

Everglades for All?

**An in-depth look at public perception and public participation
in the worlds largest ecosystem restoration project.**



A report by prepared by
Clean Water Fund
February 2010

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our sincere thanks to the National Parks Conservation Association, Tropical Audubon Society and Sierra Club Miami Group for their assistance in distributing the questionnaire. In particular we thank Kahlil Kettering, Rebecca Garoville, and Dr. Laura Ogden for their assistance with research and questionnaire design. Special thanks to Justin Reznick for contributing cover photography. Without the generous support of the Everglades Foundation, it would have been difficult to produce this report. Finally, we would like to thank Clean Water Action's members and all other respondents who took the time to candidly answer the survey and for their support for our programs.

About Clean Water Action www.CleanWaterAction.org

Clean Water Action (CWA) is a national 501(c)4 environmental organization with more than 1.4 million members nationwide including over 55,000 in Florida. CWA works for clean, safe and affordable water, prevention of health-threatening pollution, creation of environmentally safe jobs and businesses, and empowerment of people to make democracy work. CWA organizes strong grassroots groups, coalitions and campaigns to protect our environment, health, economic well being and community quality of life.

About Clean Water Fund www.CleanWaterFund.org

Clean Water Fund (CWF) is a national 501(c)3 research and education organization promoting the public interest since 1978. CWF supports the public interest in protection of natural resources, with a special emphasis on water issues. CWF's programs build on and complement those of CWA. CWF's organizing has empowered citizen leaders, organizations and coalitions to improve environmental conditions in hundreds of communities and strengthen policies at all levels from the local to the national.

To get an electronic copy of the report, log on to www.cleanwateraction.org/fl or contact our office:



190 NE 199th St.
Suite 106
Miami, FL 33179
(305) 653-9101 phone
(305) 653-9108 fax
dshirreffs@cleanwater.org

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. Executive Summary	1-2
II. Introduction	3
III. Survey Design & Methodology	4
IV. Key Survey Results	5-7
V. Recommendations.....	7-8
VI. Conclusion.....	9
VII. Additional readings.....	10

I. Executive Summary

Although recent polls indicate sustained and growing support for Everglades restoration, Clean Water Fund has witnessed a decline in public participation on Everglades restoration in the last ten years.

In order to investigate this phenomena, Clean Water Fund consulted with environmental allies, social scientists and supporters to help develop a set of 23 questions about where the public obtains information about restoration projects, what they feel the most important goals of Everglades restoration are, and what they felt were the barriers preventing public participation, etc.

Accompanying the survey was a qualitative commentary to allow for a deeper understanding of public opinion. The survey was intended to get a pulse on how the public and diverse constituency groups in Florida felt about ongoing outreach and historic Everglades restoration efforts.

The 1,567 survey responses were primarily collected anonymously online over the course of 90 days from September through mid December 2009. Some surveys were also gathered via email, web postings and physical collection at a variety of public and community meetings held in South Florida.

Clean Water Fund's "Everglades for All" survey findings:

- 94% believe Everglade's restoration is good for the local economy.
- 86% stated that they believed restoration has a positive impact on public health.
- 74% of respondents rated public outreach efforts by government agencies as very poor, poor or fair.
- 77% felt there are insufficient opportunities for the public to raise concerns prior to the development of restoration plans.
- 60% indicated a willingness to volunteer with Everglades restoration efforts.
- 44% did not know whether comments made at public hearings were meaningfully considered.
- 44% indicated that they first learned about Everglade's restoration through newspaper/magazines, rather than in school (less than 17%).
- 73% get information on local issues off the Internet and newspapers

Respondents identified protection of wildlife habitat, drinking water supply, and climate change as the most important objectives in Everglades restoration. Results were also indicative of a breakdown in a public policy framework that does not elevate civic input and lacks transparency, eroding public trust.

Clean Water Fund evaluated the concerns of respondents and met with a number of partners which included government agency employees, elected officials, low-income people and others to develop the following list of recommendations to broaden support, communication and connection between Florida's Everglades and its citizens.

