



Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

Business Council Members

Talbert Cypress, Chairman

Lucas K. Osceola, Assistant Chairman
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Pete Osceola, Jr., Lawmaker

October 18th, 2023

Thomas Forsyth
Superintendent
Big Cypress National Preserve
33100 Tamiami Trail East
Ochopee, FL 34141

Subject: Opposition to Wilderness Designations in Big Cypress National Preserve

The Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida opposes the designation of wilderness areas within the Big Cypress National Preserve. The Wilderness Act of 1964 defines wilderness as “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor and does not remain” which “retain[] its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation.” And yet, the Miccosukee and Seminole people are at home in the Big Cypress National Preserve. The entirety of the landscape has been shaped by human hands, and continues to be. There is not an inch of the Preserve which has not been shaped by our ancestors or our living relatives.

Before contact with Anglo-American settlers, the whole of this continent was stewarded by our people. Every tree, every plant, every animal, has a relationality to us, and, in fact, we are one of them. As the late Native advocate John Trudell said, “We are literally shapes and forms of the Earth.” To seek any part of this land which has not been shaped by its stewards is to engage in an intentional process of forgetfulness and erasure.

The foundation of national parks and the designation of wilderness areas has often resulted in the eviction of the Indigenous people who lived there, causing direct harm to the ecosystems which they had been stewarding. During the foundation of Yellowstone National Park, 300 Shoshone were killed in a single day of violent mass evictions. Closer to home, the foundation of Everglades National Park resulted in the eviction of six villages and the wholesale removal of a 99,200-acre reservation. Neither Park is healthier now than it was when stewarded by our ancestors and relatives. 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. Deleting Indigenous peoples by the stroke of a pen on paper, from

a landscape created in harmony with and by Indigenous peoples, is a surefire recipe for the same kinds of ecosystem collapse that Yellowstone has endured.

So far, Big Cypress National Preserve has been spared the misanthropy that defines this fortress conservation approach. The Big Cypress has been a home for our people for centuries. We have stewarded its lands and waters, and we live in harmony with our non-human relatives. There are fifteen active traditional villages in Big Cypress, more which are now considered historic cultural sites, multiple active ceremonial grounds, as well as active burial grounds scattered throughout the Preserve. Beyond the physical occupation, Miccosukee and Seminole Tribal citizens further retain rights to use and occupancy throughout the *entirety* of the Preserve, explicitly protected in the Preserve's 1974 enabling legislation. Designating wilderness which restricts those Tribal citizens' right to move freely about their homeland or which does not accommodate Tribal rights to permanent residence in those spaces, will only serve to repeat again the folly of the past century's approach to conservation.

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. From its inception, this Preserve has continued to exemplify our Indigenous land ethic of relationality and collaboration with nature. Rather than imposing arbitrary lines on a map to keep our people out, the Service would be well-served exporting to its other parks Big Cypress's capacity for multiple uses, freedom of access, and respect for Indigenous rights.

It is for all these reasons which I have said, and more reasons which I cannot say, that we oppose the designation of wilderness areas within the Big Cypress National Preserve. Please reach out to my office with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Talbert Cypress', written in a cursive style.

Talbert Cypress
Chairman
Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida