

O Outlook



TRILLION-DOLLAR BABY

Think you owe a lot to Visa?
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TREASURE IN OUR MIDST

Saving the Everglades



Photo Courtesy Ron Bergeron, Florida Wildlife Commission

A misty morning in the cypress swamps of the Florida Everglades.

ABOUT TODAY'S OUTLOOK

I've lost count of how many dollars have been sunk into Everglades restoration. It's certainly a lot of greenbacks.

What I do know is, decades of efforts to provide more, cleaner water are showing results. Bird and animal species are proliferating — you don't need to hike deep into Florida's outback to see an alligator these days, for example.

What's next for the River of Grass? We asked Ron Bergeron, who has served on the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission since August 2007.

Bergeron's an interesting character, to say the least. Read the Q&A on Page 3 that Senior Editorial Writer Gary Stein conducted with "Alligator Ron" for a look at the next challenges in Everglades restoration.

We also encourage you to read visiting journalist Jaideep Hardikar's first impression column on the Everglades on Page 2.

Jaideep is a reporter for the *Daily News & Analysis* newspaper in India. He has written numerous stories for the paper about efforts to save the tiger population in his homeland. Today he offers us a thoughtful, almost philosophical view of the River of Grass that so many of us take for granted.

And don't forget our Opinion page. This week, columnist Kingsley Guy offers his take on what the GOP needs to do to stop its implosion. Namely, he says the Republican Party needs to embrace its true roots by rejecting the religious right.

In addition, freelance writer Lois Lindstrom makes a pitch for expanding America's nuclear power production. It's an unusual one you probably haven't heard about before. A hint? Floating small nukes on barges.

A third column you won't want to miss is health care executive Stephen Ronik's prescription for national health care reform.

Give it all a read, and, as always, make sure you tell us what you think at letters@sun-sentinel.com.

Antonio Fins
EDITORIAL PAGE EDITOR

'Gladesman' has stories, passion about Florida's beloved wilderness

Ron Bergeron's passion for the Everglades is six decades in the making.

The 65-year-old from Davie first started going to the Everglades at the age of 3 with his grandfather, who was a game warden. He calls himself a Gladesman and "Alligator Ron" — he got his hand bitten while wrestling an alligator in 2006 — and talks about how Florida schools years ago used to have alligator wrestling teams instead of football teams.

His stories are endless, some taller than others. Listen long enough, and he'll tell you about the time he got lost in the 'Glades as a youngster and wound up walking and wading through the River of Grass for three days and 40 miles until reaching the old Andytown.

South Floridians know him as the namesake of the Bergeron Rodeo Grounds in Davie, but one of his most important tasks these days is as a commissioner for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. He was appointed to the post in 2007 by Gov. Charlie Crist.

A well-known developer, Bergeron has rock mining interests that concern environmentalists because of possible contamination. Bergeron counters that the rock mining has never had an environmental violation, and actually helps the area by producing rock for roads, schools and a reservoir being built for Everglades restoration.

Regardless, now that Bergeron is on the commission, he serves as



Joe Cavaretta, Sun Sentinel

a point man and advocate for the massive Everglades restoration project, while constantly trying to bring awareness to the public and politicians. Among recent travelers on his airboat were Gov. Crist, U.S. Sen. Bill Nelson and Interior Secretary Ken Salazar.

The political visits will probably increase in coming months, as the Obama administration has set aside almost \$300 million for Everglades restoration, finally contributing some of the federal government's part of a supposed 50-50 partnership with the state of Florida.

During and before a recent airboat ride deep into the Everglades with senior editorial writer Gary Stein, staff photographer Joe Cavaretta and visiting journalist Jaideep Hardikar, Bergeron talked at length about the future — and past — of the famed River of Grass.

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Online

Ron Bergeron talks about the 'river of grass' in a video report at SunSentinel.com/bergeron

