



"WINKING AND WONDROUS... BEWITCHING."

ROBERT DANIELS – ROGEREBERT.COM

**"A VIVID LOVE LETTER TO THE LAND
AND A CALL FOR ITS PROTECTION."**

PAT MULEN – POV MAGAZINE

River of Grass

JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding



SUBTROPIC FILMS and WALKING PRODUCTIONS present a film by SASHA WORTZEL "RIVER OF GRASS"
In association with JUSTFILMS | FORD FOUNDATION Music by ANGÉLICA NEGRÓN
Director of Photography J. BENNETT Edited by REBECCA ADORNO DÁVILA, SASHA WORTZEL
Co-Produced by MONICA BERRA, ALEXANDRA CODINA, J. BENNETT Produced by DANIELLE VARGA
Directed and Produced by SASHA WORTZEL



"WINKING AND WONDROUS...
BEWITCHING."

ROBERT DANIELS – ROGERE BERT.COM

"A VIVID LOVE LETTER TO THE LAND
AND A CALL FOR ITS PROTECTION."

PAT MULEN – POV MAGAZINE

River of Grass



Introduction

The following guide complements the beautiful, poetic documentary film and reimagining of Marjory Stoneman Douglas's book by the same name, *River of Grass*. The film provides an intimate view of the Everglades as an important ecosystem in Florida, under constant threat as human growth and development encroaches on this one-of-a-kind ecological space.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

3	Facilitation Guidelines
4	Director's Statement
5	Section 1: <i>The Ecosystem of the Everglades</i>
16	Section 2: <i>Art and Words of the Everglades</i>
40	Section 3: <i>Land Use and Human Rights—Living in Harmony</i>
48	Section 4: <i>Land Use—Sugarcane, Data Centers, and Other Development Projects</i>
51	About Journeys in Film

A note to users:

This guide contains content, questions, and activities for ages 9 to adult. We envision this guide as valuable for youth and adults in traditional learning spaces, such as K-12 classroom spaces, as well as other learning environments. The discussion questions and extension activities make the guide flexible for various communities.



JOURNEYS IN FILM™
educating for global understanding

©2026 River of Grass LLC.

All rights reserved.

FACILITATION GUIDELINES



Filmmakers use immersive storytelling to produce intense thoughts and emotions in the viewer. **Journeys in Film** uses this powerful medium as a springboard for meaningful dialogue around humanity's most pressing issues. In this guide, you will find suggestions for leading productive conversations that broaden perspectives, increase global competency, encourage empathy, and build new paradigms for education.

- When watching a film or having a powerful discussion, normalize taking breaks and exercising bodily autonomy. Acknowledge that conversations around complex topics can be vulnerable, complicated, and challenging. Encourage members to voice and do what is right for them without needing to explain or apologize.
- People do their best when they know what to expect. Start and end your meetings on time.
- Share or co-create your intentions for the meeting.
- Create your space. If possible, share snacks or find other ways to create an inviting, comfortable atmosphere.
- Create a trustworthy space. Maintain confidentiality and only speak to your own experience.
- Minimize distractions while you are together. Silence cell phones and devices so you can give your full attention to the conversation.
- Practice whole-body listening. Listen to words, tone, body language, and the feeling in the atmosphere.
- Acknowledge voices that may be absent. Is there a lived experience that isn't represented in your group? Who are the bridge people who might be able to connect you with other people in your community who might bring new perspectives to the table?
- Adopt an attitude of positive intent. If someone says something that bothers you, assume positive intent and ask for more information.
- Ignite your curiosity around other people's views and opinions. Listen to understand, not to respond. You don't need to agree with others in your group or make it known that you are "right" to have a worthwhile conversation.
- Words matter. Be open to learning and practicing new ways to communicate with others.
- Be clear, direct, and kind in your communication. Nobody benefits when you bottle your opinions.
- Everyone has blind spots and biases; cultivate a space of grace as you enter into new territory together.
- If a conversation gets heated, practice acknowledging the tension, pausing as a group, and taking a collective breath together before diving back in or taking a longer break to reset.
- Privilege your relationships with others over the content or agenda of the meeting. Show each other kindness.
- Create a closing ritual that celebrates the time you've spent together and either gives closure or gives members something to think about before your next meeting.



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT



***RIVER OF GRASS* Director Sasha Wortzel**

Across film and expanded forms of cinema, my practice explores how this country's past and present are inextricably linked through resonant spaces and their hauntings, particularly at shorelines, boundary lines, and bodies of water. The tangled dynamics of desire and loss layered in the landscape and reverberating across time form a throughline in my work.

Born and raised in the Everglades region, this profoundly personal project grows out of my process of grappling with what it means to be from a place that may cease to exist in my lifetime, and with the complexities of "home" in a settler colonial landscape. This line of inquiry is rooted in my first-hand experiences of the devastating impacts of capital-driven resource extraction, pollution, and the human-accelerated climate emergency. Since a 2017 artist residency in the Everglades National Park, I've been developing this project and forming relationships while embedded in the communities this film is about

and an offering to. I have been gifted access by the film's participants with whom I share a sense of pride-in-place, love for the lands and waters we call home, and a genuine concern about our futures here.

The Everglades are a network of ecosystems connected by water. Similarly, *River of Grass* takes shape formally as a prismatic portrait of the region's interdependent communities. Water and its movements — natural and human-influenced — move us through the landscape and chorus of voices. The project's polyphonic structure reverberates in Marjory Stoneman Douglas's intentional use of the pronoun "they" for the Everglades and in Betty Osceola's Miccosukee teachings of land as ancestor, binding "them" to the collective, the non-binary, and to expansive notions of kinship between people, animals, plants, and the unknown.

— Sasha Wortzel

SECTION 1: *THE ECOSYSTEM OF THE EVERGLADES*



“There are no other Everglades in the world.”
— Marjory Stoneman Douglas

The Everglades ecosystem, located in South Florida, is unique in the world. Covering over 1.5 million acres, the slow-moving river provides water and environmental protection through 550 square miles of mangrove forests for millions of residents. Early non-native settlers considered the land useless and concocted elaborate engineering projects to drain and reclaim the land for production and development. Their hubris and ignorance of the ecosystems' complexity and vitality to the region resulted in significant damage and devastation in water flow, animal extinction, and plant extinction.

The Everglades is home to many distinct ecosystems, including freshwater sloughs, marl prairies, tropical hammocks, pinelands, cypresses, mangroves, coastal lowlands, marine zones, and estuaries.

Water and the Everglades

Florida has two seasons, both defined by water. The dry season is from December through April. Temperatures are cooler, humidity is lower, and biting insects are less prevalent. The wet season is from May through November. During the wet season, daily temperatures and humidity are extremely high, and thunderstorms that drop large amounts of water are a near-daily occurrence. Hurricane season is June through November.

DRIVING QUESTIONS

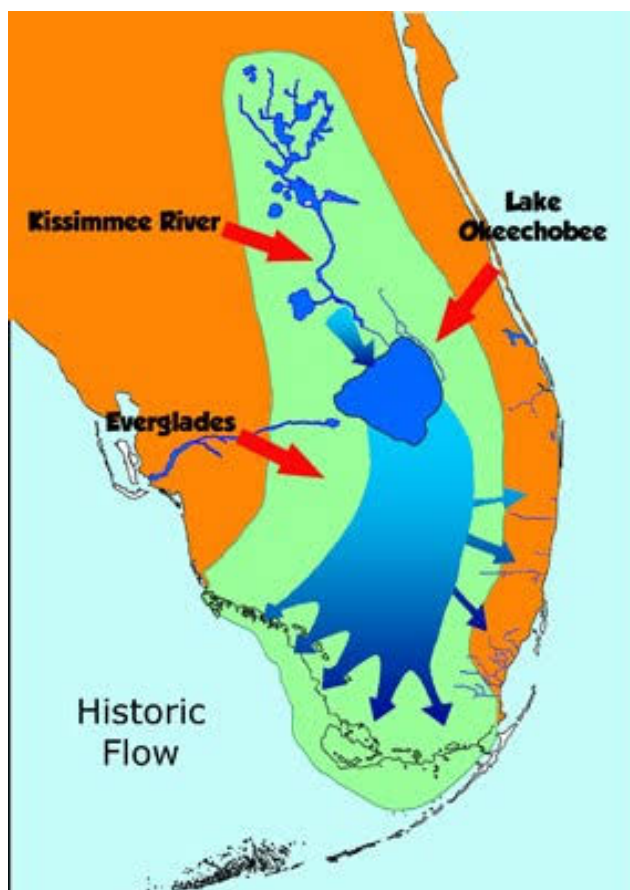
Why is it important to understand the role ecosystems play in our environments?

What happens when an ecosystem is disrupted?

The Everglades environment shifts during these seasons. Besides the temperature and humidity shifts, water levels change the character of the ecosystem. In the dry season, water levels drop, and wildlife is compressed into the smaller areas of water. Alligators create holes, depressions created by their tails and snouts that hold water, which become an important site for other animals. This behavior makes the alligator a keystone species. A keystone species creates an environment that supports other life. In an arch, if the keystone is removed, the arch falls; in an ecosystem, if the keystone species population decreases or is destroyed, the effects are devastating to other life forms.

In the wet season, water levels rise and fluctuate with daily storms and periodic hurricanes. The majority of the year's average rainfall of nearly 60 inches takes place during this season. This season is one of restoration and abundance. The Everglades is uniquely adapted to absorbing these fluctuations and diverting water to other areas. As seen in the map below, water in Florida collects in springs and lakes that flow south through the Kissimmee River and into Lake Okeechobee, which acts like a massive holding tank. When Lake Okeechobee overfills, the water continues to flow south through the Everglades and out to the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean.

This system historically had worked well, ecologically speaking. But when manmade dams and attempts at rerouting water flow were introduced starting in the early 20th century, this complex system was degraded. The effects were flooding in new residential areas and impacts on the animals and plants.



Map of historic water flow in south Florida

Threats to the Everglades Ecosystem

The Florida Everglades ecosystem is important to Florida residents, but it faces multiple threats, including:

- **Climate change** — As the climate warms and sea levels rise, the Everglades is at particular and immediate risk of flooding, saltwater intrusion into freshwater supplies, and habitat destruction. Climate patterns such as El Niño and La Niña can intensify droughts and cause wildfires.
- **Invasive species** — Florida's year-round warm climate creates an ideal environment for invasive species of plants, animals, and insects to thrive, upsetting local ecosystems and native organisms' populations. Many animals, like giant constrictors and nonnative reptiles, come from the pet trade. Other animals, like the giant African land snail, entered the state accidentally through international trade or as biological research subjects. Plants like kudzu were specially introduced to people as a good vine for shade and erosion control, only to find out later that it was highly aggressive and choked out native plants. Laurel wilt is a fungal disease spread by the invasive ambrosia beetle, impacting the avocado industry as well as the cultural practice of local Indigenous communities of Miccosukee and Seminole peoples.
- **Sugarcane and agricultural impacts** — Sugarcane has been grown in Florida since 1572 and is now planted on around 400,000 acres of land, making Florida one of the top sugarcane-producing states in the U.S. A primary environmental concern with significant human impacts is the preharvest burning of the fields, which prepares the cane for easier harvest and concentrates the sugar, making a sweeter product. The ash that fills the air every year during this process is called "black snow" by the residents who live nearby, and recent research shows this smoke and ash impact human health through respiratory disease and cancer. Residents are working to ban the burning and restore health justice to the area.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss how Florida seasons are different from other places you have lived, visited, or learned about. Do you think these differences were understood by early developers? Do you think these differences are understood now by most living in the area?
2. Looking at the map above, imagine blocking the water flow at any point. Where would the effects potentially be seen?
3. Discuss the power of film to transport viewers to new, remote, or inaccessible ecosystems. When watching this film, what landscapes were you most drawn to?
4. What do you think made Marjory Stoneman Douglas fall in love with the Everglades? How might the natural world be a balm for humans during specific times in their lives? Have you had an environment or place that resonated with you in a powerful way?

