

A skeleton staff of five work hard to protect the park. Mike Owens, the park biologist since 1993, still exudes his enthusiasm over 25 years later. "The amazing biological diversity in the park means that no two days have ever been exactly alike," he said.

Owens and his colleagues are assisted by a remarkable group of volunteers called Friends of the Fakahatchee. The organization is currently collaborating with the park to fund and build an interpretive pavilion on the Tamiami Trail at the Big Cypress Bend and open a visitors center near the park headquarters. In addition to an interpretive display, the pavilion will feature a rain shelter, restrooms, and connections to a rebuilt boardwalk extending out into the preserve.

The history of the park is fascinating, both troubling and

promising. This was one of the last pieces that was put together to protect the Everglades, Marjorie Stoneman Douglas' River of Grass. Everglades National Park was created in 1947, but not until 1974 was land purchased for the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve State Park. The property was acquired in response to development pressures and sprawl in Collier County, which rarely turned down any project. Grandiose development plans associated with Golden Gate Estates in Naples and Port of the Islands envisioned residential projects that would house thousands of people with homes on canals carved into the Everglades. As the early phases of these developments proceeded, the devastating impacts on the Everglades became all too clear. The residential canals sucked water out of the Everglades into the Prairie and Faka Union

canals, lowering groundwater levels up to eight feet in some areas, stealing life-giving water from native plants.

Looking at an aerial view of the area today on Google Maps, the leftover scars are plainly visible. The park purchase in 1974 helped stem the assault on Everglades from the west, but much work remains to be done. Today the west end of the state park and those leftover scars are part of a multibillion-dollar, multi-agency effort with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to plug the Prairie Canal and restore natural water flows through the Everglades to the

Ten Thousand Islands National Wildlife Area and Gulf.

At over 70,000 acres, Fakahatchee Strand Preserve is the state's largest although it hosts only about 100,000 visitors a year, far less than others like Bahia Honda in the Florida Keys which sees over 700,000 annually. The park is 20 miles long north to south and about 10 miles at its widest east to west.

The park has recovered nicely from being heavily logged from 1944 into the 1950s for pine and cypress. Cypress wood is highly water resistant and was in demand during World War II for making aircraft carrier decks and PT boats, among other vessels. The tiny communities of Copeland and Jerome within the park are reminders of those days, having served as home to loggers in that era.

The freshwater lakes where I had tussled with the bass were created in the 1950s and '60s. According to Don Harmon, who worked with his father Forrest, they operated big cranes with buckets to gouge out limestone rocks and gravel for Alligator Alley and other highways. Today, Don lives part time on Lake Harmon, helping the park staff keep an eye on things. If you see Don on his dock, give him a wave.

The canals along the Tamiami Trail were carved out much earlier in the 1920s with big steam-powered dredges to provide fill upon which to build the highway linking the east and west coasts of Florida. Back then the highway was called the Eighth Wonder of the World. The fact that the Fakahatchee Strand recuperated into a reasonably functioning ecosystem after all this poking and prodding is a testament to nature's resilience. Now the question Mike Owens and many others

Snook caught in upper Faka Union River, a tight, mangrove-lined creek best suited for kayaks or canoes. The nearby East River, explained below, is another option.



HOW TO MAKE RESERVATIONS TO FISH THE EAST RIVER

(FROM PARK WEBSITE)

THE EAST RIVER CANOE LAUNCH is tucked away down an unmarked dirt drive off U.S. 41 (the Tamiami Trail), 5 miles west of State Road 29, on the south side of the road. The river is a primarily brackish water and tidal responsive creek that flows southwest to Fakahatchee Bay and the Ten Thousand Islands. It is a beautiful and varied creek, passing through a succession of small lakes and canopied mangrove tunnels before widening into a tidal river. Maps of the river are available at the launch and at the park visitor center. This location can be accessed by appointment only. Appointments can be made the day of or the day before by calling the park 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday, at 239-961-1925.