

Proposed wilderness designation threatens tribes access to Big Cypress National Preserve

BY KELLY J. FARRELL
Special to the Tribune

Congress is to consider a protection that could limit access to Big Cypress National Preserve ahead of the Preserve’s 50th anniversary.

Despite opposition from the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Florida Fish and Wildlife Commission (FWC) and more than 25,000 other vocal opponents, the National Park Service is moving ahead with the wilderness designation at the park located in South Florida. It is the most restrictive land policy possible, advocates said. The wilderness designation is meant to protect the Preserve, particularly from vehicular traffic and machinery.

“People don’t understand what a wilderness designation will do. Even for the Preserve to be managed, this hinders their ability to properly address invasive species,” said Betty Osceola, a member of the Panther Clan of the Miccosukee Tribe and an environmental steward.

Pythons and other animals as well as plants, including melaleuca and Brazilian pepper, require access to be managed, said Osceola. “But if you can’t go out with machinery and vehicles, you can’t manage these,” she added.

Osceola is particularly concerned about access to ceremonial ground, she said.

She is a resident of Ochopee and operates Buffalo Tiger Airboat Tours in Miami. Airboats are one of the common activities within Big Cypress that could become limited.

The Preserve is approximately 729,000 acres, making vehicles necessary for practical access throughout the Preserve. It’s larger than Rhode Island, the National Park Service points out.

Osceola warns the wilderness designation will keep Miccosukee and Seminole tribes off the land they have traditionally used.

“The proposed areas to designate wilderness hinder the tribe and members’ access to ceremonial ground,” said Osceola. “This includes Loop Road where we have a ceremony scheduled in April,” she added.

Osceola echoed the stance of the tribe in their letters of opposition to Big Cypress National Preserve’s superintendent Thomas Forsyth. Now, the letter writing extends to Congress.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as an area “untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain.”

The Tribe wrote that the Miccosukee and Seminole people are at home in the Big Cypress National Preserve.

And, Osceola stated that the concept of a place “untrammelled by man” does not exist anymore, if it even did in the 1960s.

“Wilderness devoid of human activity doesn’t make sense,” said Osceola. “The process of a Wilderness Designation needs to be redefined. There is no area not trammelled by human activity. I don’t think that exists. Maybe deep in the ocean.”

Instead, people need to maintain and improve their connection with the Preserve, taking care of it and the environment overall, rather than separating people from nature, living only in cities, she added.

“The foundation of national parks and designation of wilderness areas has often resulted in the eviction of the Indigenous people who live there, causing direct harm to the ecosystems which they had been stewarding,” wrote Miccosukee Chairman Talbert Cypress in a letter dated Oct. 18, 2023, to Forsyth.

He warned that history at Yellowstone



Kelly J. Farrell

Betty Osceola, of the Panther Clan of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, speaks to a group at a landmark along U.S. 41, Big Cypress National Preserve, in Ochopee on Oct. 14, 2023, about the history of park designations limiting Indigenous people's access to land. The National Park Service is sending a proposed wilderness designation at Big Cypress National Preserve to Congress.

and Everglades National Parks shouldn’t be repeated. The foundation of Everglades National Park resulted in the eviction of six villages and the removal of a reservation spanning 99,200 acres, Cypress wrote.

“Neither park is healthier now than it was when stewarded by our ancestors and relatives,” he continued. “It is not the presence, or lack of human habitation that defines the health of a landscape, but rather, it is the relationship of humans to that land which determines the land’s fate,” Cypress said.

The Preserve continues to be home to the Miccosukee after centuries with 15 active traditional villages, multiple ceremonial grounds and burial grounds, he added.

The land area of the wilderness designation is yet to be decided, but proposals include 40 percent of the Preserve.

“Big Cypress is unique, not just in its physical landscape, but in its management. It is one of the only places where Indigenous peoples, settlers, hunters, fishermen, conservationists, and our plant and animal relatives live in relative harmony,” Cypress wrote.

The Miccosukee and Seminole tribes shall retain use and occupancy of the entirety of the Preserve, Cypress advised.

Joining his sentiments are other Indigenous groups.

“The American Indian Movement and United Confederation of Taino people are highly opposed to the Wilderness Designation at Big Cypress,” said Robert Rosa, chairman of the American Indian Movement of Florida and a member of the Taino iukaieke Guainia, a tribe of the Virgin Islands. “We’ve all taken a stance and we feel it’s going to do a great injustice, not only to the Seminole and Miccosukee, but to the people they’ve allowed on their land and are friends with.”

FWC wrote of its opposition to the designation.

“Any wilderness designation would deny public access and traditional uses within the BCNP as originally envisioned and intended by the U.S. Congress, representatives of the State of Florida, and many stakeholders

involved in the establishment of this ecological and recreational resource,” wrote FWC chairman Rodney Barreto in a letter dated Feb. 6 to the U.S. Department of Interior.

The wilderness designation would contribute to loss of biodiversity, Barreto added.

