

seemingly pinched and cancerous; wading and nesting birds have declined 93 percent in the southern Everglades in 75 short years, according to the U.S. Park Service. Where you now see one, as late as the 1930s you might have seen 10. And the tree islands, either parched or drowned, are mostly dying or dead, says Hammond.

The fact that George W. Bush's administration, represented by the U.S. Department of the Interior, in June convinced the United Nations to remove Everglades National Park from its list of the most endangered sites important to all humans on the planet, does not impress many Floridians familiar with the 'Glades.



JUDAH

And in the minds of many it confirms the notion held by Lee County Commissioner Ray Judah, that the problem is not economic, but political.

"Our natural system is extremely resilient, and given the opportunity can rebound from the brink of complete devastation to a fully functioning system," he insists.

"The 'Glades can be saved, but it's not a function of money. It's a function of political will. It means doing the right things in terms of hydrological management of water right from the headwaters of the watershed flowing into the Everglades, as opposed to water being severed and re-routed and reduced in quality and quantity. If we do that, we can nurture and sustain a healthy Everglades system."

That, of course, would benefit every living soul in Lee County — which is Judah's stake in the game — since restored water-flow southward might provide the greatest stimulus in resurrecting the west-bound Caloosahatchee River (known as C-43 by the government), which is now little more than a waste canal, and its sizeable basin.

Judah embraces a plan that would send water from Okeechobee south in a long shallow spillway roughly between two Broward County canals (and right through some sugar cane fields there): the Miami Canal and the North River Canal, which are separated by about 15 miles. And from there to pump stations and cleaning stations and into the Everglades.

But Everglades champions such as Judah keep running into "ands," "ifs" or "buts," along with "althoughs," they say.

Although both the U.S. House and Senate passed a water preservation bill this year which includes an additional \$2 billion for the Everglades, Bush has not signed it, and will likely veto it as unnecessarily expensive, pundits say.

Although the federal government promised to pay half of the \$10.5 billion estimated at the beginning of the decade as the cost to clean up and restore the 'Glades by 2020 (an estimate that should be doubled now, according to many), so far it's fallen woefully short: Floridians have kicked in about \$3 billion, says Judah, but the Feds have only anted up \$300 million.

Finally, although the U.S. Sugar Corporation donates some money to help clean up and restore the Everglades, Judah and others compare that effort to "Big Tobacco's" lip service about health issues; the reality, he concludes, is that Sugar officials have made no land available to the government for sale, and their acreage may be the key to the restored health of the existing 'Glades.

"That's why it's a political issue," Judah says. "It comes down to state and federal officials fully recognizing the impediment that the sugarcane fields represent in correcting the hydrological conditions that would restore the Everglades."

Since the water has to flow south in



natural cycles — and east and west out of Lake Okeechobee in natural quantities if any systems are to work right again — sugarcane fields have to be surrendered at some point. Not all of them, perhaps, but some of them.

"I would say absolutely, unequivocally, the Everglades can't be restored without (more land)," says Judah. "And Sugar doesn't want to give up a square inch of land. Agriculture, including sugar cane, could be self-sufficient, at least if 60,000 to 120,000 acres were purchased by the Feds and the state to restore the flow-way. "Then we could truly develop a meaningful restoration. But they aren't making that land available for purchase, which is why the state needs to designate the entire Everglades agricultural area as an area of critical concern."

Hammond, who spent three terms on the influential board of the South Florida Water Management District, lends that argument some historical perspective.

"The Everglades core area was set up to grow food — the only other place that was ever done on that scale is the San Joaquin Valley in California. My premise has always been that if that's NOT the public purpose, then taxpayers shouldn't be pumping water to irrigate and drain the farm fields. I precipitated in that debate when the Sugar people wanted us to subsidize their soils out there.

"And I've always been told that the day after Castro dies, Sugar will move back to Cuba. So I asked the Sugar people: 'Are you going to grow vegetables there, like the historic expectation for that land?'"

"Well, sir,' they said, 'We own the land, so we'd have the right to develop it.'

"My response was, 'Why expect the U.S. public to put tax money into draining and pumping water through the system if it isn't to be used for that purpose (food farming)?' The public could close down the pumps and let nature take its course."

What would Marjory do?

It is probably no coincidence that the South Florida Water Management District, the second largest in the United States behind a California district whose responsibilities are much less broad, is responsible for the 16 Florida counties that roughly define the traditional Everglades — a shallow sheet of water flowing over limestone at about three days to the mile, once.

That vast river began near Orlando at

the headwaters of the Kissimmee River, flowing south into Lake Okeechobee. Then water moved east down the St. Lucie River and west down the Peace and Caloosahatchee River systems. And much of it moved south again when Okeechobee lapped over, nourishing the southern Everglades and Florida Bay, along with the rich and fecund fishery there and in the Ten Thousand Islands.

So it seems appropriate that the

South Florida Water Management District (along with the Army Corps of Engineers) be charged with fixing the 'Glades — with doing much of the actual work, or marshaling those who do.



WEHLE

But it's not that simple, say Carol Wehle, who heads the 1,750-person organization, with its \$1.4 billion budget, \$600 million of which is designated for Everglades restoration.

"We have the responsibility for water quality, supply, natural systems, and flood protection," she explains. "That's four major areas as delineated by the State legislature."

"The real challenge for the folks in the District is related to population growth. We have many more challenges than we did before, especially in terms of quality and supply issues. And with the anticipated growth, it will be that much more pronounced 10 years from now."

Which may not bode well for the Everglades.

So what can you do? What would anybody do? What, in fact, would Marjory Stoneman Douglas do, the renowned author of "The Everglades: River of Grass," the woman credited with first saving the Everglades from complete annihilation?

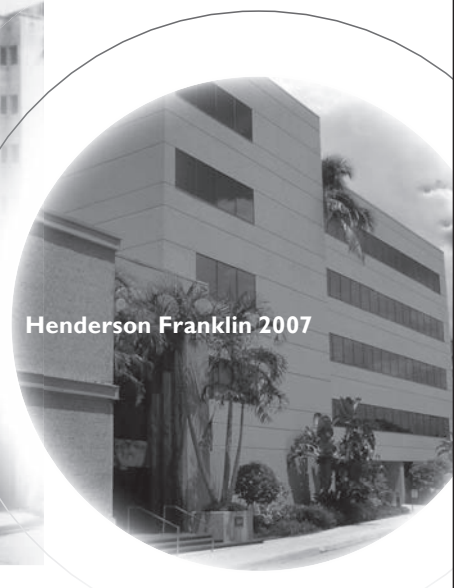
Bill Hammond knew her, and he figures if it's good enough for her, it's probably good enough for anybody who cares.

"Marjory would be around pounding on tables in front of officials," he says. "She'd put on her glasses, pull on her hat, tighten the band a little, and scold the politicians. Then she'd go home and have a bourbon at 5 p.m." ■

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