspired poets are becoming cloudy, discolored, and dry.

Never before has Florida been in such peril of losing its essence. Yet wisdom in nature persists.

Through various programs since 1990, Florida has preserved some 25 percent of its natural lands, but they need love and tending, while other critical pieces—wildlife corridors, habitat, recharge expanses, flood-abatement areas, storm buffers, filtering zones, natural carbon sinks—are set aside for protection. Of course those areas that are preserved are always at risk of the next development proposal that might seek exceptions, exemptions, and variances to mine, drill, or build.

Attitudes can and have changed. A century ago, politicians were elected on blustering promises to drain the Everglades, considered a major wasteland and hindrance to progress. Today, politicians gain office on promises to repair them in the world's largest ecological fix, now estimated at a cost of more than \$30 billion. And we are thinking more and more about this idea of restoration, of fixing ecological problems—which translate invariably into social and economic problems—that both well-intentioned and not-so-well-intentioned human engineering has historically wrought.

The Wilder Heart of Florida hopes to teach and inspire. Authors have donated their writings to this collection, royalties from which will go to The Nature Conservancy's Florida Chapter, a nonprofit, nonpartisan participant in the larger popularly supported effort to preserve Florida's natural places, vital for humans and wildlife alike. We live in a time when extensive and invaluable scientific research can enlarge our understanding of the natural environment. But a story has the capacity to reach beyond the intellectual to touch something within, an instinct or primordial memory, that turns one's attention more acutely to the animating world that gives not just pleasure but life itself. Perhaps the observations, experiences, and emotions shared in this collection of essays will inspire deeper thinking and constructive conversations about consequential issues related to the human condition and Florida nature. The one is inseparable from the other.