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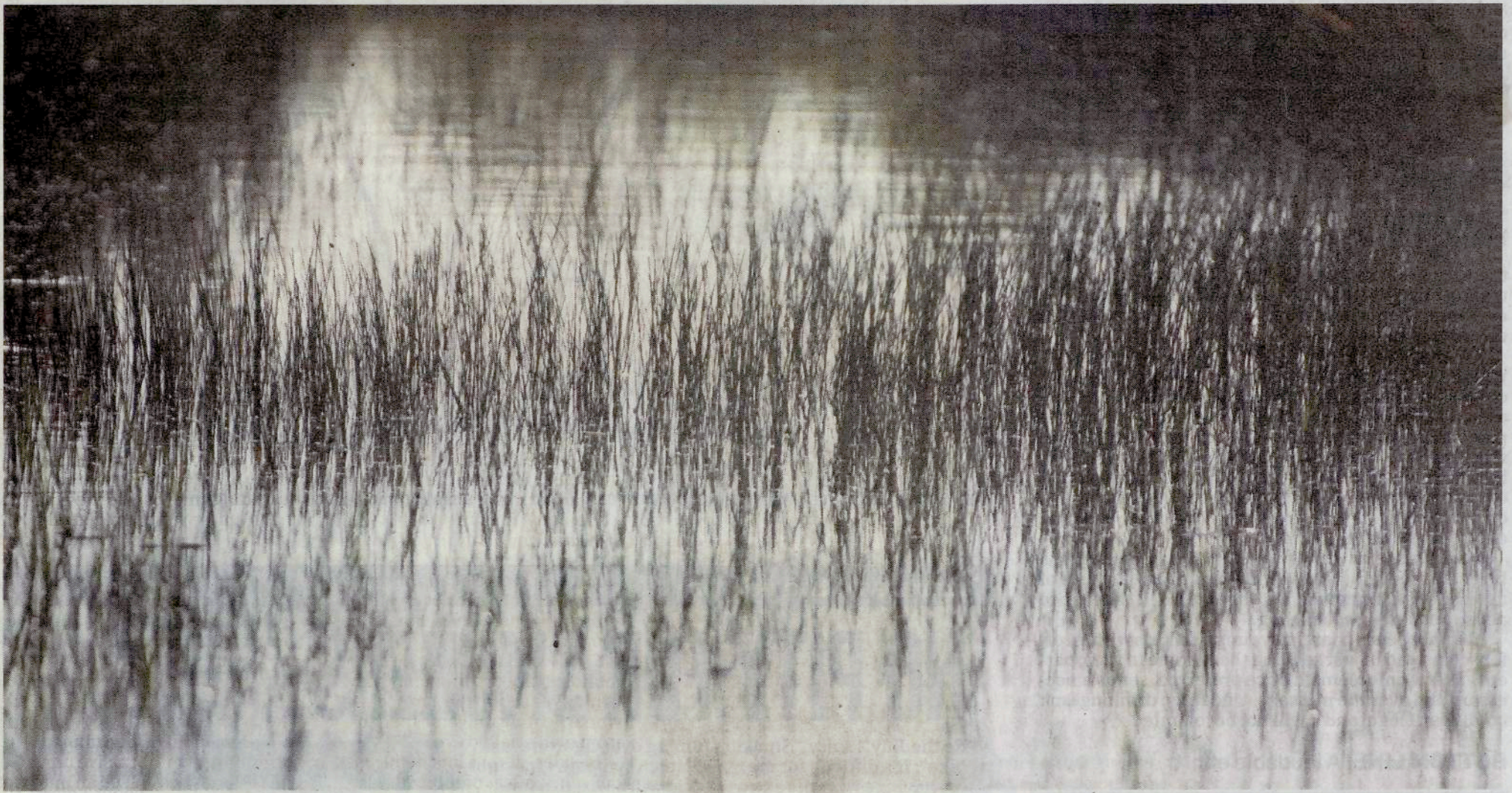
Alligator



Black Bear



Florida Panther



The river of grass area of the Everglades.

Joe Cavaretta, Sun Sentinel

Q&A

The case for preserving Florida's unique outback

How do you see the Everglades looking 20 to 50 years from now?

By 20 years from now, the Everglades restoration will leave the Everglades in much better shape. All the components of the restoration should help. They include pre-treatment areas so we have better quality of water, reservoirs to store surplus water, and de-compartmentalizing the system so you have more of a natural sheet flow. The Everglades will be closer to its natural state and not have to be micromanaged every time you have a tropical storm or an act of God.

The Everglades restoration people — assuming we get funding, and the federal government is a true partner matching what Florida has already funded — should put us in the position where we have stopped the irreversible damage within 20 years.

Do you remember your first impression of the Everglades?

As I entered the Everglades with my grandfather on that airboat, it was just majestic. It overwhelmed me. It was truly God's creation. The wildlife. The plants. The trees. The smells. The sunsets. I've enjoyed it for the past 60 years. I saw my first panther camping with the Boy Scouts where the hockey arena is now. I drove an airboat through many places that are cities today — Miramar, Pembroke Pines, Southwest Ranches, Davie, Weston, Sunrise and Plantation, all the way through Tamarac, Coral Springs and Parkland.

I grew up in the Everglades. It's part of my Gladesman-cracker culture. Some people say "cracker" is a bad word, but I'm proud to be one. It's my culture. I don't spend most of my weekends at five-star restaurants and hotels. I spend them in the Everglades.

How much different are the Everglades now than when you were a kid?

I first entered the Everglades with my grandfather in 1946. He was a game warden. What my eyes saw then was a more natural environment. There was more wildlife. There were very few levees and pump stations, and there was more of a natural flow of water from Lake Okeechobee to Florida Bay.

Then there was the '47 flood. We had six feet of water in our house. In '48, we had four feet. The South Florida region lived within the elements of nature prior to 1949.

In 1949, our forefathers drew a line. They said the Everglades inside of the levees will be preserved forever. Outside of the levees will be drained for agriculture, development and to protect the safety and welfare of the general public.

The Everglades was 6 million acres. Our forefathers chose to save about 3 million — about 750,000 acres in state lands, 800,000 in the Big Cypress and 1,500,000 in Everglades National Park.

After 1949, the Everglades started to change by being more compartmentalized.