- **Break Down the Language Barrier** by removing technical language and making information multi-lingual.
- **Bring Restoration Home** by holding meetings in locations within the community and on nights and weekends that would increase participation.
- **Timing is Everything.** Solicit stakeholder involvement during initial planning stages of the process to ensure public contribution is meaningfully included.
- **Dispel Myths** and stereotypes that minority communities don't support conservation.
- **Create Ambassadors** by including personal and relevant information to youth and disenfranchised communities i.e. costs, water supply, etc.
- **Increase Accountability** by identifying agency representatives in charge of public participation in each project of Everglades restoration planning.
- **Bettters Ways to Reach Out** include utilizing new technology like two-way webcasts, social networking mediums to increase participation.

This survey revealed new opportunities for relationship building and hopefully will increase public input on key decisions in Everglades restoration. In spite of discouraging public participation statistics reported in this survey that suggest an eroded public trust, nearly 60% of respondents indicated a willingness to volunteer in Everglades restoration efforts.

Clean Water Fund has already begun to work with survey participants, government agencies, non-profit organizations and others to advance these recommendations to support, broaden and deepen the connection between Everglades restoration and the public.

II. Introduction

This report, *Everglades for All*, was developed in preparation for a dialogue with key state and federal agencies; the business and environmental communities and local governments responsible for implementing Everglades restoration projects and public outreach. The survey was intended to ask key questions like: Where do people obtain information about restoration projects? What does the public feel the most important goals of Everglades restoration are? What is the public's knowledge and involvement in Everglades restoration?

The influence of Everglades restoration extends well beyond the meeting halls and conference rooms of administering agencies like the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water District. Decisions made by local county commissions, state agencies including the Department of Community Affairs, the Department of Environmental Protection, and policy makers within the state and federal legislatures also heavily influence restoration.

It is important to note that Everglades National Park is a world heritage site and Everglades restoration has international significance and is the site of precedent setting restoration. However, for the purpose of this report, stakeholder identification is being limited to those with economic, social, health or other fundamental interests within the state of Florida.

The financial support and environmental benefits of the Everglades touches all families in Florida's diverse communities through related land use planning decisions, availability and quality of water supply, governmental finances, and hurricane and other weather events which impact quality of life. These stakeholder groups include taxpayers, recreational users (i.e., fisherman, kayakers, wildlife enthusiasts), economic interests (i.e., farmers, developers, rock mining and tourism businesses), adjacent land owners, indigenous tribes and climate-impacted communities.



Clean Water Fund and other members of the non-profit community have sought to improve our education and outreach efforts with the public as well as enhance the ways in which we are included as representatives in numerous stakeholder processes. In order to identify information shortfalls and best practices, we felt it was necessary to solicit input from various geographic, cultural and socio-economic communities to develop the survey outlined below.

III. Survey Design and Methodology

In our survey design, Clean Water Fund sought to discover how people felt about Everglades restoration issues in their communities and what they knew about public participation. To be respectful of the amount of time people were willing to spend on survey answers and to allow for quantitative data analysis, the survey was limited to 23 questions. During a number of e-mails, meetings and conference calls, over the course of two months the wording and prioritization of questions were vetted with key citizen volunteers, advocates from over 20 non-profit organizations and social scientists. Most questions were designed as multiple choice and participants had opportunities for adding individual comments. It was assumed that participants had at least tangentially heard of Everglades restoration.

The 1,567 survey responses were primarily collected anonymously on-line over a 90 day period from September through mid December 2009. Some surveys were also gathered via e-mail, web postings and physical collection at a variety of public and community meetings held in South Florida.

It should be noted that due to sample size, methodology and geographic constraints, survey results are not necessarily representative of the population but remain indicative of support and concerns of a broad constituency.

The need for broadening support and outreach on Everglades Restoration was demonstrated by results revealing that less than 9% of respondents surveyed identified themselves as non-white. Additionally, income, age and education levels responses showed a positive deviation from U.S. Census results.

IV. Key Survey Results

Public understanding of what's at stake in Everglades restoration.

- ❖ An overwhelming 94% of respondents replied that they thought Everglades restoration **helps** the local economy, rather than hurts it.

