Audubon At Work

Saving Florida Bay

Photos by Mac Stone
Everglades Science Center in Tavernier

A few months ago, I was thrilled to be with a small group and witness millions of gallons of water rushing suddenly into a parched area of Everglades National Park. The C-111 Spreader Canal project, long a priority for Audubon and for the wading birds we have worked to bring back to the Everglades, was finally online. The project reverses a decades-old drainage problem that has greatly harmed Florida Bay.

As we cheered the new flow of water and enjoyed the feeling of accomplishment, I wondered if even all that water would be enough. Will the birds and fish that live in the Everglades and Florida Bay respond with increased abundance?

In that moment I remembered that I was standing next to Dr. Jerry Lorenz, Audubon Florida’s Science Director. Dr. Lorenz and his staff at the Everglades Science Center in Tavernier are the folks with mud on their boots who really know what is going on with ecological conditions in the Bay. When I say mud on their boots, I mean I have seen Jerry and other Audubon researchers wading waist deep, climbing over mangrove roots and pushing through thick sawgrass to do their job, which is understanding how fresh water affects Everglades birds and fish at the edge of Florida Bay.

It is as simple as this—if the water is right the Roseate Spoonbills nest. If not, we lose a breeding season. Jerry, and his mentor Dr. John Ogden taught me this approach. To think about how birds respond to changes in the natural system.

Audubon continues to define success as bringing back the birds and wildlife that were so naturally abundant in the Everglades. These species serve as an indicator for all of the other benefits to the natural environment, aquifer recharge and economic prosperity that restoration can also produce. The recent operationalizing of the Tamiami Trail bridge and the C-111 Spreader Canal project bring us closer to mimicking the natural water flow patterns that have been altered by human infrastructure. But as Audubon's scientists monitor the prevalence of prey fish and track Roseate Spoonbill populations, they can tell water managers and restoration partners where, when and in what quantities these species are found. This will let us know whether restoration is working and what more needs to be done.

I hope you saw the great cover story in this month’s Audubon Magazine. It features an excellent profile of our work with Roseate Spoonbills on Florida Bay and how they are a critical indicator for the overall health of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem. If you have not yet read this article, I encourage you to visit http://mag.audubon.org/ to check it out for yourself. The importance of Audubon's field work in Florida Bay was also the highlight of a recent television clip featuring Dr. Lorenz as he monitors fragile Roseate Spoonbill nesting sites hidden in the ecosystem's dense mangrove islands. You can view this inspiring video by visiting http://youtube/TY7Ehv_NJVE.

The work of Audubon's Everglades Science Center has depended on contracts and grants from the US Army Corp of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District. Cuts in those agencies' science budgets have put great pressure on our science staff. They are an incredibly dedicated group of individuals. But we are going to have to call on you to help us make sure we can keep them on the job and keep their boats running.

The nesting Spoonbills tell us if Everglades restoration is working. And Jerry and his crew tell us if the Spoonbills are delivering that message. Please help us keep this important science effort going.

Eric Draper
Executive Director, Audubon Florida

P.S. If you want to learn more about how you can support this incredible work call me at (305) 371-6399, ext. 123.
Tamiami Trail Bridge First Mile is Completed

After twenty years of advocacy by Audubon and other Everglades supporters, the first mile of the Tamiami Trail bridge is finally complete. Removing this segment of the road that has acted as a dam to the natural north to south freshwater flow into Everglades National Park, is a first step toward rehydrating the Park, including Florida Bay. Ecological connectivity can now be increased by moving more water into Northeast Sharkriver Slough—the historic heart of water flow. But on the heels of decades of deliberation about project designs, costs and legal challenges, the completion of this project has also taught many valuable lessons that Audubon hopes will continue to be considered as more restoration projects are developed.

Water Flows through the C-111 Spreader Canal Project

The C-111 Spreader Canal Phase 1 project was completed earlier this year, marking the first project planned as part of the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan to become operational. Information from the Audubon's Everglades Science Center in Tavernier proved that this project was urgently needed to restore the salinity balances in Florida Bay and recover populations of Roseate Spoonbills and other fish and wildlife that rely on the Southern Everglades. With this information from the science team, Audubon's advocates urged that this project be put at the front of the line for construction. Now, as the water begins to flow in a more natural way, Audubon scientists will be relied upon to study the effect of the water management changes on prey fish and Spoonbills, and determine how the project can be operated to provide the greatest benefits for the environment.