Prior to those lines being drawn, there were very few cities in Broward County. Today, we have 31 cities. We've developed from seagrass to sawgrass to the lines that our forefathers drew.

Whether the decision by our forefathers was right or wrong, I was just a little boy then. I have fought my whole life to protect the area they set aside.

How did the Everglades get into disrepair?

We built levees and pump stations and compartmentalized the system, stopping the natural sheet flow of water.

A wetland should only be about 1 to 1 1/2 feet of water. In a 100-year act of God, it can go up to 3 or 3 1/2 feet for a 60-to-90-day period.

In 1982 and 1994, there were catastrophic events with high water for two years, which extended the high water from a natural act of God to a 500-year man-made event.

Some of these problems are caused by the construction of the Tamiami Trail, Alligator Alley and multiple levees. Plus, water being pumped in from developments and agriculture areas.

Most people think more water is a better wetland. It's exactly the opposite. You get three or four feet, it's a reservoir, not a wetland. The birds can't get footing. A dry season cleanses the wetlands. A drought is healthy to a wetland.

What are the biggest problems that need attention?

The biggest problems are long durations of high water levels and the quality of water. If the duration of high water lasts 60 to 90 days, that's natural. If that duration is longer, it's unnatural.

They need to prioritize projects, and do the ones that would stop irreversible damage first. That would buy us the time to complete the rest of the Everglades restoration, the largest restoration in the history of America.

The reconstruction of the Tamiami Trail to let the water flow should be a priority [construction of a one-mile bridge over Tamiami Trail to allow fresh water to flow into Everglades National Park and Florida Bay will be one of the first projects].

Everglades National Park south of the trail needs water. Everglades National Park is too dry, and Florida Bay is dying because it needs more fresh water flow.

North of the Trail is often like a reservoir, with long durations of high water, which affect the wildlife. A wading bird doesn't have a three-foot-long leg. A panther can't live underwater.

Half the Everglades north of the Tamiami Trail are drowning. Half the Everglades south of the Tamiami Trail is too dry. So improving the flow through Tamiami Trail would equalize water levels. It would also create

shared impacts and shared adversities over the entire Everglades.

The federal government's proposed infusion of \$278 million next year certainly will help. How do you think it should be spent?

Prioritizing projects is critical. Tamiami Trail's reconstruction should be the number one project because it stops irreversible damage in the heart of the Everglades.

This will enable us in much of the Everglades to have shared adversity, shared impacts and equalization of water levels. There is a difference of opinion on how to fix the Tamiami Trail. But everybody agrees it should be done.

Are invasive species a problem that needs immediate attention?

Yes, both invasive vegetation and wildlife need attention.

There are estimates of 150,000 invasive snakes. The best way you can address that issue is to offer a bounty. In my opinion as a Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission member, we should let the old Gladesman-crackers and sportsmen who know that the environment help the agencies to get rid of the snakes.

There have been extensive programs to deal with invasive vegetation, like the Brazilian pepper and melaleuca. We are well on our way to dealing with it.

What species are facing extinction?

The panther, of course.

Two well-known endangered birds are the Everglades snail kite and the Cape Sable seaside sparrow. We have 67 threatened and endangered species which could become extinct unless Everglades restoration is completed.

What can the average person do to make sure the Everglades stays healthy?

Learn what makes a healthy wetland. Encourage education about the Everglades, one of the 10 Natural Wonders of the World we are lucky to have in our backyard.

How do you balance the need to manage the resource with the need to give people access to the Everglades?

There are two schools of thought. One is that you should stay out and

the Everglades should be treated like a museum.

I believe people should have the ability to enjoy this natural resource so long as they do it with respect and in accordance with proper management practices. The public should be allowed to see it, enjoy it and fall in love with the Everglades, just like I did. If I had not been able to go with my grandfather and if my access to this natural wonder had been restricted, I wouldn't today be spending half my time trying to protect the Everglades.

What do you say to those who claim your rock mining interests are damaging the environment that you are trying to save?

In order to mine rock, you have to have a permit from the local, state and federal environmental agencies and others. Scientific studies have shown there are actually less pollutants in the water after rock mining than before. None of my quarries have been shown to create environmental damage.

Quarries provide materials which enable people to have a home. They provide materials for roads and even for Everglades restoration projects.

Rock mines are so benign that three are being incorporated into the Everglades restoration project. Many of the parks in Broward County — T.Y. Park, Snyder Park and others — are former quarries. We have many beautiful housing developments built around quarries.

Can you tell us how the alligator wrestling incident [in 2006, state wildlife agents talked to Bergeron about a wrestling match with an alligator] occurred and what was the final disposition of that?

There was no "case." My family has been in Florida for six generations. Wrestling alligators is part of my Gladesman-cracker culture. It's like running with the bulls in Spain. One hundred years ago, there were alligator wrestling teams in many towns across Florida. It is part of the Indian culture, too, and I was raised in the Everglades with the Indians.

The alligator did not get hurt. I did.

Interview by Senior Editorial Writer Gary Stein. To respond, e-mail us at letters@sun-sentinel.com.