“Necessary for long term economic sustainability.”

“It helps the economy in that without a healthy environment, we will have an unhealthy economy in the future.”

- ❖ Respondents were also united on the effects restoration has on public health. Over 86% of those who took the survey stated that they believed restoration has a positive impact on public health.

Individual comments cited numerous advantages linked to conservation and restoration.

“Clean air and water mean healthier people.”

“The wildlife resources in a healthy ecosystem enhance quality of life and mental health.”

“Not only is it a personal sense of well being - it moderates Florida's climate.”

The results did not reveal a significant correlation between respondents' positions (i.e. business people, concerned citizens, students, elected officials, or government agency employees) with what they felt was the primary concern of Everglades restoration. However, the protection of wildlife habitat and drinking water supply were widely held as the most critical restoration goals amongst all respondents, followed by climate change.

How do people get information about Everglades restoration?

- ❖ 44% indicated that they first learned about Everglades restoration through newspaper/magazines, rather than in school (less than 17%).
- ❖ Over 1,200 (77%) of respondents have visited the Everglades for recreation.

“It will clean the surface water and help recharge the aquifers.”

“Balanced ecosystem restoration to benefit all forms of life, including people and the drinking water supply.”

- ❖ 74% of respondents rated public outreach efforts by government agencies as very poor, poor or fair.

Respondents expressed their concerns about the quality and accessibility of information available on Everglades restoration while others blamed civic disinterest for a lack of public participation.

“Websites and pamphlets do not personally engage people and the real impacts personally applied need to be explained”

“I read conflicted [sic] information”

“Unfortunately I believe most South Floridians don't care about anything except politics and sports”

Public participation on Everglades restoration

- ❖ An alarming 77% of those who took the survey felt that there were NOT sufficient opportunities for the public to raise concerns prior to the development of restoration plans.
- ❖ Nearly 47% of citizens surveyed have never made public comments to officials on Everglades restoration at all. Of those who stated they had made comment 45% of respondents indicated they had sent e-mails, 6.9% mailed letters and only 7% had commented during a public hearing.
- ❖ A surprising 44% did not know whether comments made at public hearings were meaningfully considered when creating restoration projects. 30% thought comments carried weight with Everglades decision-makers and 23% did not.

Respondents commented on a reliance on environmental organizations for information, alerts, and petitions, but also revealed a disconnect between themselves and the public process.

“Decisions are made at higher levels”

“I feel like the people listening to the comments often already have their minds made up.”

“Most people are not heard”

“Restoration is something for experts to accomplish not the uninformed public at large”

When asked to remark on what they considered barriers to public participation in the Everglades restoration process, a number of responders said that a lack of awareness and information not made readily accessible to the public played a roll in stalling public participation. Other common responses were time constraints, lack of organization among activist groups, and a feeling of powerlessness against big businesses, entrenched interests, or politicians.

“Insufficient publicity in local media; lack of information on hearings, meetings.”

“Lack of adequate communication.”

“Behind the scenes political and business arrangements.”

V. Recommendations

In January 2010, at the 25th annual Everglades Coalition Conference, Clean Water Fund facilitated a panel discussion titled “Everglades for All – Diversifying Restoration”. The panel discussed and received suggestions from attendees on best practices government agencies and non-profit organizations can take to improve public participation. The emphasis placed on improving public participation particularly amongst low income communities and people of color. Clean Water Fund’s analysis, respondent ideas and panel suggestions have been collected and are highlighted in the recommendations listed below.

■ **Break Down the Language Barrier**

In addition to making information multi-lingual, the heavy reliance on technical information and science in decision-making renders information more difficult to understand by the general public and should be more user-friendly.

■ **Bring Restoration Home**

Input must be actively solicited at all levels to determine what matters most to experts, stakeholders, elected officials, and real people in communities. Government agencies should build-in an on-going listening tour in locations within the community and at times that could increase

participation (e.g., on nights and weekends and at schools, libraries, community centers, churches).

