**Big Cypress preserve celebrates 40 years of keeping things as they always were**

Greg Stanley Naples Daily News Dec 5, 2014

One hundred yards deep into the Big Cypress National Preserve, the sound of traffic starts to fade. A boardwalk winds beneath hanging moss and young cypress trees, deep into the swamp, until it reaches a pond where the water is never still. A white egret stands sentinel as endless ripples of diving birds and feeding fish make their way to the exposed nose of an alligator, barely visible under a hanging branch.

Forty years ago this site – the pond, the trees, the vast swamp’s all-important fresh-watershed – was set to be buried underneath the mass of what would be the world’s largest jetport with the world’s largest runway.

Instead, it became the country’s first national preserve.

Unlike with a national park, a preserve is still open to many of the uses in place when it’s designated. Congress created the Big Cypress preserve in 1974 to protect the land and water from development, but still allow about 300 homeowners to keep their property. Off road vehicles and swamp buggies race through courses and trails, while hunters and permitted oil drillers also can share the land.

The preserve is as much about keeping the lifestyle of the people who have been living in and using the swamp for generations, as it is about protecting the countless species who rely on it and the freshwater flow to the Everglades, said Pedro Ramos, superintendent.

In celebration of 40 years, the park service will host a free festival 10 a.m. Saturday at the swamp’s welcome center on U.S. 41. The festival will feature food, music, artists and storytellers.

The challenge of the last 40 years — and likely for the next 40 — has been to balance the traditional uses of the land with conservation efforts, Ramos said. To find the sweet spot between competing desires for both the accessibility of a roadside boardwalk and the solitude and mystery still hidden in 729,000 acres of hard-to-reach and uninterrupted wild.

“There are places here in Big Cypress that are truly ancient,” Ramos said. “If you’re determined enough, and up for a long hike, you could find a spot so remote the loggers couldn’t get to it, where you could stand and think, perhaps, no one has ever stood here before.”

It’s there, deep in the diverse expanse of land that holds swamps, pine forests, grass prairies and estuaries, where hikers travel in the hopes of catching a glimpse of some of the rarest sights on the continent.

The site is one of the final holdouts for the Florida panther, whose numbers dwindled to about 20 in the 1970s after being forced into smaller and smaller pockets by creeping development. The numbers have slowly rebounded to an estimated 160 today.

In the heart of summer, ghost orchids are known to bloom. The extremely rare small leafless flowers, which stretch out like a bird in flight, are only known to still exist in Southwest Florida.

The orchids are particularly rare because they only bloom for a week or two and only one type of insect — the giant sphinx moth — has a beak long enough to reach into a ghost orchid’s flower and pollinate it.

“It’s a mysterious place,” Ramos said. “The most important responsibility we have, is to share this place. If we don’t — if people don’t have the chance to touch it, to feel it, to be in it, to see it, to listen to it — how can they help us support it?”

With a population of 6 million people within an hour’s drive the preserve could be the first introduction for many to the natural world, Ramos said.

Visits to the preserve have been steadily growing — doubling from 1999 to 2013 to just over 1 million visitors, according to the National Park Service.

There is still room to grow, especially in attracting families and children.

“As we develop more and more of the land around us — not just here in Florida but in the country at large — people will be seeking opportunities like this to get out,” Ramos said.

 

  

    

   

   

  