Useful Terms

Apex predator — An animal that is at the top of the food chain and has no natural predators.

Ecosystem — A community of living things (like plants and animals) interacting with each other and with their non-living environment (like soil, water, and air).

Estuary — Partially enclosed, coastal water body where freshwater from rivers and streams mixes with sea. These important transitional zones are critical habitats for wildlife and act as buffers to rising water and storm surges.

Florida plateau — A geological platform upon which Florida is erected. Created 530 million years ago through volcanic activity and marine sedimentation.

Gulf Stream — A strong ocean current that brings warm water from the Gulf of Mexico into the Atlantic Ocean. Influences the climate of the east coast of Florida, keeping it warmer in the winter and cooler in the summer than other southeastern states.



Indicator species — Also known as a bioindicator, a species whose presence, absence, or abundance impacts a specific environmental condition(s).

Invasive species — Non-native organisms that threaten a local ecosystem. Because of Florida's warm weather, invasive species can often thrive.

Limestone — A sedimentary rock, mostly calcium carbonate, with fossilized remains of sea life.

Marl prairie — An ecosystem that develops during the wet season and is similar to a slough but with lower vegetation and abundant microorganisms that provide food for insects and fish.

Slough — Freshwater marshes, the main routes of moving water through the Everglades. These are the deepest water bodies in the Everglades and are covered with water for 11 months of the year, making them an excellent habitat for tree islands and animals.

Swamp — An area of land that is perpetually saturated or covered with water.

Tree islands — Also called hammocks, located in the sloughs, these islands range in size from .01 to 70 hectares and are biodiverse with as much as 10 times the nutrient phosphorus as the surrounding Everglades. Traditionally inhabited by the Indigenous populations for thousands of years. The health of tree islands is an indicator for the health of the Everglades.

Watershed — That area of land, a bounded hydrologic system, within which all living things are inextricably linked by their common water course and where, as humans settled, simple logic demanded that they become part of a community. A specific area of land where all rainfall, snowmelt, and runoff drain to a common outlet, such as a river, lake, or estuary.

BIRDS

Anhinga — The male anhinga is inky black with a cluster of silver/white feathers on his wings. During breeding season, the male's blood-red eyes are surrounded by a bright blue patch of skin. Females are distinguishable by their buff-tan neck. You can often spot the anhinga perched on a branch with wings outstretched, drying feathers. They feed on small fish, shrimp, amphibians, crayfish, young alligators, and snakes. The fact that their feathers are less water resistant than other birds helps them to swim underwater, where they often spear fish with their long neck and sharp beak. They surface in order to flip their catch into their mouth for consumption.

Double-crested cormoran — Large waterbirds with small heads on long, kinked necks. They have thin, strongly hooked bills, roughly the length of the head. Sometimes mistaken for the anhinga.

Great blue heron — The largest heron in the United States, this wading bird is often seen fishing near freshwater shores.

Limpkin — A long-legged species of waterbird that has dark brown feathers with streaks of white on the head and neck but absent from the rest of the body.

Purple gallinule — Medium-sized marsh bird with long yellow legs. Adults are brilliant purple with a bright red and yellow bill.

Roseate spoonbill — A social small wading bird with a flattened spoon-shaped bill and beautiful pink coloring.

Snail kite — A medium-sized hawk with a wingspan of about 45 inches, very similar to the marsh hawk but without wavering, tilting flight. An indicator species, due to its relationship with snails as a food source. The snails lay their eggs on the stems of the sawgrasses, and this depends on appropriate water levels.

White ibis — Large wading birds with football-shaped bodies. They have long legs and a long neck that they hold out straight in flight.

Wood stork — The only native stork in the United States, this wetland wading bird's population was severely impacted by the disruption of habitat in the development of South Florida, landing them on the endangered species list. They have recently been delisted as their numbers rebound.

MAMMALS

Bobcat — A medium-sized wildcat found throughout the Everglades and much of North America. Bobcats are skilled hunters that prey on rabbits, rodents, birds, and reptiles.

Florida panther — Florida's state animal, also called the catamount, has been on the state's endangered species list since 1973. These large feline predators' habitat has been fragmented by development, and they rely on a long range to wander and hunt.

Marsh rabbit — A rabbit adapted to wetland habitats, where it feeds on grasses and aquatic vegetations.

River otter — A playful, semi-aquatic mammal that lives in freshwater wetlands, rivers, and marshes. River otters are excellent swimmers and feed primarily on fish, frogs, and crustaceans.

Virginia opossum — North America's only marsupial. Opossums carry and nurse their young in a pouch and help control insect and rodent populations by feeding on a wide variety of foods.

Florida manatee — A large, slow-moving aquatic mammal that lives in Florida's rivers, estuaries, and coastal waters. Manatees are herbivores that feed on aquatic plants and are protected because of their vulnerable status.

REPTILES

Alligator — Florida's state reptile, an indicator species that makes a depression in the ground that provides water for many other animals throughout the dry season.

Box turtle — Florida box turtles usually live 50–70 years, but can live longer. Named for its unique “hinged” plastron that allows it to close its shell completely like a box.

Burmese python — One of several highly invasive, large constricting snakes that have populated the Everglades in recent years. A byproduct of the pet trade, these general predators eat and decimate native mammal and bird populations.

Coral snake — A small, highly venomous, red, yellow, and black-striped snake found throughout Florida. Identified with the popular mnemonic “Red on yellow, kill a fellow; red on black, a friend of Jack.”

Eastern diamondback rattlesnake — North America's largest venomous snake, found in the Southeastern U.S.

Red-bellied cooter — Florida is home to several species and subspecies of cooters: the river cooter, Florida cooter, Florida red-bellied cooter, and Suwannee cooter. There are similarities in appearance across all cooter species: They all have moderately to highly domed shells, yellow to cream stripes on their heads and limbs, females grow larger than males, the shells on male turtles are less domed, and males have longer claws

Snapping turtle — A large, long-lived freshwater reptile known for its powerful bite and prehistoric appearance, characterized by a serrated shell, long tail with spikes, and a small, T-shaped plastron (bottom shell). Notable for its combative disposition.

Softshell turtle — Florida softshell turtles have a leathery, soft, dark brown to olive green shell that is oblong and has bumps behind the head. Florida softshells have tubular

nostrils and webbed feet. Florida softshell turtles have long necks which they can extend about halfway down their shell. They can deliver a powerful bite.

Water moccasin — Also known as a cottonmouth, one of Florida's venomous snakes. Water moccasins live in the water and along the bank. They are not aggressive, but can easily be stumbled upon.

PLANTS

Cattail — A strikingly tall, native wetland plant with a unique flowering spike that resembles the look of a cat's tail, hence the name. It thrives in high-nutrient water, and the expansion of this plant community can indicate high levels of phosphorus in the water. An example of a native plant that has become invasive in the Everglades.

Cocoplum — A South Florida native and an outstanding texture plant with a "beachy" look, producing an edible plum which many creatures (including people) enjoy. Can be found in swamps, coastal dunes, and hammocks.

Cypress — Evergreen trees that can grow underwater. When grouped together in a depression, they form a cypress head, which, along with gator holes, provide water during the dry season (see image below).

Mangrove — Florida has nearly 600,000 acres of mangrove forests along the coast. These trees are unique because they can desalinate the water they need from sea water, expelling the salt through their leaves and exposed roots. Their above-ground weblike root system provides protection, a nursery, and food for sea life. They also stabilize the coast line and reduce the impact of severe storm surges.

Muhly grass — Pink muhly grass grows in a mound with erect, blue-green foliage until September when spectacular, billowing pink seed heads form a cotton-candy crown. Muhly grass is naturally found in Florida's pine flatwoods, coastal uplands, and even along its highways, but these days it's also a popular choice in home and commercial landscapes.

Redbay — Member of the laurel family of plants, and is a source of plant medicines for the Miccosukee and Seminole. An aromatic evergreen tree famous for its spicy, culinary-friendly leaves and wildlife value. It is currently facing massive die-offs across Florida due to laurel wilt disease, a fatal vascular infection spread by the invasive redbay ambrosia beetle.

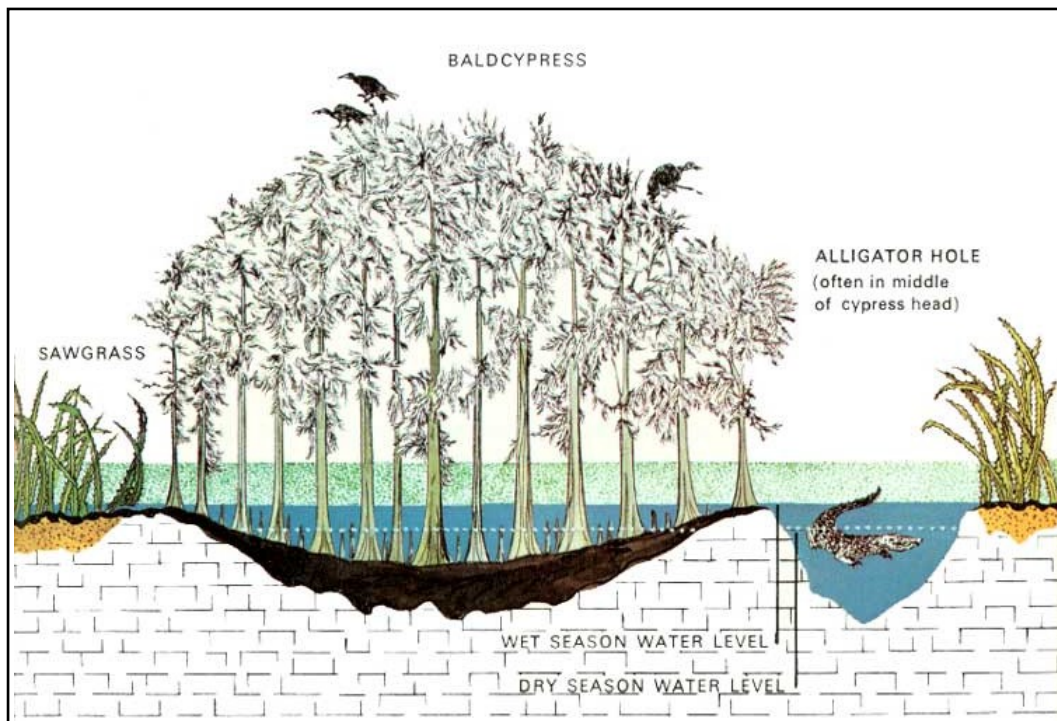
Resurrection fern — A native Florida epiphyte that withstands drought by drying up and looking dead. When rain comes, the fern turns green and appears to "resurrect."