■ **Timing is Everything**

Premature focus on positions or specific proposals polarizes participants and leads to entrenchment rather than exploring best possible solutions. To restore public trust and avoid delaying restoration, solicitation of stakeholder involvement should be done at the very first stages of the process to ensure that the public's contribution will be meaningfully included. This will result in increased public support and less litigation as projects near completion.

■ **Dispel Myths**

Recent polls challenge stereotypes and show that support for conservation ranks very high amongst minority communities. A national voter survey on conservation revealed that voters of color are significantly more concerned than white voters about a wide range of conservation issues.

■ **Create Ambassadors**

Make outreach personal, relevant and enduring to all, but especially to youth and disenfranchised communities including information about costs and water supply issues. Include interactive and first-hand experiential learning within the ecosystem. Everglades restoration goals should be shaped by the public using simple language, then planned and implemented by agencies using science. One-time events are not adequate as they limit public participation.

■ **Increase Accountability**

Identify who is responsible for monitoring public participation in each project of Everglades restoration planning and set goals to achieve public involvement. Publish meeting notices using a variety of media sources as not all stakeholders have access to internet postings. Ensure ample time for voices of citizens, who have made efforts to attend meetings, to be heard. Additionally, independent sources should verify whether goals are being met.

■ **Better Ways to Reach Out**

Meetings are frequently inaccessible due to geography and/or daytime schedules that conflict for many working adults and families. Night and weekend meetings, utilizing new technology like two-way webcasts, social networking mediums can increase two-way communication and increase participation.

VI. Conclusion

Clean Water Fund believes that relationships can be strengthened and public trust restored through commitment and creative approaches. In spite of the discouraging public participation statistics reported in this survey, nearly 60% of respondents indicated that they would be willing to volunteer with Everglades restoration efforts if contacted and volunteered contact information.

Clean Water Fund's organizing work around this survey has already opened up two-way communication with previously disengaged individuals and organizations. There has been overwhelming interest in and commitment to follow up by citizens and a need has been identified for improved education in schools by engaging teachers, PTA groups and clubs. In response to this effort, non-profit organizations have already stepped up efforts to modify outreach strategies in response to these findings. Additionally, governmental organizations such as the South Florida Water Management District have agreed to re-assess their outreach models to include the recommendations of this report.

Clean Water Fund will continue to work with survey participants, government agencies, and non-profit allies to identify new ways to implement some of the recommendations outlined in this survey report. Clean Water Fund's goal is to deepen the connection between Everglades restoration and the public.



VII. Additional Readings

The Everglades Foundation 2009 poll found that 82 percent of Floridians believe it is personally important to them to restore the Everglades . Strong majorities also agreed that it was necessary to ensure a fresh supply of drinking water, to control flooding and to preserve the state's wildlife.

<http://www.evergladesfoundation.org/article2.php?id=720>

The Legacy Water Resource Education Program is a cooperative educational venture piloted by the St. Johns River Water Management District and area schools in which the District works with educators and their students to make public lands more accessible. Public lands serve as living laboratories where students take the lead in managing land for their community while learning about natural resources. <http://www.sjrwmd.com/education/legacyprogram.html>

“Key Findings from National Voter Survey on Conservation” September 25, 2009 National Voter Survey report showing the commitment of voters to supporting conservation despite economic downturn.

<http://www.nature.org/pressroom/files/poll.pdf>

“Key Findings from National Voter Survey on Conservation Among Voters of Color” which shows that communities of color in America are some of the most dedicated supporters of conservation.

<http://www.nature.org/pressroom/files/poll.pdf>

“Public participation in environmental decision-making: A case study of ecosystem restoration in South Florida” Dr. Laura Ogden

<http://www.inra.fr/esr/publications/cahiers/pdf/ogden.pdf>

“A Public Engagement Handbook for the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Planning Process” Prepared y the Human Dimensions of the South Florida Environmental Group, Florida International University 2003

[http://www.fiu.edu/~hudimen/publicengagement/Primer frontpages.pdf](http://www.fiu.edu/~hudimen/publicengagement/Primer_frontpages.pdf)

Legacy on the Land: A Black Couple Discovers Our National Inheritance and Tells Why We Every American Should Care

<http://www.earthwiseproductionsinc.com/legacyontheland>