

Written Public Comment
National Park System Advisory Board
August 15, 16, 2023 Meeting

- Mike Elfenbein (received 8/16/23)

[EXTERNAL] Public comments for NPS Advisory Board

MIKHAEL ELFENBEIN [REDACTED]

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To: Winchell, Joshua <joshua_winchell@nps.gov>

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To the National Park System Advisory Board,

I am writing to express both appreciation for positive initiatives and concerns about the state of National Park Service units in South Florida. As a frequent user of the National Park system and visitor of National Parks across the county, I commend the work that this board has to do. Protecting parks for future generations and Americas best idea is of utmost importance.

First, I want to acknowledge the commendable efforts being undertaken to safeguard the environment and preserve the natural heritage of the region. The ongoing collaboration to acquire mineral rights beneath Big Cypress National Preserve, involving the Miccosukee tribe and various environmental and conservation organizations, is a shining example. This joint effort seeks to prevent oil drilling and its potential damages by protecting the area from oil exploration.

The reinstatement of the volunteer trail patrol program at Big Cypress and the strides made in increasing prescribed fire and invasive plant management efforts also deserve applause for their positive impact.

However, alongside these accomplishments, there are disconcerting issues that demand urgent attention. The alarming 98% loss of mammals and small fur bearers within Everglades National Park (ENP), 1.5 million acres, and the continued decline of deer populations throughout Big Cypress National Preserve (730,000 acres) are deeply troubling. These declines have direct implications on the availability of food sources for the endangered Florida panthers, further exacerbated by improper water management practices and inconsistent National Park Service (NPS) management goals and objectives.

As Dr. Lowe underscored in yesterday's presentation, the connection between communities and public lands is of paramount importance. Access is a crucial element in fostering this

relationship. However, the persistent delays in reestablishing Big Cypress ORV trails and the backcountry access plan, mandated by Judge Steele in 2014, are hampering efforts to establish this vital traditional and generational connection. Equally concerning are continued attempts to enforce "wilderness" designations, despite objections from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC).


It is essential to reiterate the potential consequences of such designations, both in the form of "Big W" and "little w". While the distinction between these designations might be nuanced, they can have far-reaching impacts on the region. In light of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) objectives and goals, existing designations within Everglades National Park (ENP) (big W) and proposed designations for Big Cypress National Preserve (BICY) (little w) must be carefully reconsidered. While we can't walk back the designations in Everglades National Park, there is still time to reconsider the proposed designation in Big Cypress.

FWC's concerns expressed in 2009 and reaffirmed in January 2023 about the limitations of wilderness designations are valid. The potential hindrance to natural resource management, invasive species control, and the protection of native habitats for fish and wildlife are valid concerns. Furthermore, the restrictive nature of these designations could negatively affect public access, falling below appropriate and sustainable levels.

I urge the National Park System Advisory Board to holistically consider the dual aspects of progress and concerns in South Florida's national park service units. The diligent work being carried out is commendable, but the challenges are pressing. A balanced approach is necessary to ensure the conservation of the region's invaluable natural resources while maintaining meaningful public access and engagement. Not only in South Florida but throughout our nation and its historic and cultural places.

Thank you for your attention and consideration.

Sincerely,

Mike Elfenbein
Executive Director
Cypress Chapter
Izaak Walton League of America


Sent from my iPhone