

# cameras for conservation

## Four Photographers Celebrate The Everglades and Big Cypress National Preserve

by Erin Hull

**T**HOUSANDS OF PEOPLE DRIVE from Miami to Naples everyday along I-75, or 'Alligator Alley,' but few of them will ever diverge from the highway, in spite of the fact that it runs through one of the most pristine environmental preserves in all of Florida — Big Cypress National Preserve. Speeding by at 80 mph, the Everglades and Big Cypress appear to be a mass of impenetrable green growth. The few who have stopped along I-75 or the smaller Tamiami Trail in the summer were likely beaten into submission by clouds of blood-thirsty mosquitoes before retreating to their vehicles and high-tailing it to the coast. These experiences lend the Everglades the reputation of an inhospitable swamp, a wasteland that is passed through on the way to bigger and better things.

Recently, though, public opinion of the Everglades has begun to shift, in large part due to the work of Florida photographers. The cliché 'a picture is worth a thousand words' holds true when it comes to conservation photography — until a person sees the beauty of an area, it is next to impossible to convince that person of the necessity of its preservation. Florida's photographers have been working hard in recent years to show Floridians and people around the world that there is more to their state than gorgeous sunsets and sandy beaches. Photographs of the Everglades now hang in airports, hotels, and politicians' offices, as well as many peoples' homes, and as a result of the increased public interest, parks throughout the Everglades have seen an increase in visitors.

Although frequently referred to as 'the swamp,' the Everglades is composed of three ecological systems: the River of Grass in the East, the wet and dry prairies of Big Cypress National Preserve, and the areas at the Southern tip of Florida, protected in 1947 as Everglades National Park. These areas make up the greater Everglades ecological system, which

begins in central Florida with water from Lake Okeechobee that slowly drifts south, following the slight southern tilt of the limestone that runs beneath.

The Everglades today are not the Everglades white explorers saw when they finally ventured into its depths in the 19th Century. Logging, urban development, and agricultural run-off have created a very different South Florida. Today, thousands of miles of canals and levees redirect water from the Everglades into the Atlantic Ocean and Florida Bay. The creation of canals and levees forever altered the rise and fall of the water table that is endemic to the Everglades ecological system. The consequence is the loss of 1.2 million square miles of wetlands, 90% of the Everglades wading bird population, and between 75%-95% of animals such as deer and turtles. Today, the Everglades is home to 69 endangered or threatened species.

In 2000, President Bill Clinton signed a \$7.8 billion bipartisan bill that promised to restore twenty national parks and refuges in the Florida Everglades, pledging to essentially 're-kink' the water flow by removing many of the canals and levees that now characterize much of the Everglades system. This project, like many other large-scale environmental projects, has been stalled for political reasons, bringing on a slough of lawsuits from environmental groups across the nation. "It's always been that caring for the environment was a personal calling," says Margaret McPherson, Vice President of the Everglades Foundation. "But in Florida it's no longer about that. It's no longer a hobby; it's a necessity."

For all of these reasons, artists throughout Florida are still fighting to keep the Everglades in the public consciousness. The following are four conservation photographers working in the Everglades and Big Cypress to raise awareness and inspire the public to work towards Everglades restoration.



Erin Hull



Clyde Butcher

### Clyde Butcher

To those who know the name, Clyde Butcher is synonymous with life-size, crystal clear, black and white prints of Florida's most beautiful and mysterious locals. The grandeur of his photography, his fierce environmentalism, and the degree of fame he has achieved as a black and white photographer have lent Butcher the apt comparison to the late Ansel Adams, whose photographs inspired the creation of Kings Canyon National Park in 1940. But Butcher, formally trained as an architect, took the long road to environmentalism, working for years selling color prints to department stores before leaving the corporate world and California behind in favor of a slower pace in South Florida. Once in Florida, Butcher began photographing what most Florida photographers photograph – sand and sunsets. It took Butcher four years of living in Florida before he came across what he now calls “the real parts of Florida.” After his first few trips into the Everglades, Butcher was hooked. He and his wife Niki now reside in a home that is literally in the swamp, situated behind Butcher's Big Cypress Gallery on the Tamiami Trail.

way to Jungle Larry's Caribbean Gardens in Naples. Huddled together with the heater working as hard as it could, listening to the AM radio chattering away, Ripple and his parents drove along what was then the two-lane Alligator Alley. A skinny, thirteen-year-old Ripple stared out the window, completely mesmerized by the wildlife passing before his eyes. “The sky was just filled with birds,” Ripple recalls. “Just seeing a winter sunset blazing red-orange, with thousands and thousands of birds silhouetted – herons and egrets and ibis and everything – coming back to roost ... I remember how extraordinary that was.”

