

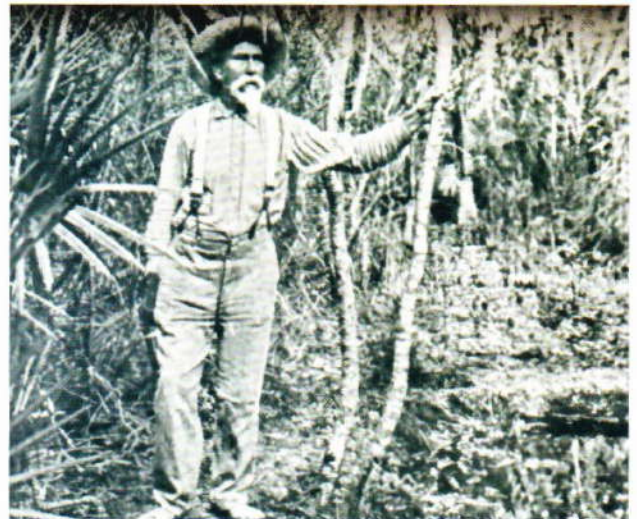
Early Naturalists in the Everglades

BY JAMES A. KUSHLAN, PH.D.

A person newly arrived can see how wonderful South Florida is, but not know how even more wonderful it used to be; learning how the Everglades was can help us understand how to make it better again.

These thoughts turned out to be my summary remarks during a Miami Book Fair conversation with Audubon Florida's Executive Director Julie Wraithmell. We were talking about my newest book, *Seeking the American Tropics, South Florida's Early Naturalists*. Julie had asked, "What did I want readers to take away from the book?" and "how did I hope it will affect the way readers see South Florida?" Although I expected some sort of question along those lines, I hadn't prepared an answer until the moment arrived: We can't know what Everglades we want until we know how it used to be.

How do we know how the Everglades used to be? The authentic sources are those who experienced it first. *Seeking the American Tropics* tells the stories of many dozens of explorers, naturalists, and scientists who ventured, observed, and reported on South Florida as it was.



Charles Torrey Simpson on an exploring trip to the Florida Keys. Simpson hiked alone throughout South Florida sleeping where he could, studying the environment, and searching for plants and tree snails. He shared his insights in four wonderfully-written books and many articles. Having retired from the Smithsonian to Little River, he became well-known and well-appreciated as a scientist and character, and his achievements were recognized by the University of Miami's first ever honorary doctorate.

We can overlay such early naturalists' observations with modern scientists' more technical understanding of the Everglades' natural processes to suggest how the Everglades used to work ecologically - and can be made to work again.

John Kunkel Small on a plant-collecting expedition in the Everglades, shown behind his car, which he called his "weed wagon." Small, a botanist at the New York Botanical Garden and an expert on southeastern flora, explored South Florida for decades, often under the patronage of Charles Deering. His writings forcefully documented the environmental changes being caused by drainage and development.



A little-appreciated aspect of the Everglades' history is just how late its environment was described, even though South Florida was encountered very early in European explorations, merely 20 years after Columbus' first landing. In his expedition to South Florida, Juan Ponce de León made sure to locate freshwater sources, always a concern for mariners. He found two - northern Biscayne Bay and an outflow into what is now called Ponce de Leon Bay - near the southwestern tip of the peninsula. By 1513, the two main discharges of the Everglades had been discovered.

But the Everglades itself remained a mystery to settlers for several centuries more, mainly because it was inaccessible, not very useful, and protected by Native Americans. It wasn't until the Seminole Wars of the mid-1800s that non-Native Americans traversed the glades, and it is from these soldiers, shredded by sawgrass and wearied by pushing canoes through mud and bugs, that came our first descriptions of the true Everglades. Naturalists accompanied the troops and were among all who died during the conflict. But by the Wars' end, the Everglades was known and mapped. This was 1858; exploring the Everglades coincided with exploration of the most remote places remaining on Earth, such as the Congo and Amazon.

Civil War followed, and then early pioneers, practical naturalists by necessity, as they, like Native Americans before them, had to live off the region's wildlife and aquatic resources. It wasn't until the 1890s, when the railroad arrived, that trained naturalists could readily access South Florida. Finally, they were able to push into the glades following canals, military trails, and primitive roads.

They were exploring an Everglades already changing from drainage. In the first decades of the 1900s, some of the great names in natural science came to South Florida, mostly on winter junkets and mostly at the invitation and expense of millionaire patrons luxuriating seasonally in Coconut Grove. This was the time of botanist John Kunkel Small and resident naturalist Charles Torrey Simpson and many others, who, by the great crash of the mid-1920s, had made South Florida as well-known biologically as could be accomplished at the time.

South Florida is blessed by its historical ironies, naturalists' stories being no exception. For example, while the naturalists' explorations were being funded by deeply conservative captains of industry, it was the liberal progressive movement that was draining the Everglades. Nearly all the otherwise revered naturalists were devoted to making the environment ever so much better by introducing non-native plants and animals; some were paid by David Fairchild, a botanist and plant explorer, to do so. John Gifford, the first graduate forester in the U.S., was a full-scale developer. While some of these men wrote eloquently about the environmental destruction they were seeing, it was not these scientists who spearheaded local conservation, but rather civic-minded women such as Mary Barr Munroe and May Mann Jennings working through their Audubon societies and women's clubs. They were the ones who created the law to protect birds, manatees, and a precious bit of the Everglades, Royal Palm State Park, which 30 years later was to become the nucleus of a great national park in the Everglades.



Discover more at
JamesAKushlan.com

Jim and Julie's conversation can be seen at
miamibookfaironline.com by searching for
"Conversation. Seeking the American Tropics.
South Florida's Early Naturalists."