Sawgrass — A thick sedge that is integral to the Everglades ecosystem. Its serrated edges, long length, and density make it a natural refuge for wildlife (and people). It thrives in nutrient-poor soil and slows the water flow down, which, combined with its thick root system, reduces erosion.

Slash pines — Native pine trees that grow on limestone and make up vast pinelands in the Everglades. The undergrowth of the pinelands is typically saw palmettos. This environment has adapted to fire and benefits from natural or controlled burns that clear the underbrush and release the pine seed from fallen cones, which must burn to propagate.

Spanish moss — Resplendent in the Southern U.S., this epiphyte drapes on trees creating dramatic ambience. It takes moisture from the air and does not harm the trees it hangs from.

Sugarcane — A species of tall, perennial grass that is used for sugar production.



Extension Activities

1. Have students research the indicator species and keystone species in your ecological area. Are species under threat? If so, what are the threats? Are there people working to help the species? Is there anything individuals or your class can do to support the threatened species, including creating an educational program, poster, or social media campaign?

2. To explore the interconnectedness of an ecosystem, try hexagonal thinking. Use the provided **Handout 1: Hexagonal Thinking** or create your own. Cut out the hexagons (add terms as needed) and provide small student groups with a large work surface, like a table or a long sheet of butcher paper. Ask students to place the hexagons next to each other in patterns that suggest relationships. They should be able to explain the relationships and can record this on the butcher paper, with Post-it notes, or in a notebook. This is an open-ended activity meant to spark discussion. You can read more about hexagonal thinking and its applications [here](#).

3. Create a zine library of mini field guides for the various plants and animals in the Everglades, using the list above as a starting point. Zines are considered an “open pedagogy” and turn passive learners into creators. Students can work individually or in small groups. The depth of research and understanding should correlate with the educational level. Ask the school librarian to add your class’s zine library to its collection.

4. Create a bulletin board that highlights one of the ecosystems in the Everglades. Examples might be a tree island, an alligator hole, a rookery, or a mangrove forest. Students can create both images of the components and illustrative text.

5. Create an interactive alligator hole as a role-playing exercise. Choose one student to be the alligator. Have them move around a pile of towels, cloth, or newspaper to create the hollowed-out area. Let other students act as the various animals that come to the hole. Have them narrate what kind of bird, mammal, insect, fish, or plant they are representing and the needs that are provided by the alligator hole.



Additional Resources Study

Elementary resources

The Alligator Pool: How Alligators Engineer the Everglades by Joseph James

Who Lives in an Alligator Hole?: An Award-Winning Nonfiction Book About Alligators and Their Ecosystem Role for Kids by Anne Rockwell

Middle and Older Books

Everglades Forever: Restoring America's Great Wetland by [Trish Marx](#)

Everglades: An Ecosystem Facing Choices and Challenges by [Anne Ake](#)

Articles and Web Resources

"Nature's Early Warning System: Understanding Indicator Species"

<https://ecology.net/indicator-species/>

"Everglades Mangroves Build Resilience for Coastal Communities"

<https://www.evergladesfoundation.org/post/everglades-mangroves-are-the-resilience-building-solution-we-need>

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission

<https://myfwc.com/wildlifehabitats/profiles/>

Friends of the Everglades

<https://www.everglades.org/>

National Park Service. Florida Everglades Nature

<https://www.nps.gov/ever/learn/nature/index.htm>

"Now in its 25th Year, a Historic Effort to Save the Everglades Evolves as the Climate Warms"

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/01012026/25-years-of-everglades-restoration>

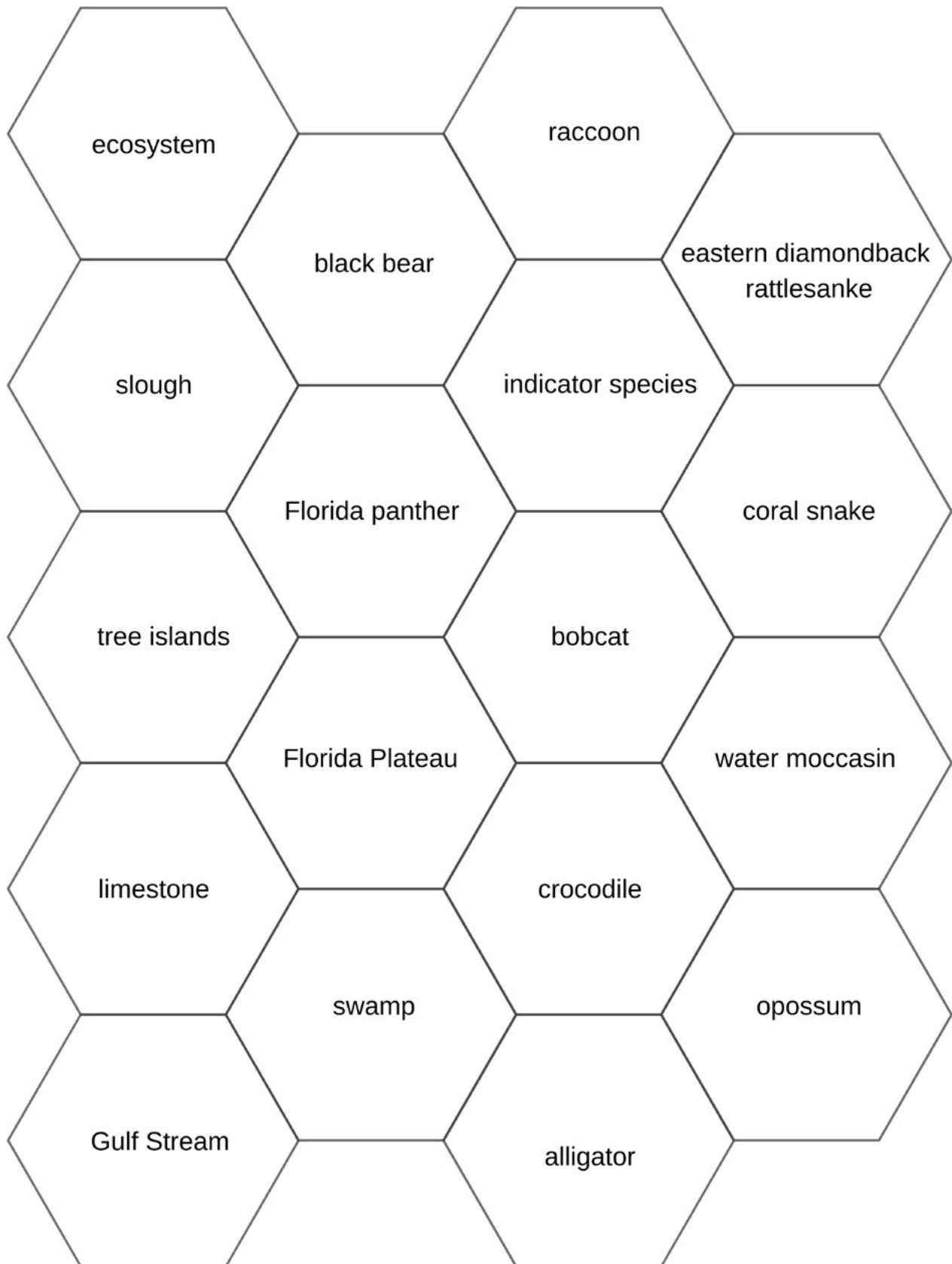
The Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan

<https://www.evergladesrestoration.gov/comprehensive-everglades-restoration-plan>

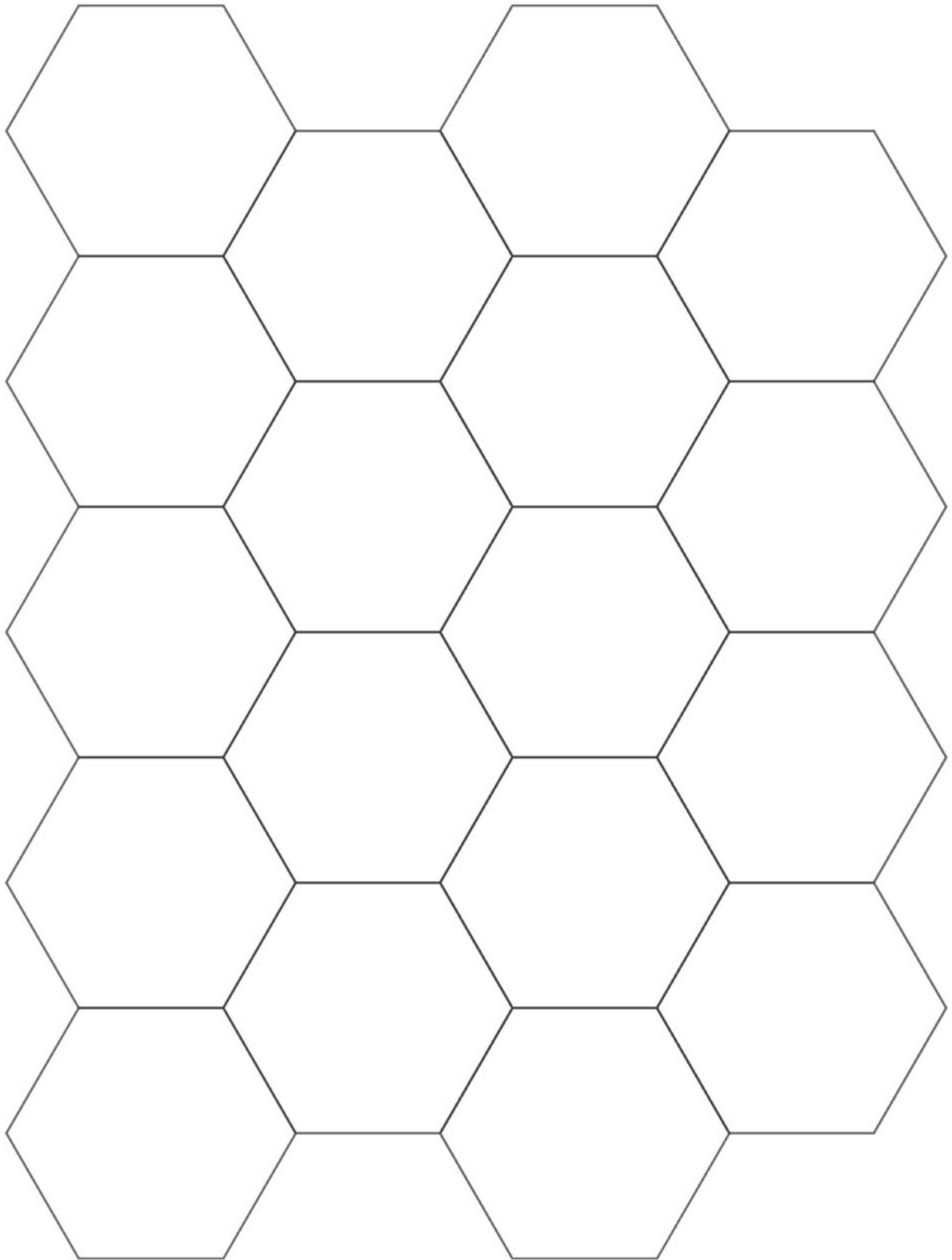
United States Fish & Wildlife Service

<https://www.fws.gov/>

HEXAGONAL THINKING: EVERGLADES









SECTION 2: ART AND WORDS OF THE EVERGLADES



The Everglades have been and continue to be a source of inspiration for artists and writers depicting the extreme and captivating landscape and recording its cultural significance.