DEP warned of a potential hindrance to continuing the Western Everglades Restoration Project, which is to restore water flow, or hydrology, to the Preserve if the designation garners Congress’s approval. The WERP is vital to Seminole and Miccosukee tribes who are dependent on the health of the lands within Big Cypress and adjacent areas as part of their heritage and traditional practices, wrote DEP secretary Shawn Hamilton in a letter dated March 14 to the Department of Interior.

Another significant concern includes fire response and emergency response, Hamilton wrote.

Senators Rick Scott and Marco Rubio wrote to Deb Haaland on March 18 advising her that the U.S. Department of Interior should not support a wilderness designation at Big Cypress for these same reasons of proper resource management, public access and significance to tribes.

“We share the concerns raised by stakeholders that the proposed wilderness designation would unduly restrict public access, falling far below the appropriate and sustainable levels required to maintain a healthy balance between conservation and recreational opportunities,” the Senators wrote.

Big Cypress was the first national preserve established in October 1974. The National Park Service has estimated that approximately a million people visit each year.

Advocates of the wilderness designation include the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonpartisan membership organization founded in 1919, and the Wilderness Society, a nonprofit supporting such designations in general. There are approximately 112 million acres of land designated wilderness in the U.S., which is approximately 5 percent of the land.

Advocates state that resource management and fire protection are still possible within a wilderness designation.

One of the most environmentally harmful activities in Big Cypress, according to the NPCA and others, is oil exploration, which has led to long-term damage over large expanses of land in Big Cypress. Attempts to prevent such damage have included requests for government agencies to deem oil exploration and drilling to be violations of the Clean Water Act. Meanwhile, the Miccosukee Tribe has been working toward purchasing the mineral rights with WildLandscapes International estimating a fair market value of the mineral rights and working with the Department of Interior urging use of taxes from offshore oil drilling to purchase those mineral rights at Big Cypress. Texas-based Burnett Oil currently leases the mineral rights from Collier Resources. While it’s not uncommon for parks to not protect mineral rights, Big Cypress is unique.

“The size of a proposed oil exploration and drilling project within BCNP is far and away the largest and most damaging energy development project within any park unit in the country,” wrote WildLandscapes International communications team.

Osceola encourages people to write letters to Congress to prevent the wilderness designation and instead urge Congress to support the purchase of the mineral rights at Big Cypress National Preserve to prevent what continues to be the biggest threat to the Preserve.

Hollywood kids hunt for Easter eggs



Calvin Tiger (2)

Above and below, kids in Hollywood show plenty of enthusiasm as they start an Easter egg hunt March 21 on the ballfields. Dozens of kids participated in the event that was sponsored by the office of Hollywood Board Rep. Christine McCall.



Mayli Tommie

Aislinn Osceola, Kenna Osceola, Sally Alfonso and Sue Osceola enjoy their time at the egg hunt.



Mayli Tommie

McKinley Osceola with a shiny egg.



Mayli Tommie

The Easter bunny gets ready to receive a high-five.

CAREERS

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A sixth grade class was ready with a list of questions for the presenters, including why this job is significant to them and what their typical day is like.

“We all own this company,” said Joseph Hughes, a tribal member who works in operations, construction and design. “Right now, I’m helping Tampa Hard Rock renovate the high rollers area.”

The class also heard from other tribal members who work in gaming. Aaron Tommie works in the marketing department at the Coconut Creek casino and assists teams in all areas with their advertising needs. Jo-Lin Osceola is the TCD director and works in the corporate office where she strategizes and develops plans for the company.

“You all have greatness in you,” Tommie said. “I’ve been fortunate to have people who believe in me. Tap into that greatness and don’t let anyone dim your shine. Don’t let people tell you what you can’t do.”

“Don’t turn 18 and forget your dreams,” Hughes said. “Find your purpose, find what you like to do. You have a heads up over 99% of people in the world. You have a billion-dollar company there to help you. TCD will help you find what you want to do and eventually you will.”

Educators from the Ah-Tah-Thi-Ki Museum shared their experiences. Cypress Billie passed out a variety of objects from the museum for students to hold and examine during the presentation. He identified each one in Elaponke and told the students that

the tribe was recognized by the federal government in 1957.

“We have always been cowkeepers,” Billie said. “Our people are cowboys at heart, we have always raised livestock. But now we also have gaming and tourism.”

Students wanted to know about their jobs and what they like best about working at the museum.

“I get a better understanding of our culture and talk to my elders about things,” Billie said. “It’s very informative; I talk to people about our culture.”

“I get to talk to people from all over the world, including tourists from Australia and monks from Tibet,” said museum educator Brandon Frank. “You can connect with them, we have similarities in our cultures and a lot of the same principles.”

On a typical day, Billie and Frank lead tours through the museum and explain the



Beverly Bidney

Nutritionist Karen Two Shoes watches as third graders pass around a replica of five pounds of fat during her career day presentation.

displays. When he isn’t leading a tour, Billie takes the time to read some of the many books in the museum.

“You are our next generation,” Billie said. “Having a work ethic is very important. Without a job or a sense of purpose, you will fall into anxiety and depression. We all need structure in life. It’s important to have a career or go to college to keep you on a schedule and give you something to do.”



Mayli Tommie

Kids also had a chance to enjoy bounce houses at the egg hunt.