Although his mother Judy says that her son's aspiration was to become a rock star, Ripple's actual employment prior to delving into photography was practical, and less than romantic; he worked cleaning a donut shop, at a hamburger joint, as a Pepsi delivery

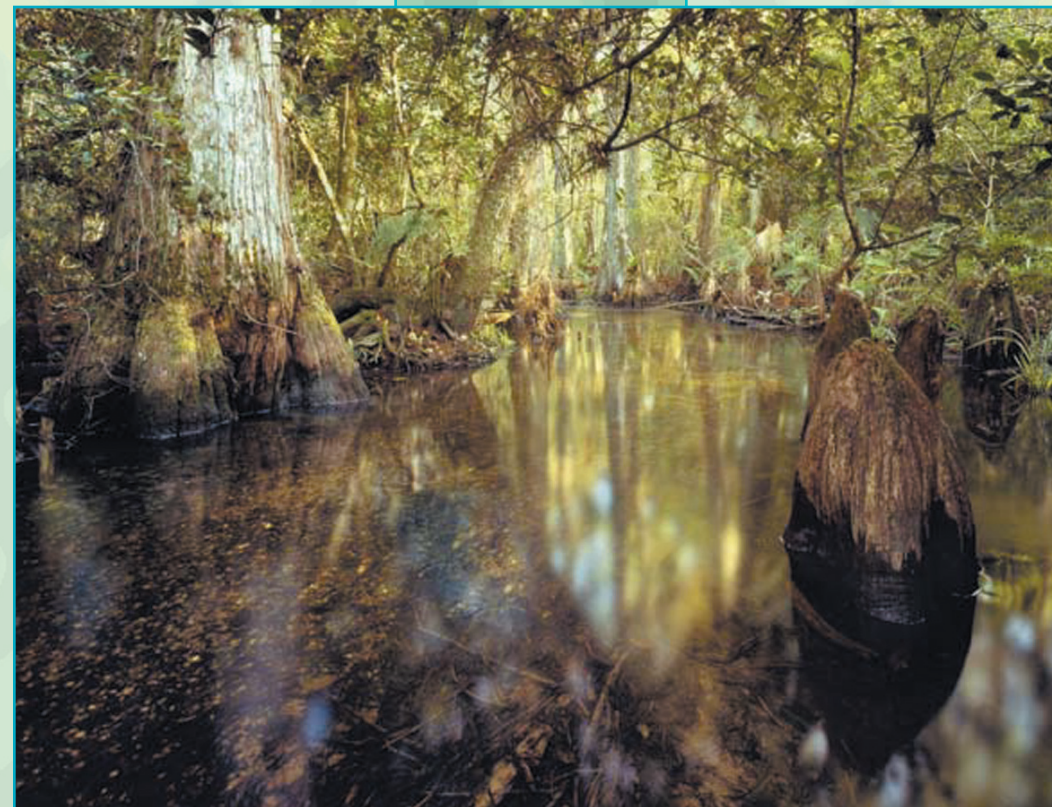
Butcher's prints are almost life-size, cypress knees and cumulous clouds enveloping the viewer. He is able to make such large prints because of his very large negatives; Butcher uses Deardorff cameras from the 1940s in various sizes, which respectively hold 5x7 inch, 8x10 inch, and 11x14 inch negatives. In addition, when he's not traveling far, Butcher breaks out his Wisner camera, which holds a 12x20 inch negative.

Like many environmentalists, Butcher has recently put all of his energy into spreading the word on global warming. Projected flooding from the effects of global warming would put South Florida under water, but this is an issue, Butcher says, that is bigger than the Everglades. “If you want to protect the Everglades,” Butcher says, “you have to protect the world.”

*Clyde Butcher's work can be viewed at the Big Cypress Gallery on Tamiami Trail in Ochopee, and at the Venice Gallery, at 237 Warfield Avenue. [www.clydebutcher.com](http://www.clydebutcher.com)*

### Jeff Ripple

Jeff Ripple first remembers crossing through the Everglades as a child in the backseat of his parents' Volkswagon “Thing,” on their



Jeff Ripple

driver in the Ozarks, and as a sous chef. But it was his final job writing software manuals that was the last straw; when Ripple and his coworkers arrived one morning at the office only to find that the owner had completely shut down the company and fled town overnight, Ripple was finished with the corporate world. “That was when I decided that I didn't want to work for anybody anymore,” Ripple says.

Having never formally studied art, Ripple is completely self-taught. Ripple's environmental passion extends beyond his photography – he is the author of nine natural history books, has recently revived his love of landscape painting, leads canoe and kayak trips into the Everglades, and has professionally recorded the sounds of the Everglades.

