

One man's trek through the Everglades

By Scott Francisco
Special to The Star

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK, Fla. — Squinting against the naked sun, I peer through the saw grass that surrounds me, shoulder high. I have approached another barrier. A body of water — if green slime can be called water — edged with dense jungle, stretches as far as I can see in either direction.

This is where the 'gators are. By now alligators are old hat; my dangerous reptile count is pushing 30. But the one I see now through the trees is huge, sunning its 12-foot form on the water's edge. I begin to approach it.

Twenty feet and no movement. Fifteen feet, 10 feet. Suddenly it explodes; uncoiling like a huge spring it throws its 300 pounds of muscle into the water and out of sight; the huge splash starts a chain reaction — turtles plop into the water, fish start and birds burst screaming into the air.

About four more healthy looking alligators slip silently beneath the green surface like sinister submarines. Somehow I have to cross this water; I don't have a boat.

Numerous warnings

After considering every option I take hold of my walking stick and begin to wade into the water. Alligators are nowhere to be seen, and that scares me. The slough is not deep, but the bottom is like quicksand. The other side is close; up to my knees, thighs, waist . . . a little more . . . there.

I reach the other side and throw myself on to the dry bank. Here I sit and contemplate what I have just done. The Everglades is not a smart place to be.

It is my second day in the glades; I am here despite numerous warnings not to be. I remember a conversation I had at the Everglades National Park office. "But people just don't walk cross-country in the Everglades," she said, "especially solo."

I am beginning to understand. Receiving the necessary permits to use the off-trail Everglades back-country was not easy. After all, why would anyone want to?

The Everglades is a vast expanse of wilderness, a "river of grass" flowing from Lake Okeechobee and covering most of south Florida. It contains some of the United States' most unique and diverse ecosystems, with many animals and plants found



nowhere else in the world.

Winter is the dry season here and the test for almost all of the organisms including, I am to find, myself. Water is scarce; saw grass plains usually flooded with at least a few inches of water are now dry. According to the book, dry enough to permit my trip.

My plan is to trek south through the heart of the glades to the ocean. From here I will go west, following the coast to the city of Flamingo, the southernmost outpost of civilization in continental U.S.A. The trip is only 25 to 30 miles, an easy five-day hike by usual standards. The Everglades, however, are not usual.

Alone in the Everglades. The angry sun scorches, the ground sucks at my feet with every step and the saw grass becomes a hell all its own. Sometimes around my ankles and sometimes over my head, each blade is armed with three rows of razor-sharp teeth.

It tears and pulls at my clothing, shreds skin and often brings progress to a halt. Each step is a battle. The glades are winning.

Around here the only water to be found is a bacteria soup. After slogging my way only seven miles I am exhausted. I want to stop, but it seems if I do I will sink up to my neck in the mud. My water supply is already dwindling and five days out here seems an impossibility.

Digging into the soft mud with my machete, I find water only two feet down. But after a labori-

ous filtering process it is still unfit to drink.

Looking around, I begin to realize where I am: isolated in a sea of saw grass that flows endlessly in all directions.

Time has come to make camp, and I decide to explore one of the numerous "hardwood hammocks." These are large clusters of trees growing on what appear to be small islands scattered throughout the grassy plains. I am brought to my knees as I hack and force my way through the tangled mangrove trees that surround the hammock.

This is the home of the deadly diamond-back rattlesnake; it is also dense, denser than any tropical rain forest. The interior is worth it, though, opening up as I reach the centre. Shaded and cool, I rest.

All around me a soft green light has filtered through the leafy canopy overhead and is now illuminating a primeval jungle. Giant mahogany trees grow here, surrounded by exotic vegetation that seems to come from another planet.

This oasis from the mud and burning sun appear to be the perfect place to camp. But after sitting on a log to rest, I hear the drone of thousands of mosquitoes homing in on their new prey. Mosquitoes like shade, too. Tonight I will camp on the mud.

An Everglades sunset take shape as I watch. Blue skies slowly dim to a transparent pur-

ple melting into vibrant reds and oranges as they meet the sun. Slowly the glowing orb sinks and as the moon rises this place becomes a strange paradise. The sky, clear and open, reveals stars that meet horizon in all directions.

I awaken as the sunrise spills a variety of warm colors into my tent. Silence. A flock of ibises fly over, pure white, in search of water.

Day two and more saw grass, more mud. The Everglades, home of the panther, wild boar, bear, alligator, poisonous snake and even a few crocodiles. Thinking back I find it hard to come up with a good reason for being here; a reason to put myself into a position where pain is inevitable. These thoughts began to gnaw at me, driving deeper with every painful step as I start, once again, to make my way south.

Flamingo is becoming an impossible goal; just making it out of here will be a success.

After surviving my close encounter with the alligators, I explore several more tree islands in

search of a suitable place to camp. Again I find I will have to set up on the mud. It's actually not mud, it's called marl. There is a hard crust of dead vegetation that sits on top, cracked and dry; it's this that allows me to walk at all here. Even so each movement pushes the crust under the wet mixture of clay and peat and I begin to sink.

I start preparing supper on my tiny stove; I am almost out of fuel. I have used up most of it in an attempt at boiling enough bad water to replenish my supplies. Using some of my last water I realize this will have to be my final night here. As I have seen around me in the dried skeletons and shells of various animals, nothing can go for long without water and I am no exception.

Another spectacular sunset, another sleep interrupted by the eerie cry of the anhinga bird, another explosive sunrise.

I start back early, in hopes of beating the noon-day sun. But I have come too far, the sun overtakes me and with only half a canteen of water remaining, the

possibility of dehydration is becoming all too likely. No shelter from the sun; the heat is unbearable and I am quickly sweating away the water I need so badly.

Although I am sorry the trip has to be cut short, the thought of an ice cold soda overpowers all others and spurs me on. My mouth is so dry, my legs ache, my feet are sore and blistered. With each step I break through the hard crust and sink into the mud, sometimes up to my knees. I feel as if I'm getting nowhere.

I should have been more prepared; but I remember I was prepared. I was prepared for a wilderness where no preparation is ever quite sufficient. I snap out of my daze and try to focus all my attention and energy on my goal, the road, the only road through the National Park.

My trip comes to an end at the Royal Palms Visitors Centre. Wide-eyed tourists try not to stare as I stumble out of the jungle on to the nicely paved nature trail. Covered in dirt from head to toe, I sense a mixture of horror and curiosity from this group and expect to hear the click of cameras as they examine me from a distance.

Gained courage

My rather long stay at the drinking fountain is followed by a trip to the pop machine where I try one of each of the five choices. I revel in the feel of solid ground under my feet and, finding a shaded bench, I wait for a ride out of here.

Finally gaining enough courage, a group of tourists approaches me and, after feeding me several sandwiches, one lady pipes up.

"I'm sure you've been asked this a thousand times, but why did you do what you did?"

The question has become easier now that the trip is over. My journey has not gone as planned, but this has taught me something that I might never have learned if the glades had let me off easily. Out in the Everglades there was no one to help, no one to ask and no one to blame but myself.

I have experienced the power of a threatened wilderness and its intolerance to human invasion; like the alligator once driven near extinction by man's greed, the Everglades can be destroyed but never tamed.

There is a reason that no one hikes through the heart of the Everglades. Maybe I should have listened to all the advice. Somehow, I'll always be glad I didn't.

Author is outfitted in comfortable walking gear, hat and backpack (inset). Below, he rests, alone in the wilderness.



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