Note to Teachers:

The following ideas are beginnings for you to use in your learning community as desired. There is considerable flexibility and customization possible for each. Adapt, combine, or remix to make the prompts work for you and your group

Discussion Questions

1. What is your immediate reaction to the film *River of Grass*? What did you think about the choice the director, Sasha Wortzel, made to include parts of the film with no spoken narration, just moving images?
2. How do you think Sasha Wortzel's personal connection to the Everglades impacted the tone and content of the film? What might be different if a director from a different place made a film about the Everglades?
3. How does introducing other voices to the conversation enrich the story being told? Which other voices did you connect with? Marjory Stoneman Douglas, Betty Osceola, and other participants?
4. Discuss the impact of Betty Osceola's prayer walk as an example of art and activism. What do you think it would be like to witness a group paying homage to a place?
5. Consider how we talk about nature (e.g., storms as monsters and fires as destructive). Should we reframe the perspective by using different words? How can we describe extreme natural events' immediate negative impact on humans while including the positive long-term effect on nature?

DRIVING QUESTION

How do literature and visual art affect the ways we understand nature and ecosystems?

Creative Response Activities for Learners

These can be used for discussion, for creative writing, for journal writing, or for collaborative work. Use the approach that works best for your learners.

1. “I remember” projects

In the film, we hear Sasha Wortzel speak about all the things she remembers about living in Florida as a child. Create a similar piece of your memories of the place you remember most from your childhood. An alternative is to invite the class to write imagery-rich sentences of their environmental memories and then weave them together into a group document. Remove individual names from the group document and consider the author as the group. When it is completed, read aloud round robin style, and note the variety of voices and impressions. The focus can be on one location, like the town everyone is in currently, or it can focus on the group’s variety of backgrounds.

2. Places we love

In many ways, *River of Grass* is a love letter to the Everglades from the director, Sasha Wortzel. She draws inspiration from another love letter represented in Marjory Stoneman Douglas’s book of the same name. Write a love letter to a place. Include the magical and impactful imagery and experiences, as well as the struggles and richness. Share with the class. Consider printing and binding as an anthology.





Literature Activities

1. Poem Study

Pick poems to read and analyze individually or as a group. A variety of poems about the Everglades are listed below. Use

Handout 2: Thinking Cube to encourage students to drive their discussions.

2. Novels, Poetry, and Story Collections Study

Consider using excerpts or novels for student choice books.

Handout 2: Thinking Cube can be used for discussions or written responses to short works.

Carl Hiaasen novels for young readers are great choices for middle-grade readers. They are set in Florida with frequent narratives about wildlife and Florida-centric issues. They include *Wrecker*, *Squirm*, *Hoot*, *Chomp*, *Skink*, *Flush*, and *Scat*. <https://carlhiaasen.com/all-books/#KIDS>

***Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neal Hurston**

A classic high school reading list book, easily paired with the film. Much of the narrative takes place on a farm in the upper Everglades, and the historic 1928 Okeechobee Hurricane is featured.

***A Land Remembered* (1984) by Patrick D. Smith**

A multigenerational saga of a Florida pioneer family, from the Civil War era through the 20th century, deeply rooted in Everglades territory.

***Swamplandia!* (2011) by Karen Russell**

The novel follows the Bigtree family, who run a gator-wrestling theme park in the midst of the swamp, blending magical realism with family drama and painting a haunting and beautiful portrait of the Everglades.

***Florida* (2018) by Lauren Groff**

Short story collection by a Gainesville-based author. Many of the stories are set in Florida and feature the natural world and storms.

***Shadow Country* (2008) by Peter Matthiessen (National Book Award winner)**

A refigured collection of Matthiessen's trilogy of novels about E.J. Watson (an Everglades sugar farmer and outlaw), the novel uses tropes of the Western by setting it in the Southeast, exploring manifest destiny in Florida's swamps.

***Florida Water* (2025) by aja monet**

A poetry collection that is also a vulnerable meditation, that includes reflections on the author's migration to South Florida in search of love, connection, and belonging, unearthing the delicate balance between the poet, lover, and community organizer. These poems lay bare the tender dance of relationships, entwining the personal with the political, as they confront the state's fractured history of racial prejudice, marooned peoples, and the unruly forces of nature.

***Lost In The River Of Grass* (2010) by Ginny Rorby**

A young adult survival novel about two teenagers, Sarah and Andy, who get stranded in the Florida Everglades after their airboat sinks during an unauthorized trip.

Islandia Journal

A quarterly literary arts publication. Notable due to their excellent land acknowledgement, which offers a new statement with every publication, offering more insight into relationships to land and the communities that it sustains.

***Legends of the Seminole* (1994) by Betty Mae Jumper**

A collection of traditional Seminole stories passed down through generations, featuring tales of Lying Rabbit, Corn Lady, Deer Girl, and many others from the tradition of Elders Tales.

***Art of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians* (1997) by Dorothy Downs**

The artistic tradition that in the past sustained Florida Indians helps identify them today as possessing a resilient, modern culture. In this richly illustrated account of the arts and crafts of the Florida Seminole and Miccosukee Indians, Dorothy Downs shows how artistic expression reflects and inspires history.

Florida Snow

P. Scott Cunningham

The Everglades are burning. I'm fifteen.
I open the window, knock out the screen

and crawl up the tiles to the apex of the roof.
Overhead the black clouds march on hooves

from the sunset to the ocean. It's rare for the wind
to carry the sugar burns in my direction.

I assume the purpose of the fires is to make
the sugar sweeter, but besides covering the state

in smoke, all they do is make the harvest cheaper.
Some men spent a fortune to drain the river

but the cost was all up front. The stalks get so dry some-
times a piece of lightning starts the fire for them

and what's left behind can't help becoming tinder.
I think the land will tire of not being water soon.

Tonight the air is cold and smells like winter.
Ashes fall around me like pieces of the moon.

Copyright © 2025 by P. Scott Cunningham.

Originally published in Poem-a-Day on January 7, 2025, by the Academy of American Poets.



Florida

Elizabeth Bishop (1939)

The state with the prettiest name,
the state that floats in brackish water,
held together by mangrove roots
that bear while living oysters in clusters,
and when dead strew white swamps with skeletons,
dotted as if bombarded, with green hummocks
like ancient cannon-balls sprouting grass.
The state full of long S-shaped birds, blue and white,
and unseen hysterical birds who rush up the scale
every time in a tantrum.
Tanagers embarrassed by their flashiness,
and pelicans whose delight it is to clown;
who coast for fun on the strong tidal currents
in and out among the mangrove islands
and stand on the sand-bars drying their damp gold wings
on sun-lit evenings.
Enormous turtles, helpless and mild,
die and leave their barnacled shells on the beaches,
and their large white skulls with round eye-sockets
twice the size of a man's.
The palm trees clatter in the stiff breeze
like the bills of the pelicans. The tropical rain comes down
to freshen the tide-looped strings of fading shells:
Job's Tear, the Chinese Alphabet, the scarce Junonia,
parti-colored pectins and Ladies' Ears,
arranged as on a gray rag of rotted calico,
the buried Indian Princess's skirt;
with these the monotonous, endless, sagging coast-line
is delicately ornamented.

Thirty or more buzzards are drifting down, down, down,
over something they have spotted in the swamp,
in circles like stirred-up flakes of sediment
sinking through water.
Smoke from woods-fires filters fine blue solvents.
On stumps and dead trees the charring is like black velvet.
The mosquitoes
go hunting to the tune of their ferocious obligatos.
After dark, the fireflies map the heavens in the marsh
until the moon rises.

Cold white, not bright, the moonlight is coarse-meshed,
and the careless, corrupt state is all black specks
too far apart, and ugly whites; the poorest
post-card of itself.
After dark, the pools seem to have slipped away.
The alligator, who has five distinct calls:
friendliness, love, mating, war, and a warning—
whimpers and speaks in the throat
of the Indian Princess.

A Grave in the Everglades

George E. Merrick (1920)

By the rise of a palm-grown highland
Far out in the Everglade,
In a mound on a jungle island,
Is a Seminole Warrior laid.
There in the midst of the prairie,
Desolate, forgotten, lone;
'Neath a mound in a land most dreary
The land he had thought his own.

The live-oaks are growing around it;
And their roots are deep in the mound;
A palm that years ago found it
Reaches sixty feet up from the ground.
A grave in the midst of the prairie
With Palmetto-scrub overgrown;
On an isle in a land most dreary,
In the land he had thought his own.

Weighed down with a burden of sorrow
The Spanish moss drapes in dank gray,
And the sunbeams, filtering, borrow
The dullness of a storm darkened day.
On the isle where the cocoa-plum tosses
He lies, —forgotten and lone:
His grave overhung by the mosses
Of the live-oaks he had thought his own.

From His bed midst the hyacinth-canna
The 'gator crawls out for his prey,
O'er the mound, through the bed of lantana
Where the sun-loving mocassins lay;
'Mongst the kind of his long-ago quarry
But heedless of murmur or moan
He lies in the midst of the prairie
In the land he had thought his own.



Here the egret and flamingo, fleeing
From the invading and death-dealing foe,
Find escape for a dread time-being
O'er the bones of the one laid low;
For him, also, they had pressed and invaded,
And had reaped where he had sown,—
In those days e'er the warriors faded
From the land they had thought their own.

And the wind through the jungle passes
With a burden of infinite woe,—
That is whispered in the tall cane grasses
That along by the channels grow:
Breathings of a time when the prairie
Had been roamed by the Red men alone,
When they had hunted, unsuspecting unwary,
Through the land they had thought their own.

Of that time, of the harsh awaking,
Of their bitter unmerited wrong:
Of the steady insidious taking;
Of the struggle so hopeless and long.
And the wind sighs through the mosses
'Bove the mound with palms overgrown:
Breathing a sob of people's losses—
The loss of the land they had thought their own.

