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Post Series: The Swamp
Among Environmentalists, the Great Divide

By Michael Grunwald
 Washington Post Staff Writer
 Wednesday, June 26, 2002; Page A13

"It's time to choose sides," Joe Browder was saying. "Are you for or are you against?"

Browder wasn't talking about terrorism. He was talking about the \$7.8 billion Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. And Browder, a former co-chairman of the Everglades Coalition and an ally of the late Marjory Stoneman Douglas, was talking about his fellow environmentalists. Many activists believe it's time to sound an alarm that Everglades restoration is not real restoration, and to withhold political support until it is.

"It's a bogus water-supply project!" said Barbara Lange, co-chair of the Sierra Club's Everglades efforts. "It's about time we all admitted it."

There is a growing rift within the Everglades Coalition, the network of conservation groups that helped push restoration into law. Some environmentalists want to work within the system to persuade the Army Corps of Engineers and the South Florida Water Management District to improve the plan. Others say the only hope for real ecological benefits will be tough legal requirements of restoration progress -- or, barring that, public opposition and litigation.

Nathaniel Reed, a silver-haired former Nixon administration official, outlined the debate in a June 12 e-mail to his fellow activists.

"Of genuine concern to me is the feeling among some of our compatriots that the

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Shark Valley, the Florida Everglades. (Photo: Chris Johns - National Geographic)

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 - **Robert K. Dawson**, a lobbyist whose firm's current clients

[plan] is so fatally flawed that it is indefensible," Reed wrote. "I do not believe that theory. I am confident that if we work together we can mold the [plan] into the ambitious program of restoration that we worked so long and diligently to achieve."

The most enthusiastic environmentalist advocates for the plan work for the National Audubon Society and its Florida chapter. Richard Pettigrew, the chairman of the commission that proposed the plan's blueprint, is on Audubon's board; former Audubon staffer Nanciann Regalado is head of Everglades outreach for the Corps.

But several environmental groups, including Friends of the Everglades and the Biodiversity Legal Foundation, opposed the plan in 2000, and now fed-up officials at such groups as Environmental Defense and the Natural Resources Defense Council also criticize it.

Critics such as Browder -- a former Audubon official -- accuse Audubon of shilling for a deeply flawed plan, providing cover to anti-environmental politicians to maintain a seat at a stacked negotiating table. Audubon officials say they are aware of the plan's shortcomings, but can address them more by working with project leaders than by accusing them of bad faith. Of all the groups in the coalition, Audubon has the most people, money and access to policymakers; Eric Draper, its lobbyist in Tallahassee, believes other groups resent its influence.

"People are going to criticize me for hanging out with Republicans and wearing a suit, but I have to be as good as the sugar industry's lobbyist," Draper said. "When you're the lead organization and you get stuff done, people get angry with you."

Audubon biologists such as Mark Kraus, Paul Gray and Jerry Lorenz do not sound any different from other environmental scientists when describing the plan's shortcomings. They worry that it relies on uncertain technologies, overlooks water quality, subsidizes damaging growth and delays its

whose firms' current clients include several Florida agribusiness associations. ([Read the transcript](#))

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— About This Series —

This series, based on more than 200 interviews and thousands of pages of documents, shows that the \$7.8 billion plan to restore the Everglades may result in little restoration but will certainly increase water supplies for Florida residents, farmers and businesses, who already lead the nation in per-capita water consumption.

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environmental benefits.

"I thought this was supposed to be a restoration plan," said Lorenz, who studies roseate spoonbills in the Florida Keys. "It looks like a lot of water supply to me."

But in the political arena, Audubon takes a less confrontational approach. Its leaders consistently urge that nasty coalition letters be toned down. Its lobbyists focus on getting the plan money and momentum, not changing the plan.

This spring, the tensions within Florida's environmental movement exploded after Audubon helped engineer a bill ensuring state bonds for Everglades restoration. The problem was that GOP legislators had tacked on language limiting the ability of citizen groups to block development permits. Audubon cut a deal to water down the permit language -- which will not affect Audubon -- but supported the overall bill. More than 100 local groups urged Gov. Jeb Bush to veto the compromise. He didn't, and many environmentalists blame Audubon.

"Audubon sold out -- completely, unnecessarily and irresponsibly," says Alan Farago, another Sierra Club leader in South Florida.

The flip side, Draper said, is that Audubon helped persuade Bush to sign a funding bill he had publicly criticized: "It's not a bad thing to be on the inside." As long as the cash flows and the project continues, he said, restoration has a chance. But would Congress approve billions of dollars for a Florida environmental project opposed by Florida environmentalists?

"It's healthy to debate if this is just a water project," Draper said. "The question is: Does that create doubt in Congress? That's a very serious risk."

These days, more and more environmentalists are willing to take that risk.

"Sometimes you have to draw a line in the sand," said Environmental Defense senior attorney Tim Searchinger. "It's hard when organizations have a big institutional commitment. But there's no point in lobbying for money that isn't helping the Everglades."

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