FLORIDA’S ENVIRONMENT: WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

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Something is wrong in Florida. I am not sure just how to solve the problem, but it involves our environment. Florida and Alaska, the antipodes of our nation, both share a common problem in their fragile environments. The natural beauty of both states perversely attracts multitudes of people, but for grossly different reasons. Up North there are more aborigines and they have much more political power than Florida’s Seminoles, but Alaskan sourdoughs too are making their voices heard. They are saying they don’t want any more destruction of their environment as the price for continuing development.

One hundred years ago, Florida, like the Alaska of today, was a pioneer land filling with settlers. The destruction of landscape all began when Florida gave away its land to developers. It seems a wealthy rakehill managed to seduce the state into deeding him two million acres of so-called "Swamp and Overflowed Lands" in exchange for a promise to pay off some bond interest debt. Hamilton Disston promptly sold half of this land to foreigners, then proceeded to dredge, drain, and dry out some choice tracts that were left.

Thus, the modern development of South Florida begins in 1881 when more than 25,000 acres of newly drained muckland began to oxidize. This soil, a magnificent, non-renewable natural resource, was then sold off to eager buyers and progress in the form of real estate development began.

In the context of private ownership of land, royalties from mineral rights, existence of a free enterprise system, and presence of a capitalist economy, it is vitally necessary that long-term economic growth occur so that land values can increase and profits be made by the owners who sell. But how do you sell the pine woods smell of a fox squirrel, or the sight of wild turkeys feeding under muscadine along the Peace River, or the sawfish from early morning shallows off Sanibel Island? Aesthetic sensations such as these are forgotten, just as the caribou in Alaska are. Now that developers have won the struggle to build the trans-Alaska pipeline, such things will gradually disappear. And having disappeared, they are forgotten. In Florida we plan this disappearing, calling it "Environmental Land Management" so we can feel in control of our destiny.

Specifically, this planning was set down in two documents prepared by our Environmental Land Management Study (ELMS) Committee, the composition of which is curious. According to Section 380.09(1) of the Florida Statutes, this committee consists of fifteen members who must represent: organized labor, business interests, the home construction industry, the academic community (?), land sales industry, the real estate profession, agriculture interests, other professions and occupations according to provisions of Chapter 380, Florida Statutes, and... oh, yes, environmental interests. The latter group was represented in 1975 by Betsy David of Orlando. Somehow I feel that Betsy may have been outweighed by ELMS members from the labor union, United Sugar Corporation, Deltona Corporation, Sengra Development Corporation, Coral Ridge Properties, Inc., other assorted real estate developers, and lawyers. Among the entire ELMS Committee membership list past, and present, there are only two people identified with environmental interests and neither appears to possess special professional competence beyond membership in the Audubon Society. In fact, from the published vitae, we must assume all ELMS members are devoid of authoritative, scientific understanding of the highly complex South Florida habitat and ecology.

We have, in effect, encouraged economists and developers to regulate and perpetuate their own development. We have selected wolves to guard our sheep. Nonetheless, the legislation is so innovative and well written that lawyers like Pinnell are convinced that by regulating development through the Florida
Environmental Land and Water Management Act, we will, in effect, "save Paradise."

Since Florida became a predominately urban state about the year 1930, citizens have become gradually alienated from their natural heritage, growing up, working, and dying in increasingly bigger cities. The ugliness of city life is so ubiquitous most of us have forgotten there is any alternative lifestyle. Well, not all of us . . . several ELMS Committee magnates habitually leave Florida to escape for a wilderness vacation.

Who is to blame for the sorry state of our environment, and what is to be done?

Fundamentally, it is the Environmentalists themselves who are to blame, because they do not know what to do. They have no alternative plan to prevent creeping development of Florida. They continue to carp while mucklands are exposed, jet ports are built, and barge canals planned. Wholesale devastation of public domain in our coastal wetlands goes on at an accelerating pace while scientists struggle to determine why mangroves are diseased and our coral reefs are dying.

There are alternatives to untrammeled real estate development of Florida but they have yet to be fully explained to the people. Some ELMS Committee members find them unacceptable because they represent a "last man in" hypothesis.

Sooner or later we must admit there is already too much development and try to avoid the disasters that will lead to a complete breakdown of our present lifestyles. The deterioration appears suspiciously geometric rather than arithmetic. Do we have enough time to do what must be done? I don't know because the task is stupendous. Simply stated—we must soon stop all development of new land, return all undeveloped wildlands to State management and redirect the powerful business interests now in control of ELMS, encouraging them to achieve vertical development of land already alienated beyond any hope of repair. We must mandate our engineers and construction industry, charging them with the responsibility of arriving at radically new building methods appropriate to this kind of development.

Lastly, environmentalists whose only approach to conservation now consists of static preservation must learn how to improve natural habitats. The thrust of their efforts then will shift to a dynamic form of ecology centered on the reconstitution of damaged natural areas, returning Florida to a vitality greater than it ever knew before.

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