In the shade of a palm-grown highland,
In the mystical Everglade;
'Neath a mound of hammock island,
Is a Seminole warrior laid.
In the midst of the Vista of grasses;
Desolate, forgotten, lone:
And the wind that continually passes,
Sweeps the land he had thought his own.

The following three poems were written in 2009 by **Karla Linn Merrifield** after a residency at the Everglades National Park Artists-in-Residence program.

Artist's Statement

During my Everglades AIR (2009) and as a plein-air poet, I created a body of poems rooted in place, which became a part of the full-length book manuscript I completed during the residency and titled Chasing Moons in the Everglades. To write these poems, I first experienced specific Everglades habitats (e.g., a cypress dome), observing them with a naturalist's as well as a poet's eye. I inhabited the Everglades and it inhabited me, and I then translated my findings into poems. In the process I make new discoveries about the nature of nature – and man's role in it. The poems also embody my belief that poetry furthers the sacred and that there is nothing more sacred than preserving the Everglades...and the planet.

Everglades Botanical Villanelle

Green inspirits the Everglades' deep night
and teaches us to bow to wind by day.
Breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

Slash pine, mangrove, cypress, bay know the right
path—such needled saints, leaved martyrs are they.
Trees inspirit the Everglades' deep night.

Bladderwort, floating heart, spatterdock bright,
and mild turtle grass of Florida Bay,
breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

By sun, by moon, pith to peat in life's flight,
algae and palm alike point the good way.
Ferns inspirit the Everglades' deep night.

Epiphyte, orchid, sedge, and reed give sight,
instill wonder, color Earth again gay;
breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.

May gumbo-limbos grow full height,
and lichen on nurse logs prosper, I pray.
Green inspirits the Everglades' deep night.
Breathe, breathe into us; may we dream thy light.



Pine Island Reveille

At first light of day, first bird call is a cardinal's as he arrives from among slender slash pines. The trees' high black crowns emerge against dawn's cerulean, their roots swathed with ruby.

Across the lane, a dog barks, heralding first business to be done. Park ranger at the other end of the leash scratches first of many duties off his mental to-do list.

Above a clatter of crockery within the nearest bungalow, first work gets under way. A wife announces the hour to her husband; first human voice intrudes.

Rose pales to pearl along the upland horizon to the east; first white of day rises on bird wings into thinning blue. After a cold night, first details of day emerge: With red-headed urgency, woodpeckers hammer first blows.

First sun appears. Its heat stirs no wind, no clouds mask its face. Starlings begin to bustle and red-shouldered hawks are first in the forest to fly beyond the horizon. It will be mid-morning before the chill lifts. So black vultures, last to commence their rounds this day of firsts, sleep late.

Everglades light has come. I snuff the candle. A crow caws.

1513: Ponce De Leon and The Fountain of Death

By sun, by moon, All flora and fauna,
panther among them, knew.

On a hawk's cry
from mangrove to mahogany
they received word.

He would come
for slaves and gold
on the first white sail.

He would arrive
in courtly velvet shoes
and glinting armor.

He would come
with crossbow, sword, cross, the pox,
and greed and glory and God.

Even the periphyton understood
he would come
to conquer La Florida
and its Everglades'
sweet river of grass.

PERSISTENCE OF VISION

Houston R. Cypress, Otter Clan, Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida

*Excerpts from a unique fashion show
especially commissioned for the
40th Anniversary Celebration of the
United South & Eastern Tribes, Inc.*

Concept

Artifacts. Images. Imagination.
A journey beyond time.
Cherished stories and songs re-told beneath the moon.
A society of clans.

A Great Grandmother

Great-grandma said: "Here, take these:
These songs, this medicine, this way of life and love."
And beneath a moon like this
You'll look across the fire –
At friends and family –
And you'll understand
How easy it is to hear the rhythm
And dance
Grandma's favorite dance
Is the Chicken Dance
She makes it look so easy
Hopping around on one foot
In balance with her partner
They say you look a lot like Grandma did
In her youth –
She was born in wartime
Grew up in the swamps
And lived her entire life –
105 Summers –
Without having, once, to step foot
On the White Man's Road

continued



A Great Grandfather

Grandpa would go hunting
Before the ceremonies began
Singing songs to find the herbs
Singing songs to hunt the deer
Singing songs of happiness
Happiest when flipping the ball
High up at the goal
During the stickball games

A Great Mother, as a toddler

She was raised by her grandparents.
And my friends are always shocked,
When she starts up long and detailed conversations
In the Miccosukee language.
She talks like an old lady.
And she's only 6. Or 5. Or 4?
Her favorite word is: Hapooshekaaye,
It means "Mint."
Grandma taught her how to throw it in
With certain meals:
To jazz it up.

A Great Assignment

So now we need you
To speak on our behalf.
You will take our message
Beyond the horizon.
You will have to pick up the pen,
And speak foreign tongues.
You will have to tread rough paths,
That shimmer in the heat.

continued

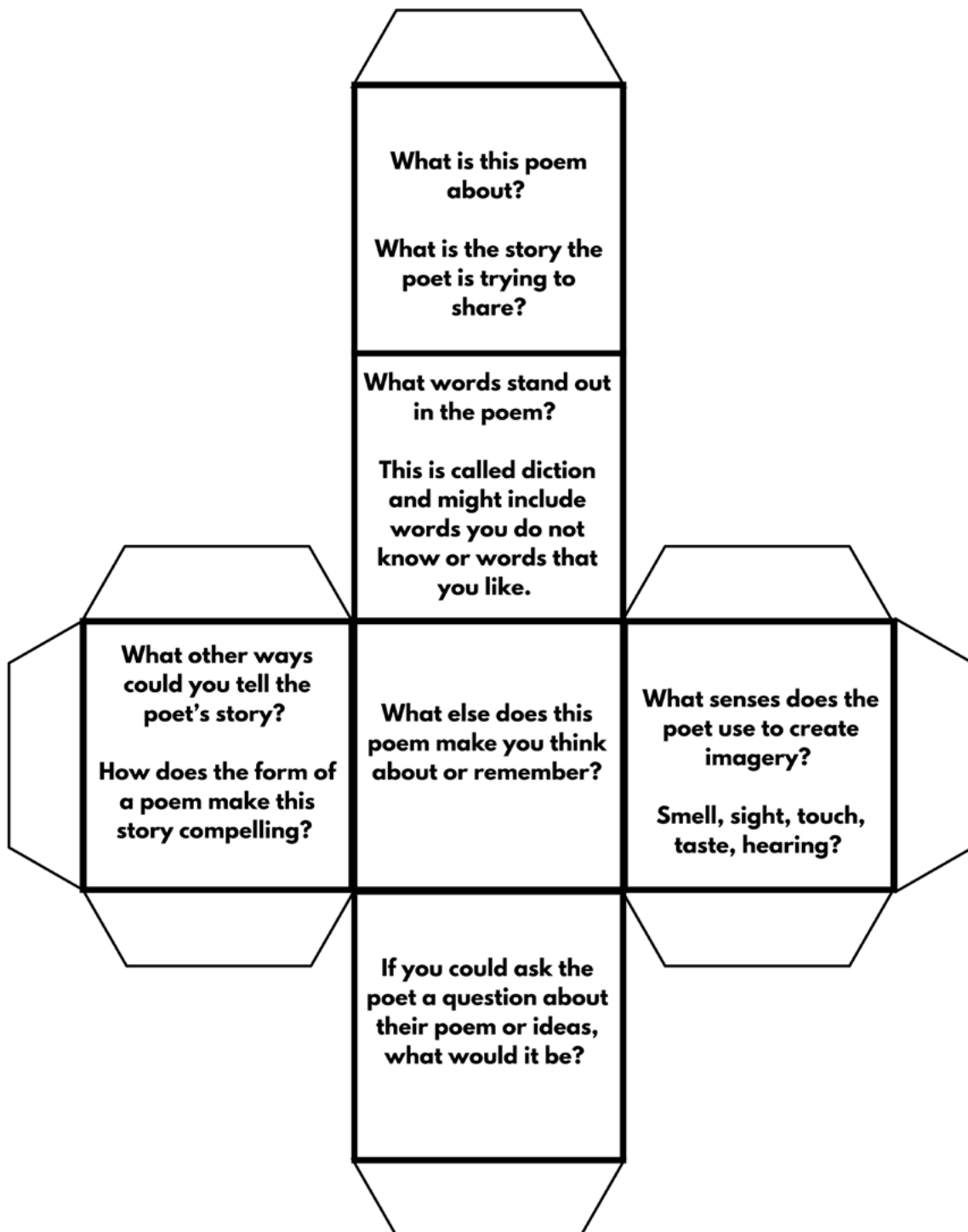
A Great Daughter, she is

"I'm so glad to have her back.
After High School she traveled the world.
Can you believe she actually went to India? –
A place called Varanasi –
to spend time with orphans there.
Helping out, teaching, bringing supplies.
She's got some kinda heart, huh?"
Her favorite metaphor is the River.
She grew up here,
In a River of Grass.
She comes from rivers of generations and culture and blood,
That flow across the land, and through time.
Her favorite metaphor is the River.
Her first documentary, she says,
Will be about Patchwork.
What is the meaning of Patchwork? – she wonders.
It's a cultural artifact
That began as appliqué.
With color, and shape, and texture,
It evolves throughout the years.
And her anger stems from love.
She's only concerned with that authentic Patchwork,
None of that bogus stuff.



