



**SOUTH FLORIDA WATER MANAGEMENT DISTRICT
WATER RESOURCES ADVISORY COMMISSION (WRAC)**

Recreation Issues Workshop
Thursday, June 28, 2007, 5:00 – 8:00 p.m.
District Headquarters - B-1 Auditorium
3301 Gun Club Road
West Palm Beach, FL 33406

**Everglades National Park (ENP)
General Management Plan (GMP)
Recommendations**

Based on

ALTERNATIVE E

“Everglades for the Educated”

A Position Paper on the GMP Preliminary Alternatives

Prepared by leaders/members of the Don Hawley Foundation, Florida Keys Fishing Guides Association, Bonefish & Tarpon Unlimited, Reef Rod and Gun Club, Islamorada Fishing Club, and Islamorada Fishing and Conservation Trust Focused on Florida Bay and the Keys, Royal Palm to Flamingo, and the Gulf Coast

As edited by general consensus of WRAC Recreation Issues Workshop participants on June 28, 2007.

“Everglades for the Educated”
Our Objectives

- To provide a higher quality, land based, boating, paddling and camping experience to park visitors.
- To provide more **protection of seagrasses**.
- To designate ENP into several new, well defined management zones.
- To provide faster response protection to nesting/fledging sites for important bird species such as the roseate spoonbill if deemed critical.
- To provide a wider range of camp sites and chickees for a more diverse set of park visitors that does not preclude elderly and mobility impaired from seeing remote areas of the park.
- To provide more compliance to park regulations with less enforcement, we feel attracting and retaining long-term, experienced Rangers will be challenged by affordable housing, cost of living in S. Florida, Ranger salary ranges, and the discomfort of working the Everglades during the summer.
- To prepare for a population in S. Florida that will continue to grow. However, past visitor numbers do not prove an increase in visitors is occurring and visitation numbers are actually down to flat.
- To provide improved safety for resources, visitors and staff.
- To “trade off “no or few signs of human presence with more educational signage and markers allowing safe and harmless access to frequently visited areas would be acceptable.
- **To educate users about etiquette, navigation, current regulations and wildlife in the Park with confidence that 98%+ will comply if they are educated.**
- **To not harm our local economy, customs, traditions and values, and to value input from the professional guides, their clients from around the nation, and avid recreational anglers in the Keys, Homestead and South Florida that have been the leading change agents and stewards of the Everglades National Park for over three decades.**

Executive Summary

Alternative E focuses on Education & Compliance, Resource Protection, Access and Visitor Experience. We do not support Alternative A, B, C or D. We support and recommend Alternative E. While some new concepts shared but not well defined in the preliminary alternatives such as “management by water depth” zones have merit, our Alternative E will bring clarity and specificity to the proposed new zoning terminology. Furthermore Alternative E is financially realistic or at least approachable, especially with more focus on public/private financial support, and park management reprioritizing budget allocations. More specifically:

1. Supports a mandatory boater education permit in order to operate a vessel in the Park and significantly more focus on educating all visitors on the water.
2. Better protection for seagrass and nesting/fledging birds.
3. Does not further limit fishing opportunities to responsible/educated users of motorized vessels, therefore no negative impact to local economies and no negative impact to areas that would receive more pressure through the closures/restricted access suggestions in alternatives B, C, and D.
4. Supports designation of Backcountry Zones (the old no-motor zones) to Joe and Little Madeira along with better experiences for paddlers in current no motor zones. We do not support adding any additional no-motor or now called “backcountry zones” within ENP.
5. Supports more attention to teaching etiquette and other courtesies that need to be practiced by various visitors in the park.
6. Supports the concept of “Management by Water Depth Zones” but changes the definition to waters less than 2’ to only poling, paddling or using electric trolling motors in very specific areas. The zones must also allow motor vessel ingress and egress in all water 2’ or greater in depth, and allow a motor on the transom of vessels in the zone as long as it is trimmed up and not in use. We do not support the concept in any location except Snake Bight and Keys in front of Flamingo surrounded by water less than 2’ deep as indicated on NOAA charts.
7. Supports the implementation of a guideline requiring courteous operation when within the vicinity of paddlers and anchored vessels.
8. Promotes significantly increasing and maintaining gated markers throughout the park. GPS only get visitors to the vicinity of marked routes and do not tell them exactly where to run in routes marked on charts.
9. Supports low cost, high impact visitor experiences between Royal Palm and Flamingo.
10. Encourages outside partnerships and public sponsors.

