

The Future of Fakahatchee's Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk

by Dennis Giardina



In the summer of 1996, a wildlife officer friend brought me out on patrol with him. I had just moved to Collier County and I was anxious to see more of the area beyond the Panther Refuge. We spent an entire day driving the back roads of State Road 29 and US-41 and in the late afternoon we ended up in a narrow little parking lot next to an Indian village and store. There were a lot of people dodging the cars entering and leaving to look at all the wildlife in and around the canal at the entrance. The water was high and very clear and, although it was right next to the busy Tamiami Trail, there were so many fish that it looked like an aquarium. I saw snook, bass, garfish and bream and aside from a healthy-looking native fish fauna there were many exotic fish as well. Schools of Oscars, Mayan cichlids and black acaras were numerous, big blue tilapia too. It was my first glimpse of the cosmopolitan South Florida aquatic ecosystem.

After a while of standing there with the other people and wading birds, we worked our way around the clustered entrance and started down the grassy road. My friend told me that the boardwalk ahead was incredible. He said it was a couple of hundred acres of primary forest and the largest stand of old growth bald cypress left in the Everglades. I wasn't disappointed. We slowly followed along the boardwalk as it wound through the giant trees above the ferny, flooded forest floor. Birds of all kinds flew beneath the canopy and I especially remember a pair of pileated woodpeckers, foraging in the trees around us. They were very vocal, chirping at each other

as they darted around and clawed their way up and down the tree trunks, scraping and pecking at the bark and poking their barbed tongues in crevices for the insects that make up a large part of their diet. It's always impressive to see one of these magnificent animals take flight. They are about the size of a crow with a beautiful red crest and large black and white wings. If you're lucky, as I was that day, a pileated woodpecker will be near you, you'll be watching it and it will let out its loud, haunting call. There is nothing like it.

I marveled at the forest around me. It was the closest thing to a rainforest that I had seen in Florida; the shrubs and vines of the mid-story, the royal palms emerging through the bromeliad-laden canopy, it was all so tropical. When we reached the end of the boardwalk, I couldn't believe the amount of wildlife around the pond, seemingly indifferent to us on the viewing platform. A flock of white ibises decorated the branches of the trees above us. An anhinga spread its wings to dry as a majestic great egret perched on a stump and preened itself. A large alligator floated out in the open and small fish splashed and popped at the surface. What was really memorable to me were all the water snakes and baby alligators, basking on logs right next to the platform. I had never seen that many wild snakes in one place before.

I remember looking out beyond the pond, deep into the surrounding forest. I thought that if there was this much wildlife here in the open, what kind of diverse and

interesting organisms were out there? To this day that question continues to inspire and motivate me to explore the swamp, and our boardwalk at Big Cypress Bend is a place that I have brought many friends and family out to visit, to give them a glimpse into the natural world and to share my passion for it with them.

The Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk is really an outstanding place and it is the way the majority of the visitors to the Fakahatchee Strand experience the Preserve. Over the next 50 years the population of the state of Florida is going to double from 18 to 36 million people. The pressure on Fakahatchee to accommodate additional visitors and provide them with a high quality and safe recreational experience at the boardwalk will be great. Going on 30 years old now, the boardwalk may last another decade or two with the help of the Preserve's staff and volunteers, but then what? The entrance and parking has not changed since my first visit 13 years ago and it was inadequate then. There are two port-a-potties available for the most desperate of

boardwalk visitors but real bathroom facilities are what they need and deserve to have.

The Friends of Fakahatchee are working with the Park Manager to develop a plan for the future of the Big Cypress Bend Boardwalk. We all agree and have committed to one principle in the process; whatever we decide to do in terms of replacing the boardwalk and designing new visitor facilities there will be done in the most ecologically sound and sustainable way possible. What we plan for the boardwalk today will be our legacy tomorrow. It will reflect our appreciation of the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve and our commitment to share it with and protect it for all who come after us, both human and wild.

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