Thinking Cube *poetry*

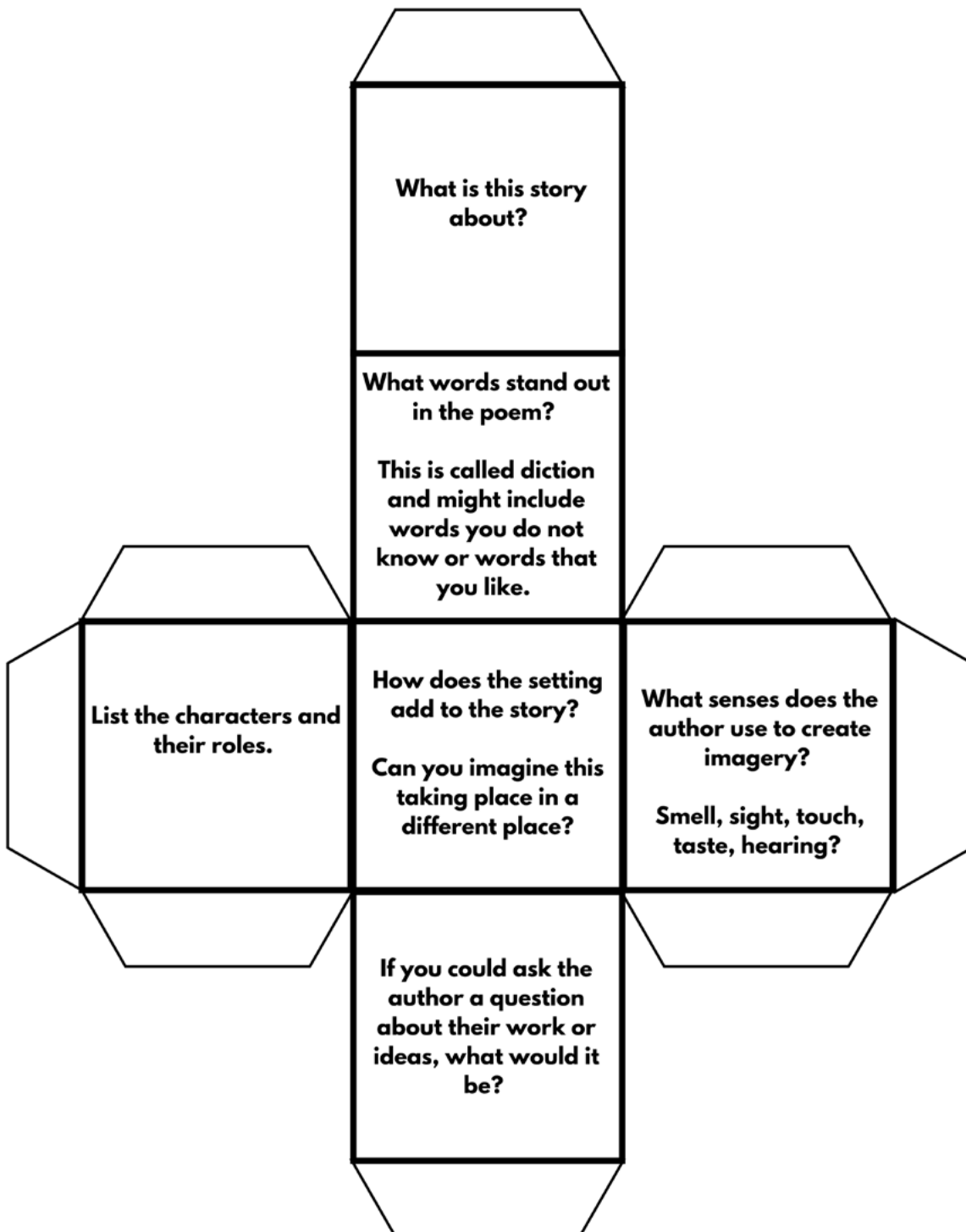
Cut out the shape below. Fold tabs in to create a cube. Roll to randomize a prompt you can use for writing a response or discussion with your group.





Thinking Cube *story*

Cut out the shape below. Fold tabs in to create a cube. Roll to randomize a prompt you can use for writing a response or discussion with your group.





Music Study

Song lyrics can be analyzed like poetry, or you can learn them to sing or play on an instrument.

Florida, Where the Sawgrass Meets the Sky

Music and lyrics by Jan Hinton

Florida, where the sawgrass meets the sky,
Florida, where our hearts will ever lie,
Sitting proud in the ocean like a sentinel true,
Always shielding your own, yet giving welcome.
Florida, land of flowers, land of light.
Florida, where our dreams can all take flight.
Whether youth's vibrant morning or the twilight of years,
There are treasures for all who venture here in Florida.
Mockingbirds cry and 'gators lie out in the sun,
Bridges span southward to the Keys and rockets skyward run,
The orange blossoms' sweet perfume and fireworks fill the air,
And cultures rich our native people share.
Florida, where the sawgrass meets the sky,
Florida, where our hearts will ever lie,
Sitting proud in the ocean like a sentinel true,
Always shielding your own, yet giving welcome.
Florida, land of flowers, land of light.
Florida, where our dreams can all take flight.
Whether youth's vibrant morning or the twilight of years,
There are treasures for all who venture here in Florida, Florida.

*This song is the Florida state anthem
and was written by a Florida music
teacher in 2008.*

Everglades

Performed by Waylon Jennings in 1967 album *Waylon Sings Ol' Harlan, Songs Written by Harlan Howard*

He was born and raised around Jacksonville
A nice young man 'bout the kind to kill
But the jealous fight and the flashing blades
Sent him on the run through the everglades.
Running like the dog through the everglades.

Where a man can hide and never be found
And never have fear of the baying hounds
Better keep movin', don't stand still
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.

Well, the posse went in and they came back out
And said he'll die and there ain't no doubt
It's an eye for an eye the debt is paid
It won't last long in the everglades
A man can't live in the everglades.

But a man can hide and never be found
And never have fear of the baying hounds
Better keep movin', don't stand still
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.

Now the years went by and his girl was wed
His family gave up they thought he was dead
Now and then the people would say
They had seen him runnin' through the everglades
Runnin' like the dog through the everglades.

Where a man can hide and never be found
And never have fear of the baying hounds
Better keep movin', don't stand still
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.
If the skeeters don't get him then the gators will.

This song is appropriate for high school and older and can be analyzed for the representation of the Everglades as an impenetrable place where folks can hide.



Music Appreciation & Listening

The first two musical artists listed below offer contemporary interpretations of Indigenous experiences, expressed through musical styles such as blues, rock and roll, and folk acoustic. Their lyrics talk of Indigenous struggles to survive and thrive in a settler colonial context, and of relying on Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge to orient themselves in a contemporary context. The last two artists are non-Indigenous musical artists working with landscape recording, indie rock, and electronic music. The Jim Miller recording offers nature sounds recorded during the daytime and nighttime inside Everglades National Park. “Above Your House” is inspired by local landscapes and histories, pop culture, and science.

- Tiger Tiger, *Space Age Indian* (1994)
- Chief Jim Billie, *Big Alligator* (1996)
- Jim Miller & Jack Tamul, *Voices of Everglades National Park* (2007)
- Above Your House, *Nuclear Power for the Tree Nobody Liked* (2025)

With any of these musical offerings, consider using our **Handout 3: Music Listening** or **Handout 4: Song Analysis** with learners.

LISTENING EXERCISE



Directions: Watch and listen to a musical performance then answer the questions below:

- 1.** What are the distinctive characteristics of the sound of the primary instrument or instruments the performance?
- 2.** Describe any other instruments or musical elements of the song outside of the primary instrument. How do they complement the primary instrument?
- 3.** Describe the rhythmic qualities of the song you are hearing. What makes these rhythmic qualities unique? Do they remind you of any other instrument? If so, what instrument and why?
- 4.** What techniques do you see the performer using in their performance? Discuss the similarities and differences between this performance and the other performances you have seen or heard.



INTERPRETING AND ANALYZING A SONG

NAME _____

DATE _____

Directions: Select the song that you will be analyzing. If the song needs to be translated into a different language for you to analyze it, do that first. If there are any words or phrases in the song that are unfamiliar to you, research them before you begin completing this form. Use this graphic organizer to analyze the song you have selected. This document may be used as your prewriting for an essay of one or two pages analyzing the song and explaining its significance to either the creator or yourself. When you turn in this form, please include the lyrics of the song and your essay or other required materials.

NAME OF SONG _____

Content

What is the topic of the song? What lyrics stand out to you the most? Why do they stand out?

Context

In what country or region did the song originate or what countries or U.S. region influenced this song? What historical, cultural, social, or political information is relevant and important to know to understand the song?

Significance

Based on the content and context of the song, what makes it important? How does it help to preserve culture or history?

Reflections

Why is the song important to you? What are your personal thoughts and opinions about the song?

ART STUDY: CORNELIUS TULLOCH



Hear Tulloch speak about this piece [here](#).

Cornelius Tulloch
Glades Guardian: Full Moon, 2025
Oil on canvas, mixed media collage
72in. X 48in.
Photo courtesy of Andrew Reed Gallery,
photographed by Zachary Balber



Cornelius Tulloch is a Miami-based contemporary sculptor, photographer, painter, and architect, whose work explores unseen histories of the Everglades. As described in the Andrew Reed Gallery’s press release for Cornelius Tulloch’s 2025 Armory Show presentation, “the artist traces the history of Marronage in connection to the South Florida Everglades and the Saltwater Railroad: a route to liberation that cut through Florida’s west coast and out across Biscayne Bay, carrying freedom seekers to maroon communities in the Caribbean, most often in the Bahamas. In South Florida, Marronage calls to mind Seminole communities, freedmen, and Black and Afro-Indigenous peoples who sought refuge in the state’s natural landscapes, building self-sustaining societies within the wild. This body of work carries the movement and spirit of masquerade traditions, such as Junkanoo, along with other African practices that have traveled through these landscapes, bridging the Caribbean and the U.S. South. Along this journey, the piece speaks to movement, migration, history, and deep-rootedness in place. It explores the dance between landscapes and cultures, creating a borderland where identity is always in motion, always in flux. The figure merges with the environment, becoming a humanoid form intertwined with the flora and terrain of these territories.”

Tulloch was an artist in residence at the Everglades National Park. You can hear an interview with him about his experience here: <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/artists-find-inspiration-in-nature-and-history-of-everglades-national-park>

Discussion Questions

1. As a group, slowly look at the painting above, *Glades Guardian: Full Moon*. Without trying to make meaning of the image or “figure it out,” note the lines, colors, and textures. Share together until you think you have named everything, then name some more.
2. Cornelius Tulloch researches the area he is depicting and tries to give a hint of the history and stories imbued in a place. Can you think of a place in your life that has a secret or forgotten history? Can you make art that hints at something beneath the surface?
3. What does the title of the painting make you think of? Is there a place you would be the guardian of? Can you make a photograph or a painting of you protecting your place?

ART STUDY: NIKI BUTCHER



Niki Butcher is a Florida-based photographer who handpaints her black and white landscape photography to give the work a “gentle, surreal look” like early photography. She works alongside her husband, Clyde, and has spent decades documenting Florida’s landscapes, cloudscares, and disappearing vernacular architecture. Inspired by nostalgia and artistic freedom, she transforms her photographs into dreamlike works through hand-painted color and digital techniques. Her art blends nature, history, and imagination, inviting viewers into a world of wonder, reflection, and visual poetry.

Discussion Questions

1. In your opinion, what is the mood of this photograph? How does the hand-painted color add to the mood?
2. Where is your eye drawn? Why?
3. Write a short scene or poem using this image for its setting. What could happen here?
4. Take a photo of a place in your life and make it black and white and then use watercolors, light crayons, or colored pencils to add accents and colors. You can do this by hand or digitally. Consider making a class or group exhibition of these images.



ART STUDY: HAROLD GARCÍA V (EL QUINTO)



Melaza Lake, 2021

Molasses, acrylic paint, Native American hunting arrows and sheetrock wall.

Artist's statement: This artwork represents decades of environmental intervention and neglect by the sugar industry, which has blatantly misrepresented and manipulated the future and health of the vast Everglades ecosystem. A drawing using molasses as the pigment of the iconic sugar refinery building located in Brooklyn sleeps over a pattern first created by the Seminole tribe and well known for its meaning of disagreement.