Recommendations “Everglades for the Educated”

EDUCATION AND COMPLIANCE

- We enthusiastically embrace a mandatory boater certification permitting program. This would require all vessel operators in the Park to complete an online or traditional classroom study program and to pass a test to legally utilize park waters.
- We request a dramatic increase in focus on **education**. We must have ongoing focus on seminars and effective collaterals centered on user group etiquette, signage, park regulations, markers, navigation, wildlife, resource protection, the importance of catch and release, fish handling procedures, nesting facts, park history, and more.
- We value much **stiffer penalties** for people who repeatedly violate the park resources and regulations. To include mandatory education classes which the time to attend hurts much more than a trivial fine to as much as banning users from the Park for repeated and serious violations.
- We support significantly increasing signage, buoys, and markers to guide, educate and warn users of **safety to self and resources**. This will not take away from the visitor experience, however; it will have a major impact on resource protection, safety, and quality of experience for all visitors.
- We urge courteous operation throughout the Park which will improve fishing and paddling visitor experiences.

RESOURCE PROTECTION

- We do not support limiting boat size or motor horse power in the Park, but we do recommend a “Park Recommended Travel Corridor Chart” indicating trouble areas and preferred routes by vessel size/draft.
- We support designating Keys in ENP as a Wildlife Habitat Protection Zone (WLPZ) as long as the definition remains as it is now: Except to effect a rescue, or unless otherwise officially authorized, no person shall land on keys of the Everglades except those marked by signs denoting the area is open to the public, and on a critical case by case basis, “seasonally” establishing a buffer area to keep visitors from spooking important species birds off their nests. We could never support the definition of a WLPZ provided by a NPS biologist at a public workshop – that being a 500’ buffer would exist around each Key. Any future plan presented should include very specific language and detailed charts or aerial maps depicting extents of Zones and conditions which would trigger partial or full closures.
- We support the zoning concept of “Management by Water Depth” zones allowing only “paddling, poling or use of electric trolling motors” in very critical strategic locations. **Those locations should be carefully chosen based on physical evidence showing significant resource damage under current conditions. Park Staff should work closely with stakeholders to develop detailed charts showing proposed Pole and Troll zones prior to plan selection. Boats operating in these water depth designations may have an engine attached but it shall be trimmed up and not in use.**

Language should be added to any newly restricted area exempting the restrictions and permitting safe operation of vessels when weather and/or sea conditions necessitate seeking of safe harbor.

- We specifically recommend better located and maintained GATED markers for travel routes and points, to include Nine Mile Bank and other western portions of the park, as well as preferred travel corridors from Islamorada, Key Largo, and the Gulf through the park. This will reduce groundings, seagrass damage and help improve visitor experiences.

ACCESS

- We oppose eliminating access to any waters currently available to motorized vessels. The new backcountry zones marked in Alternative B that incorporates Hells Bay, parts of Tarpon Bay and the waters north of the Wilderness Water Way near Chokoloskee are unacceptable.
- We support reopening Joe and Little Madeira Bay as no-motor “Backcountry” zones. This assumes current no-motor zones and Joe/Little Madeira would now be called Backcountry Zones and would continue to be used only by *vessels with no motor or vessels in which the motor(s) is (are) removed from the gunnels or transom and are stored to be inoperable.*
- We support more focus on keeping motorized skiffs out of Backcountry Zones via education, stiffer penalties, and where practical, barriers at entrances.
- We wish for the establishment and marking of an Alternate Wilderness Waterway for paddlers. But motor vessels that have no other route to reach their destinations (such as the Rookery Branch or Rogers Creek), or where it overlaps the current wilderness waterway must be allowed access at safe speeds. Also, keep in mind that disoriented and distressed paddlers often need and seek help from motorized vessel users.
- We oppose prohibiting motor vessel users from camping and fishing experiences in Hells Bay, Lane Bay, North River and Tarpon Bay for example. Joe/Little Madeira Bay should be newly designated as Backcountry Zones. No additional waters new waters should be designated under the new “back country” zone.

VISITOR EXPERIENCE

- We support better maintenance of existing camp sites.
- We support building new camp sites when ENP budget or public funding/contributions become available. Priority being new campsites in the old no-motor zones and Joe/Little Madeira Bay, because over a half day’s travel by paddle to or in no motor/paddle only zones is pointless.
- We suggest establishing a guideline that requires courteous operation of all vessels when within the vicinity of paddled vessels or anchored/staked up vessels.

- We support increased activities for land based visitors between Royal Palm and Flamingo during peak visitor times.
 - Dedicated bike path with more land based fishing opportunities and more paddle launch areas also provided between Coe Center and Flamingo
 - Regular and expanded programs to include Nike missile site
 - Bus service with stops and for interpretations along the route

Regional Economy

- Since the new General Management Plan has the potential to greatly influence the regional economy and in light of several federal regulations that require consideration of those impacts on agency actions we urge a complete Social / Economic / Cultural study be implemented. This Study must identify existing activities on the area and how they will be impacted by any proposed new regulations.