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THE SWAMP: The Everglades, Florida, and the Politics of Paradise
By Michael Grunwald
Simon & Schuster. 432 pp.

In Genesis, man receives dominion over the earth and all upon it, but in *The Swamp*, Washington Post award-winning environmental reporter Michael Grunwald describes in fascinating detail how our abuse of this custody batters Nature almost to death.

Florida's Everglades ecosystem, stretching from the Keys to Orlando, was once home to the only living coral reefs in America. Trying to make the Glades "useful" for 160 years has nearly killed it.

That's but a tick on the Rolex of geologic time, so Grunwald starts 200,000 miles ago at Florida's formation. In the last Ice Age, South Florida "would have made the modern Serengeti look like a petting zoo, with 14-foot-tall mammoths, five-ton mastodons [and] sloths the size of elephants." With abundant rain and a limestone foundation declining only two inches per mile, it's a watershed poor at shedding water.

Possibly "man's first permanent home in North America," this was no hospitable place for humans. "Breathing its heavy air [feels] like sucking on cotton," and it swarms with rats, snakes, roaches, gators and scorpions. One entomologist caught 365,696 mosquitoes in one trap in one night.

When Europeans first arrived, the Calusa tribe controlled Southwest Florida. The Spanish gladly let them keep it.

The Seminoles and Miccosukee left the Creek Confederacy to enter Florida 200 years ago, and whites forced them too into the Everglades.

After the Civil War, the government considered giving the barren wasteland called Florida to newly freed blacks, then decided the white thing to do was give it to developers instead. Then as now, if you think politicians' priority is justice or ecology, they have some swampland you'd be interested in.

Failed efforts in 1848 and 1881 to make Florida useful for fishing and settlement by draining the Everglades underestimated how slowly its water flowed. But the destruction had begun.

Florida's first land boom began when oil tycoon Henry Flagler honeymooned in St. Augustine, then built hotels and railroads. As in women, Flagler's love in land tended to drift. It drifted south, first Daytona, then balmy barrier island Palm Beach. Soon, Vanderbilts, Morgans and Astors came to golf, fish, yacht and sunbathe.

When 1894 freezes plunged West Palm to 30 degrees, Miami widow Julia Tuttle lured Flagler south with orange blossoms, proving that Miami does not freeze.

Thousands of soldiers passed through during the Spanish-American War, and some decided to stay.

In 1898, the Florida East Coast Drainage and Sugar Company tried to drain the eastern Everglades wetlands, again via canals. Making the Everglades fit for cultivation, many believed, would free America from its addiction to foreign sugar. To help swamp drainage, John Gifford, first American to earn a doctorate in forestry, imported "a thirsty Australian tree called melaleuca."

But now developers had to contend with the watchful eyes of conservationist Theodore Roosevelt and naturalists who fought the destruction of Florida's wildlife.

Theirs was an uphill fight. A fad in women's hats drove the price of an ounce of feathers higher than an ounce of gold. Five million birds were slaughtered in one year.

In the early Roaring Twenties, Florida saw a tidal wave of "immigration exceeding the California Gold Rush." As the Jazz Age riffed through the land, celebrities basked in South Florida on perpetual Spring Break.

A catastrophic 1926 hurricane hurled Lake Ocheechee south "like a 700-square-mile saucer tipped on its side," and in 1928 another hurricane killed more Americans in one night than the Seminoles had in three wars, plunging South Florida into the Great Depression a year early.

The Depression years were drought years. Wetlands turned dry; salt water contaminated wells and ruined crops. Nonnative fauna--melaleucas, Brazilian pepper bushes and Australian pines--choked marshes. Sinking water tables caused an outbreak of fires. Fish and game disappeared.

Before WWII, Florida remained thinly populated, but now armies of G.I.s trained there as air conditioners and bug spray became available to all. Social

Security helped retirees afford a sunny retirement. Jackie Gleason opened t.v. programs with a cinematic invitation to Miami Beach. And the Army Corps of Engineers helped make South Florida livable with the largest land-moving project since the Panama Canal: the Central and Southern Florida Project.

Fidel Castro now controlled Cuba, extracting America's sweet tooth from the island, causing big sugar to encroach at the Glades' north as suburbs did on the east.

America's environmental conscience began stirring. Grunwald notes the activism of Rachel Carson; marine biologist Arthur R. Marshall, Jr.; governors Reuben Askew, Lawton Chiles and Claude Kirk, Jr; Interior Secretaries Walter Hickel and Bruce Babbitt; and Marjory Stoneman Douglas, who'd forsworn sex in 1915 to sublimate her energy into championing the health of the Everglades, most visibly in her 1947 best-seller *River of Grass* and still defending the Everglades to her death at age 108.

Conservation was set back by the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, whose interior secretary James Watt described the environmental movement as a "left-wing cult."

By the start of the Clinton years, things were worse than ever. The Florida panther approached extinction, the last few so inbred that males were born without testicles. Florida Bay, favorite fishing hole of Red Sox immortal Ted Williams, was collapsing. Politicians sought win-win solutions, good for both the Glades and interest groups, including Big Sugar whose phosphorus was a crucial part of the problem.

Eyeing 2000 election polls, George Bush and Speaker Newt Gingrich recognized GOP attacks on environmental regulations alienated voters, while former environment champion Al Gore balked at offending anyone, souring the support of environmentalists even as Bill Clinton signed a \$7.8 billion Everglades bill, "the largest restoration project in the history of the planet."

While 14 miles of the Kissimmee River have been restored, the Everglades is far from saved. Water quality is better, not yet good. Lake Okeechobee, used as a sewer since the 1928 hurricane, remains toxic. Half the Everglades is gone. Runaway development is "wiping out wetlands and stressing aquifers," and the EPA's top regulator in Southwest Florida quit "after Pres. Bush's appointees began pushing a developer-funded study claiming that natural wetlands caused pollution."

The exploitation and greed documented in his important saga will incite fury, but Grunwald remains profoundly engaged, never enraged, blending exhaustive research and superlative prose into a book as valuable as a week in Ft. Lauderdale, at one-hundredth the price.