Discussion Questions

1. This piece of artwork is an installation that uses multiple media arranged in a space to tell a story. What are the various aspects you notice, and what might they each mean? (You can read the artist's statement above for help.)
2. Why might an artist choose to make an installation to share their perspective? What are the strengths? What are the weaknesses?
3. As a class, create an installation in your room of an aspect of your community. Be collaborative and spend time making a list of objects to gather in order to sketch possible compositions. Can you include sound, video, or items that are not considered art (such as something mass produced)?

ART STUDY: THE FLORIDA HIGHWAY MEN (AND ONE WOMAN) BY MARY ANN CARROLL



Mary Ann Carroll 1940 – 2019

The Highwaymen, also referred to as the Florida Highwaymen, are a group of 26 named and listed landscape artists who have been called “The Last Great American Art Movement of the 20th century.” This group of self-taught and self-mentoring African American artists was able to define themselves against the racial and cultural barriers of the time in which they painted, and created a body of work of over 200,000 paintings using construction materials rather than traditional art supplies. As white-controlled galleries and art festivals would not accept their works, they sold them in towns and cities and along roadsides throughout Florida, often still wet, out of the trunks of their cars. Their success and longevity are remarkable considering they began their career in the racially unsettled and violent times of the 1950s in Florida and the social conditions of the Jim Crow South, when the stirrings of the civil rights movement in Florida were only just beginning.

Mary Ann Carroll had to feed, clothe, and shelter her seven children; most of the time, she was their sole support. She took an array of laborious jobs, but soon after meeting Harold Newton, she concentrated on honing her own painting skills. By the time her marriage failed, she was making a living from the sales of her paintings, as were the other core artists. In addition to being a devout woman of faith, a prolific artist, and a very busy parent, she had energy to sing in the church choir and build her own ministry. Mary Ann is the sole Highway-woman and was honored by Michelle Obama at the First Lady’s Annual Luncheon in Washington, D.C., on May 18, 2011.

Discussion Questions

1. What do you think about the Florida Highwaymen’s (and woman’s) strategy to sell their art to support themselves?
2. What captures your attention most about Mary Ann Carroll’s painting?
3. Some critics of the Highwaymen’s paintings said that they were too bright and garish. But for those who live in Florida or are familiar with the landscape, the technicolor sunsets are common. How would you respond to someone who questioned your knowledge or your landscape or world?



SECTION 3: *LAND USE AND HUMAN RIGHTS— LIVING IN HARMONY*



“You know nature will always win in the end. You have to decide if you’re gonna be there as part of that win. And if you don’t, she’s gonna win without you. So we have to decide if we want to win with her.”

— Betty Osceola



DRIVING QUESTIONS

What are a person's responsibilities to the community and the land they live on?

The Everglades have faced development pressure since the 1840s, including drainage, agriculture, housing developments, an airport, a corrections center, and now data centers. What does this ongoing pattern tell us about how economies relate to ecosystems?

Since the 16th century, European explorers and colonists have landed in Florida, claiming ownership and seeking to extract value from the land through mining, cultivation, and development, usually with little regard to the ecosystem or the Indigenous populations already living on the land.

By the 19th century, the Indian Removal Acts and frequent war between federal troops and the Indigenous people killed thousands on both sides, with Indigenous nations bearing the worst of the loss. U.S. government initiatives and actions drove the Indigenous population into the Everglades, which were considered useless swamp land. When Florida became a state in 1845, efforts to "reclaim" the swamp, through ambitious engineering projects focused on draining and rerouting the water flow to allow for development, began in earnest. As capitalists sought to take advantage of the nearly year-long growing season, the remaining Indigenous population went deeper in the glades, and the fight for the land, how to use it, how to conserve and preserve it, became an ongoing, salient political issue that continues today.

From attempts to control the water flow through artificial means to using agricultural pesticides and frequent sugarcane burning, the environmental impacts compound, and a continual negotiation between those who want to use the land for short-term money making and those who fight to preserve the ecosystem for future generations continues.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the ideal relationship between ethical stewardship of the land and the impacts and concerns of developers and residents?
2. In the Everglades, what happens when the water is not allowed to flow?
3. What sort of questions should developers, business-people, and community members answer to reach a satisfactory consensus before doing anything?
4. How have ordinary citizens wielded power to effect change, as seen in the film?
5. Which individuals featured in the film were most memorable to you? Whose experience and approach to activism did you resonate with?



Marjory Stoneman Douglas (1890–1998)



Her landmark, best-selling book *The Everglades: River of Grass* (1947), brought the unique ecosystem of South Florida to a wide audience. She used her voice to fight for its preservation and was instrumental in creating the Everglades National Park, established in 1934 and dedicated in 1947.

She helped found the Friends of the Everglades in 1969, and the organization continues today, addressing ongoing concerns and advocating to protect the delicate ecosystem.

Her life was self-determined, and she fought not only for the environment but also for feminist and social justice causes.

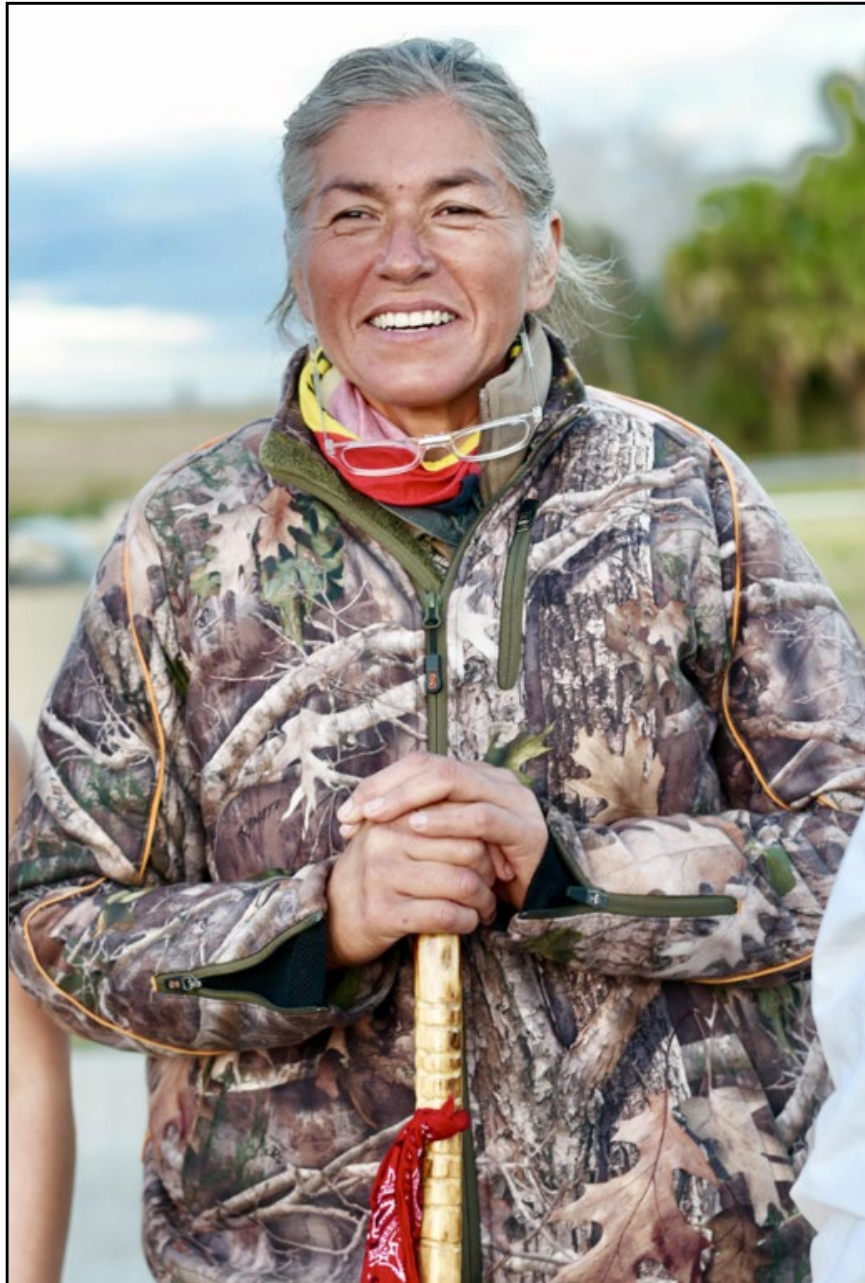
Buffalo Tiger (1920–2015)



William “Buffalo” Tiger was the first Tribal Chairman of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida, building upon his years of service as a spokesperson for the traditional council of clan elders of his community. He helped achieve federal recognition for his tribal community, articulating their difference from the Seminole Tribe who gained recognition in 1957. A Miccosukee delegation visited Cuba to assert their sovereignty, and this helped to secure U.S. federal recognition shortly after, in 1962. He continued to work to strengthen sovereignty for his people, and this included assuming contracting authority with the federal government to oversee social and educational programs. In 1983, he supported the creation of the Miccosukee Indian Village and Museum as a way to preserve the Miccosukee culture and the traditional ways of life that he experienced growing up among the tree islands. He also ran an airboat tour company that sought to share the Miccosukee heritage with visitors, and he built on the Miccosukee tradition of diplomacy to create the Miccosukee Embassy.



Betty Osceola (b. 1967)



Betty Osceola, (Panther Clan of the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida) serves on the Miccosukee Tribe's Everglades Advisory Committee and is a tribal court judge. Using Miccosukee Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge, she has advocated and educated about environmental conservation and protection. She has led multiple prayer walks to highlight environmental issues. Osceola is a staunch advocate for Indigenous peoples' rights to practice their traditions and culture. In 2024, Osceola received the Marjory Stoneman Douglas Award from Friends of the Everglades. She serves as an advisory member of Florida International University's Global Indigenous Forum.

Friends of the Everglades was founded in 1969 by renowned journalist, author, and environmental activist Marjory Stoneman Douglas. The mission of Friends of the Everglades is to preserve, protect, and restore the only Everglades in the world.

Love The Everglades Movement brings people together to address the environmental, structural, cultural, and spiritual issues confronting the Greater Everglades of Florida by inspiring adults and children and raising awareness through positive civic engagement at the local, regional, national and global levels. LTEM uses art, spiritual activities, political organizing, scientific research, event production, and policy advocacy.

Stop the Burn is a movement led by residents directly impacted by pre-harvest sugar field burning. Stop the Burn activists and leaders live in Palm Beach, Glades, Martin, and Lee counties. The campaign officially began in 2015, and since then a dedicated core of community leaders have used the power of their voices to shine a spotlight on the injustice of pre-harvest sugarcane burning. Their advocacy has shone a national spotlight on what was once a little known regional issue. By speaking truth to power, local leaders are applying pressure on both the sugar industry and their regulators in the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services. The goal is to end the injustice of pre-harvest sugar field burning now.

