

Restoring Wetlands

If there is magic on this planet, it is contained in water.
—Loran Eisely, *The Immense Journey*

You've probably heard about Florida's plan to buy out the country's largest producer of sugar cane so it can reclaim 187,000 acres of land to help restore water flow to the Everglades. Perhaps you know, too, that a large portion – nearly half – of the Everglades has already been irretrievably lost to development, farmland, and canals dug to channel the natural, sometimes inconvenient flow of water into a more acceptable pattern. But while unique, the Everglades are not the only wetlands to have suffered at human hands. The United States has lost about 53 percent of its wetlands in the last 200 years, including 9.3 million acres in Florida.

Many people still consider wetlands wastelands; if land can't be developed and used productively, it's worthless. But who gets to define "productive"? Is land only productive when it is serving a human cause or filling a human need? Luckily, we've begun to wake up and realize that we do not have the sole say in how things go here on planet earth. We may think we do. We may even get away with our shenanigans for a long time. But actions always have consequences, and, like karma, the consequences may not be apparent in one lifetime, or even two, but somewhere down the road, someone always has to pay unless reparations are made. That's what we're trying to do now, make things right so our children and grandchildren don't have to pay the price of our arrogance, our ignorance, our inaction. I don't know enough about the state's Everglades/big sugar plan to comment on it specifically, but it sounds like 187,000 acres is a good place to start, don't you think?

So, okay, the Everglades encompass a big area. And important. No other ecosystem like it in the world. But what about other wetlands? Do we really need them? What purpose do they serve? And what are the consequences of destroying them?

You may not have to look any further than your own neighborhood during the next big afternoon thunderstorm for an answer. Our street becomes a rushing river when it rains. Some yards revert to their natural state – water-filled. (In the not-so-distant past, Sarasota was pockmarked with wetlands. Now we call these areas neighborhoods, sub-divisions.) If you want a more dramatic example, there's one many of us are unlikely to forget anytime soon; the images have been burned into our retinas by the saturation of media



coverage at the time: the flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina. (It's widely believed that the deterioration of Louisiana's coastal wetlands contributed to the severity of flooding there.)

And it's not just flooding. Coastal wetlands help to prevent shoreline erosion. Wetlands also act as natural sponges, storing water and filtering and removing pollutants and excess nutrients before releasing the water on its journey to the Gulf or the underground aquifer that supplies our drinking water. Wetlands are biologically rich, home to many species of animals and plants... so many plants, in fact, that wetlands are natural reservoirs for storing green house gases, thus possibly helping to mitigate climate disruption.

Some of the consequences of wetlands loss include: increased (and more severe) flooding; soil erosion and sedimentation; changes in water chemistry that lead to the degradation of waterways and aquifers; explosive increases in algae blooms and bacterial populations; and the consequent occurrence of "dead zones" (virtually uninhabitable by any living creature), such as those found in the Gulf of Mexico. In short, wetlands are critical for maintaining biological life, including ours.

Perhaps there are technologies that could be developed that would do the same things for us that wetlands do. But we've been down this technological road before, and there are always hidden potholes and roadblocks with which we must contend... and, often, tremendous cost. Nature does what it does for free. It seems wetlands have always served a human cause, a human need, but we just didn't recognize it. Now it's going to take some money and planning to undo what we've done, but restoring healthy wetlands, including the Everglades, could ultimately make all our lives a whole lot better.

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