Florida Legislature Approves $70 Million for the Everglades

Seventy million will be appropriated in 2013 for the Everglades from the State of Florida, more than double the $30 million appropriated in 2012. Funding will be provided for Everglades restoration projects, to construct treatment areas as part of the water quality plan agreed to by the state and federal governments in 2012, and to fund on-farm water quality improvements north of Lake Okeechobee. The Audubon Florida team in Tallahassee worked tirelessly to urge this increase in funding as a means to get more projects implemented that can show early restoration benefits.

Everglades National Park Promotes Management Plan that includes Audubon Recommendations

In March, Everglades National Park released a draft General Management Plan that will guide protection, management, and use of the Park for at least the next 20 years. Audubon's science and policy team made a series of recommendations regarding sensitive wading bird foraging and nesting habitat. The Park Service integrated many of these recommendations into the draft plan, including an expanded Poll and Troll Zone where very shallow areas in Florida Bay are protected by limiting access. We will continue to work closely with Park staff and Everglades partners to see that these recommendations are crafted into the Final Plan which is expected to be released in 2014.
Spotlight on Urgency to Improve Lake Okeechobee’s Water Quality

Audubon is working hard to improve Lake Okeechobee’s water quality. Recent averages of phosphorus flowing into the Lake are three to six times the water quality goal and too much phosphorus in the Lake is linked with the increased possibility of blue green algae blooms. It can also contribute to the accelerated growth of vegetation like cattails, that block navigation and damage wildlife habitat in the Lake’s marshes. In order to significantly reduce the amount of phosphorus from fertilizer and animal feed added to the watershed, Audubon is urging an update of agricultural incentive programs in the Okeechobee watershed, including an increase of implementation of agricultural Best Management Practices (BMPs). The Florida Legislature appropriated $3 million in funding for the Everglades to help landowners store more water on the land, increase water reuse, and reduce phosphorus discharges. In addition to successfully advocating for this funding, Audubon is working with a number of agencies on other initiatives to improve water quality, including the Lake Okeechobee Basin Management Action Plan, the South Florida Water Management District’s Northern Everglades best management practices rulemaking, and the Lake Okeechobee Protection Plan update.

Central Everglades Planning Project Moves Forward

The Central Everglades Planning Project continues on its groundbreaking path forward to return more flows to the Everglades Water Conservation Areas and Everglades National Park using a faster, more efficient planning process. As the planning nears its final stages, Audubon is urging the state and federal partners in restoration to come to agreement on last minute details, commitments, and modeling scenarios that are still are under review. With coordination of all parties to stay on the current schedule, the project can then advance to the next stages of Congressional approval and implementation.

Everglades Water Quality Plan Codified in Tallahassee

Legislation to amend the Everglades Forever Act and codify the settlement that was supported by Audubon between the State of Florida and the federal government passed in the 2013 Florida Legislative session. Working with the Everglades Foundation, Audubon mounted a campaign to strip the bill of provisions which would have reduced state oversight of Everglades pollution, frozen the sugar industry’s liability for cleanup costs, and undermined a challenge to permits for Best Management Practices in the Everglades Agricultural Area now pending before an Administrative Law Judge. After securing strong editorials in major Florida newspapers decrying the amendments, Audubon and the Everglades Foundation were able to secure agreements to remove these provisions and see a positive bill emerge that will secure funding to construct water treatment projects.
Lake Kissimmee is the wellspring of the Kissimmee River and is an important part of the complex system that makes up Lake Okeechobee’s watershed. The ability to utilize Lake Kissimmee to its greatest extent as a key to attenuate southern water flows, is inhibited by water management that keeps it from filling up almost every year. In 2012 for example, so much water rushed into Lake Okeechobee that harmful estuary releases took place, yet Lake Kissimmee had never been filled to capacity. In addition, the Kissimmee River restoration project had too little water flow. After recognizing that altering Lake Kissimmee water management could be a solution to prevent some of these damaging results until larger Everglades restoration projects are completed, Audubon is now encouraging water managers to fill Lake Kissimmee each year, thereby storing more water, flooding Kissimmee’s marshes, decreasing harmful summer flows, and increasing beneficial dry season flows.

