

Grace Healy, "Swamp or Climax Region? Congressional Perceptions of the Everglades, 1947-1989"

Everglades National Park was the first national park to be established for its ecological distinctiveness rather than its magnificent physical characteristics. Nevertheless, the Everglades environment in South Florida continues to suffer due to rampant agricultural and residential development. This degradation is, in part, a result of the decisions made by congressmen. This paper offers an analysis of the congressional hearings of three specific acts of Congress created in order to protect the Everglades: the establishment of Everglades National Park in 1947, the creation of Big Cypress National Preserve in 1974, and the expansion of Everglades National Park in 1989. The goal of this analysis is to understand congressional perceptions of the landscape and how they changed over time. I am less concerned with politics and more concerned with how the members of Congress valued the Everglades. Rather than primarily concentrating on the outcomes of the hearings, which is illuminating to an extent, this paper focuses on the language and questions that congressmen used and asked. By doing so, this paper escapes the political history of the Everglades, despite its focus on federal officials, and rather outlines those officials' cultural, economical, and environmental understanding of the Everglades. I will argue that while congressmen's perceptions do shift over time, towards an understanding of the region's ecology and a belief that ecosystems deserve to be protected in their own right, the congressmen's desire to protect the Everglades was continually tampered by the impulse to view the land as a commodity.