



Progress Over People: Consequences of Everglades Drainage Projects 1900-1930

Reese Weicht and Andrew Frank

Introduction:

Everglades drainage projects from 1900-1930 drastically altered the landscape of South Florida, largely at the expense of the safety of existing Indigenous communities and the ecosystem. Firstly, this research analyzed sources including early government reports, personal correspondence and literature, as well as legislative documents outlining attitudes that the Everglades was a “wasted”, “uninhabited”, and “empty” landscape. This harmful rhetoric largely contributed to the disregard and lack of care that drainage efforts operated upon from 1900-1930.

Of course, this view of the Everglades as a “wasted” land in need of scientific intervention ignored the long-established presence of Indigenous communities in the area, as well as the environment. Seminole and Miccosukee communities were harmed by drainage efforts that increased flooding, caused displacement, and disturbed natural ecosystems that these communities had learned to adapt to for their lifestyles and survival. Continuing, many early drainage projects repeatedly failed due to poor engineering, financial collapse, and environmental miscalculations. Evidence examined through this research supports the notion that Indigenous knowledge and warnings could have prevented or mitigated the environmental and sociological damage that these flawed drainage projects caused. This research aims to highlight how these Indigenous voices were often deemed unscientific or irrelevant by those prioritizing economic development over the communicated consequences of Everglades drainage.

This research therefore argues that Everglades drainage was not the result of ignorance, but was a deliberate prioritization of economic growth and racist attitudes over ecological safety and Indigenous communities. This project goal aims to highlight how institutional arrogance shaped environmental policy and caused lasting harm to the Everglades and the people depending on it.

Methodology:

Qualitative Analysis of Primary and Secondary Documents: A large part of this research included reading and analyzing legislative documents, personal correspondence, government reports and secondary commentaries on historical events to gather insight. Government documents and legislation that proved particularly helpful included the Swamp and Overflowed Lands Act of 1850, which provided necessary context for drainage ideologies. The main conclusion drawn from this process was that the attitude towards drainage incredibly frequently disregarded Indigenous knowledge and existence. Furthermore, Indigenous testimonies supported the detrimental effects that drainage had on Seminole and Miccosukee communities and lifestyles.

Analysis of Maps and Drainage Plans: The visual aspect of this project provided a unique perspective demonstrating the physical effects of drainage. Maps visualizing the proximity of Indigenous communities to prominent drainage projects, canal maps contextualizing how project failure increased harmful flooding, and ecological site maps emphasize the negative consequences of drainage.

Comparative Historical Analysis: This step was crucial in outlining historical bias in historical documentation. Many of the conclusions drawn regarding scientific arrogance and the prioritization of economic development over Indigenous communities and resources were due to the stark differences between points of view. On one hand, Indigenous testimonies highlight the negative implications of drainage, whereas developers and government perspectives show the harmful ideas of the Everglades as “uninhabited” and in need of “civilization”. Comparing these alternating perspectives helps to uncover historical bias and fill gaps in previous research regarding why drainage proceeded despite warnings against it.

Historical Records of Disasters: Incredibly enlightening pieces of evidence included records regarding hurricanes in 1926 and 1928 that highlighted extreme engineering flaws. Dams failed, and shoddy construction and poorly researched knowledge of the drainage process cost the tragic loss of 2,000 lives, largely of underrepresented migrant worker communities. These records represent the mindset of arrogance that engineers of drainage projects possessed. By examining these records, it is clear that human lives were deemed less important than economic development by those initiating Everglades drainage projects.

Results:

This project found evidence that economic development was prioritized over human and environmental consequences in numerous Everglades drainage initiatives. Specifically, this research highlighted several key points.

1. Multiple canal systems failed to operate as intended.
2. Flooding increased in key regions due to canal construction
3. Drainage projects disrupted water flow, endangering wildlife
4. Engineering projects were unequipped for natural disasters and environmental stressors common to the Everglades, leading to exacerbated harm.

Perhaps most pressingly, human beings were affected greatly by drainage. Indigenous and underrepresented communities were habitually ignored in favor of drainage “progress”. Therefore, one of the starkest findings of this project was that: Indigenous communities, particularly the Seminoles, experienced displacement, land loss, and faced extreme change to the environment they had adapted to.

And, concerningly, this research investigated the continuance of drainage once consequences had already been made clear. This further emphasizes the disregard for consequences throughout Everglades drainage, and highlights the callous prioritization of economic development over sustainability and human lives.

Conclusion:

The drainage of the Everglades from 1900-1930 was an exercise in scientific misinformation, arrogance, and willful disregard for human beings and the environment. By operating based on faulty engineering and assumptions, the private and later government entities executing drainage projects paved the way for extreme, lasting consequences for the Everglades and the communities relying upon its resources.

Importantly, Indigenous communities suffered from the drainage of the Everglades. Members of the Seminole and Miccosukee communities in particular advocated strongly *against* drainage, arguing that the natural water flow and ecosystem of the Everglades would not respond as anticipated to the proposed engineering projects. In many cases, these communities were correct. Numerous canals and other attempts at drainage led to disaster, wrecking communities and endangering Indigenous communities in particular; the very people who had advocated for the area’s protection. In this way, we see that economic development was viewed as more important than human lives and environmental sustainability by developers.

This research highlights how Indigenous voices were often deemed as “unscientific”, and how the areas in which they had inhabited for years were deemed “empty” and “wasteful”. These harmful attitudes contributed to the willful disregard of Indigenous lives and realities in the Everglades. This is extremely important to acknowledge when studying these aspects of Florida history.

By recognizing past prejudice and historical mistakes regarding the drainage of the Everglades, we can avoid the repetition of history today.

The Everglades remains a subject of immense interest for development and engineering projects. For instance, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has expressed recent interest in going back into the Everglades to continue construction on various water management and redirection projects. With this in mind, it is more crucial than ever to underline the past errors of Everglades drainage, in order to protect the Everglades and the communities that continue to rely on its natural resources today.

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