First Sustainable Rancher Award Presented to Jimmy Wohl

In April, rancher Jimmy Wohl was presented with Audubon’s first Sustainable Rancher Award in recognition of his stewardship of land in the Northern Everglades. Mr. Wohl is the owner and manager of the 5200 acre Rafter T Ranch in Highlands County who has worked with both the Florida Ranchlands Environmental Services Project and the Northern Everglades Payment for Environmental Services Program. Wohl has installed improvements on Rafter T Ranch to store and clean water before it runs into the watershed to Arbuckle Creek and his work shows how ranchers can make simple adjustments on working landscapes to maximize benefits for the environment. Audubon hopes that the Rafter T Ranch will be considered a model so that environmentally sound activities can be replicated by other ranchers throughout the Northern Everglades. For more information, Audubon Florida board member Scott Taylor has produced a short video promoting water storage and water quality projects undertaken by ranchers like Wohl that can be viewed at: https://vimeo.com/61143683.
WESTERN EVERGLADES

Wetland Permitting Key to No Net Losses While Everglades are Restored

Under the Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Governor Rick Scott is moving to make wetland permitting rules “consistent” throughout the state. That includes both Environmental Resource Permits and the UMAM (Uniform Mitigation Assessment Method) method of counting wetland functions and values used by state and federal regulators. Audubon's research and permit analysis documents unsustainable losses of shallow wetlands because they are undervalued during the permitting process. In response, Audubon has developed several effective strategies and tools to address specific permitting problems that allow valuable wetlands to be destroyed. As an example of science influencing out policy, Audubon will advocate that these solutions be adopted as part of these revised rules, bringing the nation and State of Florida closer to their official “no net loss of wetlands” policies.

RESTORE Act May Offer Alternative Funding to Build Vital C-43 Reservoir

The C-43 Reservoir along the Caloosahatchee River in Hendry County is vital to restoring proper salinity levels in the River’s Estuary. The project is ready to build - the engineering reports have been approved, detailed construction plans are done, and 10,000 acres have been purchased as of 2009 - yet Congressional inaction has delayed the start of construction. And while we wait for the reservoir, the health of the Estuary continues to decline. These facts have caused Audubon to look for creative ways to fund earlier construction of the project, including the use of BP Oil Spill civil penalties. The RESTORE Act dedicates 80% of these penalties to Gulf of Mexico restoration. In addition to other great projects benefitting the Gulf Coast, advancing the C-43 Reservoir as a candidate for funding is one of Audubon Florida’s top priorities.

A Vision for the Caloosahatchee Estuary

Audubon Florida and our local chapters are participating in a new process to find solutions for the Caloosahatchee Estuary. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD)’s Caloosahatchee Visioning Process has conscripted the Consensus Building Institute to facilitate a process with stakeholders to articulate ecological goals for the system. Audubon is working to advance a vision that looks at the estuary as part of the Greater Everglades Ecosystem to recognize the relationship between the Caloosahatchee and Lake Okeechobee, Water Conservation Areas, and Kissimmee Watershed. We are also advocating for an emphasis on water conservation, water quality improvements, and developing adaptation mechanisms to climate change in the region. We commend the SFWMD for facilitating this discussion toward a united Caloosahatchee vision.
In her first official travel outside of Washington DC, newly appointed Interior Secretary Sally Jewell visited the Audubon Florida office in Miami for a meet and greet with the Everglades community, including Audubon Florida staff and members of our Board of Directors. The event was held on the heels of the Secretary’s tour of both the Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge and Everglades National Park. All who attended expressed delight that the Secretary chose to make visiting the Everglades a priority, and that she took the time to meet with members of the environmental community face to face. In discussions with the Secretary, Audubon stressed the importance of the Department of the Interior’s leadership role in protecting and restoring the Everglades.

Before being nominated for her current position, in 2009 Secretary Jewell received Audubon’s Rachel Carson Award. This prestigious award recognizes visionary women whose education, talent, and energy have advanced the environmental education locally and on a global scale.

Help Audubon Restore the Greater Everglades Ecosystem

Audubon Florida
Everglades Policy Office
444 Brickell Avenue, Suite 850
Miami, FL 33131
www.fl.audubon.org
(305) 371-6399

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