Always in the back of Ripple's mind is the hope that people will find intrinsic value in the Everglades after seeing his photography. “Maybe they've only seen the Everglades in the middle of the day when the light is flat, and they think there's just grass,” he says. “I can give them a new perspective, because I really get out there. My work says, ‘Look what's out there! You're just not seeing it the right way.’”

*Jeff Ripple's work can be viewed at Clyde Butcher's Big Cypress Gallery in Ochopee, the Gardner Colby Gallery in Naples, and at The Natural Experience in Cedar Key. [www.jeffripple.com](http://www.jeffripple.com)*

### Peter J. Nolan

Leaning over the steering wheel in the pre-dawn light, Peter J. Nolan peers out the passenger window of his Toyota Four Runner. “This could be interesting,” he says, as he suddenly pulls off the road onto the gravel. Gathering his Chinese-made Shen-Hao camera, he's off across the field, taking long, quick steps through the cordgrass and sawgrass which spring out of a sticky mud covering the limestone beneath. In the middle of the field, he stops and sets up the camera. Dark orange light pierces through the base of the bald cypress stand, and near the tops of the trees, yellow clouds dot



Peter Nolan

the sky. Farther overhead, however, a jet's contrail dirties a swath of speckled pink clouds. Nature photography aims to exclude human elements such as telephone poles and contrails; thus, Nolan's shot is ruined. He decides this in an instant, and rapidly folds up his camera and is off to the next location, racing the inevitable approach of the harsh South Florida sun.

As a part-time photographer, Nolan says that he has organized his life so that he really only does three things: spend time with his family, work as a web designer for the legal firm Becker & Poliakoff, and shoot. To ensure that his two children grow up with a healthy appreciation of nature, Nolan regularly takes his family into the Everglades. He says that he tries not to push them, but sometimes his enthusiasm has led him to do things like take his pregnant wife into the humid, buggy summer swamp, or to attempt to take his young daughter into the alligator-ridden muck. Nolan says he has learned, though, that he can have a good time in the Everglades without striving for that perfect shot. “Sometimes photography can take away from the experience because I'm worried about the shot too much, and I'm not focus-



Carlton Ward

ing on what's around me," Nolan says. "Sometimes I come out here and just explore. I'll have my equipment, but I'm having so much fun just looking around that I don't use it. And that's okay."

*Peter J. Nolan's work can be viewed at the Ivey House in Everglades City. [www.digitaltree.com](http://www.digitaltree.com)*

### Carlton Ward, Jr.

Dashing in and out of a dense thicket of pine and palm, photographer Carlton Ward, Jr. wields a simple machete, collecting underbrush and branches and arranging them along a narrow dirt road. Using what he has collected, he extends the thicket out into the road a bit further, and then shifts his focus to the nearby camera trap. "Hopefully this will encourage the animals to walk closer to the camera," he says. Ward kneels in the dirt and labors over the \$5,000 contraption, changing the batteries of the two giant flashbulbs and testing the camera-flash synchronicity. For the past year, Ward has spent the majority of his time on Hendrie Ranch and others, where he has documented the vanishing Florida ranchlands and the species, such as black bear, that they support.

This project is not an accidental endeavor – although Ward first decided to focus his photography on Florida while walking along an African beach, he is no stranger to the state; Ward's family has been ranching in Florida for eight generations. Ward has worked in Gabon, Mali, Kenya, Australia and the

Amazon, but eventually decided that he could best use his photography to relate the seldom-heard story of the Florida ranch.

Rather than photographing the Everglades further south, Ward is focused on the scrub ecosystem on the ranches of central Florida, which provides critical upland wooded habitat for roaming species such as black bear, wood stork, and panther. In addition to preserving habitat for creatures that venture into the Everglades, ranches provide aquifer recharge in a way that land covered in concrete can't, and with less pesticide run-off than that devoted to citrus farms. "Really, it's this whole matrix of wetland and upland habitats that allows the Everglades to be what it is," Ward says.

Ward unabashedly speaks of the mistakes he feels mankind has made, and works with the goal of preserving a way of life in Florida that many residents don't even know exists. The Ten Thousand Islands, which lie at the base of Everglades National Park, he says, are an optimal vantage point from which to imagine an older, more pristine Florida. "You look south," Ward says, "and there's nothing but Florida Bay until you hit the Keys. You look to the west, and you've got the Gulf of Mexico. You look north and you have the Fakahatchee Strand and Big Cypress. You look to the east and you have nothing but Everglades until you reach Miami. That, to me, is a source of inspiration."

*Carlton Ward, Jr.'s work can be viewed at the Hoffman-Porges Gallery in Ybor City. [www.carltonward.com](http://www.carltonward.com)*