Discussion Questions

1. How can a person shape a life that aligns with their values and commit to long-term, impactful change?
2. How does each person's individual skill set and interest affect their activism? Consider Douglas, Buffalo Tiger, Osceola, and the filmmaker Sasha Wortzel. (Also, learners can share insights gleaned from activists they may know personally or may follow through social media, print media, or other films they've watched.)
3. Create a list of methods that Stoneman used in her advocacy. How did those work? Consider her writing, her organizing, her voice, her privileges, and her stamina.
4. How do you think Buffalo Tiger's life experience growing up traditionally in the Everglades impacted his commitment to preserving his culture?
5. What challenges do Indigenous communities face when fighting for their sovereignty?
6. Compare Buffalo Tiger's methods of cultural advocacy with Marjory Stoneman Douglas. How did he share his message with the broader public? How did she share her message? What is the value of different approaches?
7. How do prayer walks fit into your notion of environmental activism? Compare this with Douglas's writing and Buffalo Tiger's political advocacy.
8. As an environmentalist, how important is it to bring people onto the land you are trying to preserve through tours and tourism? Do you think visitors become more invested when they have a close-up encounter with a place?



Useful Terms

Clan — A group of people united by actual or perceived kinship and shared descent; extended family. Due to the unique Creation stories of Indigenous communities, tribal clans (extended family structures) are different among tribes.

Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledge — Sometimes abbreviated as ITEK, or TEK. Knowledge and practices passed from generation to generation, informed by cultural memories, sensitivity to change, and values that include reciprocity. Can take the form of storytelling, song, dance, prayer, and other forms of expression, and may often integrate healing practices and spiritual values.

Reservation — A specific land area managed by a Native American tribe officially recognized by the U.S. federal government.

Sovereignty — The supreme authority, power, or right of a governing body to rule itself, its people, and its lands without external interference. Also described as “self-determination.”

Two-spirit — A modern, pan-Indian umbrella term used by some Indigenous North Americans to describe Native people who fulfill traditional third-gender, mixed-gender, or other gender-variant social roles in their communities. Coined in English in 1990, this term has flourished as a part of a decolonial movement of healing for Indigenous communities across Turtle Island.



Additional Resources

Marjory Stoneman Douglas

For primary sources about Marjory Stoneman Douglas, check out the archive housed at the University of Miami. <https://digitalcollections.library.miami.edu/digital/col-lection/asm0060>

The Everglades: River of Grass by Marjory Stoneman Douglas, 1947. Chapter one, “The Nature of the Everglades,” would be an appropriate excerpt for high school students and older. Not only does it offer an ecological description of the Everglades, but the prose is also gorgeously poetic with vibrant imagery. Students might compare the obvious love Stoneman shares for the Everglades with director Sasha Wortzel’s cinematic love letter.

Friends of the Everglades website with a short biography of Marjory Stoneman Douglas. <https://www.everglades.org/about-marjory/>

Douglas was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1993, when she was 103 years old, by President Clinton. You can watch a short clip here. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4765888/marjory-stoneman-douglas>.

Buffalo Tiger

Buffalo Tiger: A Life in the Everglades by Buffalo Tiger and Harry A. Kersey, Jr., 2008.

Buffalo Tiger: A Warrior for Indigenous Sovereignty, Florida Folk History

Buffalo Tiger’s Airboat Tours still offers excursions. You can visit their YouTube channel to watch outtakes of the tours.

https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCDm4FFECx-A8EYa9ysk6OxIQ?view_as=subscriber

If you are local or in the area, take a tour in person: <https://www.buffalotigerairboattours.com/>

Betty Osceola

PBS documentary *The Secret Islands of the Everglades*, filmed by Betty Osceola (2021).

<https://www.pbs.org/video/the-secret-islands-of-the-everglades-lncj6r/>

Read about Betty Osceola at Florida Folk History. <https://floridafolkhistory.org/2025/11/19/betty-osceola-defender-of-the-glades/>

Read about Nibi walks, an Ojibwe water ceremony. <https://www.nibiwalk.org/about/>

Read about water walks in Canada. <https://www.motherearthwaterwalk.com/>



SECTION 4: LAND USE – SUGARCANE, DATA CENTERS, AND OTHER DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS



The majority of the U.S. sugarcane is grown in Florida, near the Everglades. It is commonly burned to make harvesting easier and concentrate the sugar in the stalks. This burning emits massive amounts of smoke into the air that pollutes the environment and causes serious health risks for the people living nearby. As an outcry against this health injustice, activists are working to educate the public on the issue and push growers to green cut, which is a viable method that saves the health and lives of the people living in the area.

Another new land use challenge facing the region is that of data centers. With the growing demand for generative AI, more data centers are needed to process the large amount of data. Data centers use large amounts of water and electricity to cool the computers, and much of that is evaporated and not recovered or recycled. In Florida, where water is a critical resource, backlash from communities and the governor has slowed or halted data center development. However, several data centers are being planned in South Florida and the Everglades area. The positive impact on communities is uncertain, with massive centers creating only a few dozen jobs while putting large strains on infrastructure.

Other development projects throughout history have also threatened the ecosystem of the Everglades, such as housing developments, airports, detention centers and/or corrections facilities, and much more. An exploration of such projects and their environmental impact can offer important engagement, learning, and research opportunities for learners.



Discussion Questions

1. What limits should agricultural industries have concerning the pollution of the environment? Should they be held responsible for damaging the health of those who live nearby?
2. Discuss the innovations of new techniques like green cutting. How can agribusiness be encouraged to innovate for the sake of the environment and people as opposed to economics?
3. What kinds of questions should residents ask government officials if a data center is being planned in their community?
4. What responsibility do governments have to the environment? How do government entities balance business development and interests with conservation and environmental stewardship? How *should* government entities balance the two?

Extension Activities

1. Have learners research land use in this region throughout history. Learners could do so individually or in small groups and can present their findings through an essay, a slideshow presentation, a video created for social media, or a zine.

Key research areas could include:

- a. Wartime land use during the Seminole Wars (1817–1858).
 - b. The building of the Tamiami Trail in the 1920s.
 - c. The coalition of people from different backgrounds who stopped the Jetport airport project in 1968.
2. Have learners research the federal government's Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP) established in 2000. Learners should explore the goals of the plan, its current status, and its pros and cons. They may also create their own additions or amendments to the plan.

3. Have learners research their local water supply with emphasis on where water comes from and where and how it is treated. Consider organizing a field trip to the water management sites. Learners can present their findings about their local water supply through a research paper, a poster presentation, or a slideshow presentation. This project can include research on human projects that affect local water sources, such as dams, locks, or other engineering projects in your area, and present their findings regarding the environmental impacts of such projects.
4. As a group/class, engage in a study of current threats to the local water supply, such as pollution, drought, overuse due to agriculture, data centers, etc. Then research the individuals and groups involved in addressing these threats. Create a collective presentation of these findings that can be shared beyond the group/classroom.

Community Service Learning / Local Action Activities:

1. Research and make a list of local environmental organizations that are working to preserve your area. Invite one to visit your group and share current concerns and work.
2. Research how development is handled in your area. Attend a local zoning or government meeting.
3. Think about the change makers listed at the beginning of this section. Can you use their methods to advocate for your ecosystem?

Consider:

- a. Writing articles and letters to the editor for the local newspaper.
- b. Prepare and deliver a speech at a town meeting or other public venue.
- c. Create and host a tour of a special aspect of a landscape. Sharing your knowledge can make a place come alive for people.
- d. Create a prayer walk or ritual to honor your ecosystem in a public way.



Additional Resources

Data Centers

The Miami Herald's local coverage of data centers in South Florida.

<https://www.miamiherald.com/news/business/real-estate-news/article315560025.html>

Florida Trident: Fierce competition for data centers in Florida pits secrecy for developers against the public's right to know.

<https://floridatrident.org/fierce-competition-for-data-centers-in-florida-pits-secrecy-for-developers-against-publics-right-to-know/>

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis's proposal for a Citizen Bill of Rights for Artificial Intelligence.

<https://www.flgov.com/eog/news/press/2025/governor-ron-desantis-announces-proposal-citizen-bill-rights-artificial-intelligence/>

World Resources Institute: Insights on U.S. data centers.

<https://www.wri.org/insights/us-data-center-growth-impacts>

The Harvard Gazette: Communities in both red and blue states are pushing back against data centers.

<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2026/04/why-are-communities-pushing-back-against-data-centers/>

Sugarcane Burning

FoodPrint: An overview of the topic of sugarcane burning.

<https://foodprint.org/blog/sugarcane-burning/>

Rolling Stone: Investigative article about the impact of the sugarcane burnings.

<https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-features/sugar-crop-pollutants-florida-1234924707/>

Stop Sugar Burning is an advocacy group working to move sugarcane growers to greencutting. Their website is rich with scientific studies and political updates.

<https://stopsugarburning.org/>

A lawsuit against Florida Crystals Sugar disputes their environmentally clean claims. Compare the lawsuit and the Florida Crystals corporate website that explains their "regenerative organic" methods.

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/mar/05/florida-crystals-sugar-lawsuit>
2. <https://floridacrystals.com/regenerative-organic>

ProPublica: An investigative article exploring how Brazil is moving away from preharvest burning.

<https://www.propublica.org/article/burning-sugarcane-pollutes-communities-of-color-in-florida-brazil-shows-theres-another-way>



Educating for Global Understanding

JOURNEYS IN FILM **RESOURCES AND SERVICES**

We create educational resources that spark community discussions and/or promote proactive learning for youth, parents, educators in K-12 and higher education, home-schoolers, and other learning communities. We also **create impact materials for libraries and community organizations.**

We leverage our established educational relationships to **promote materials in active outreach** to these audiences. We **extend the reach of a film and its lifespan** in the educational marketplace and beyond.

We work with a wide array of partners (non-profit organizations, educational institutions, educators, museums, teacher training institutes) to **develop resources tailored to the individuals and communities we work with and the audiences they seek to reach.**

Our resources focus on cultivating human empathy and compassion, developing a deeper knowledge of global issues and current challenges, and encouraging civic engagement.



Journeys in Film is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to the use of film to promote a richer understanding of our diverse and complex world.

JOURNEYS IN FILM **STAFF**

Jennifer Fischer, Executive Director
Hershawna Frison, Director of Education and Strategic Initiatives
Amy Bowers, Instructional Designer

JOURNEYS IN FILM **BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Joanne Strahl Ashe, President and Founder
Jennica Carmona
Jamor Gaffney-Logan
Kayla Johnson
Elana Luppino

EDITOR

Jonathan Freeman-Coppadge

LAYOUT

Tiffany McCormick

NATIONAL ADVISORY BOARD

Liam Neeson, Founding Spokesperson
Kristin Wiig, Spokesperson
Brooke Adams
Sharon Bialy
Ted Danson
Sara Jo Fischer
Gary Foster
Scott Frank
Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Daniel Goleman
Tara Bennett-Goleman
Piper Hendricks
Jill Iscol, Ed.D., In Memoriam
Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter
Alexi Ashe Meyers
William Nix
Harold Ramis, In Memoriam
Emily Shagley
Tony Shalhoub
Professor Richard A. Shweder
Mary Steenburgen
Walter Teller
Randy Michael Testa
Loung Ung
Elizabeth Clark Zoia

Educating for Global Understanding | www.journeysinfilm.org



**PO Box 65357
Albuquerque, NM 87193**