

Introduction: Sampling the Florida Trail

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I pulled our heaving Westphalia up the paved driveway and onto Herbert Hoover Dike, a thirty foot impoundment that circles Lake Okechobee. The old van felt like it would tip at any moment; dishes rattled around a cabinet. Outside, parked by a massive pump station, my wife Julie and I leashed up the dog, slathered on sunscreen, and walked towards the traffic gate. A familiar orange and blue sign greeted us—the Florida Trail.

The Florida National Scenic Trail, or FNST, splits not far from here, around the Big Lake, going fifty miles either way before rejoining at the Kissimmee River valley. A through-hiker starting from Big Cypress and crossing unshaded Seminole lands would (at this point) be one hundred miles into an already unforgiving trek. The path on top of this embankment

is not much better, showcasing the industrialized environment. Lake Okeechobee was first dammed in the early twentieth century as protection from subtropical storms. Anyone who has read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who is at all familiar with the hurricanes of 1926 and 1928, knows the power of this inland sea. But the terraforming also serves as a catchment for ridiculously polluted water, which irrigates commercial sugar in the muck and feeds sprawl on the coast. If ever there were a site where humankind has alienated itself from natural flows or processes, this would be the place. Okeechobee can be seen from outer space, but not at ground level along Highway 98. Each summer brings the drama of algae blooms, drifting down the Caloosahatchee to the West and Eastward into Port St. Lucie. The Everglades are a mess. We, the taxpayers, are paying the Corps of Engineers to trash a lake in order to flush the toilets at Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago and irrigate a crop that is killing us.

So why not start here? The Florida Trail—usually for better, sometimes for worse—cuts through the long natural, social, cultural and even political history of a varied (often contentious) state. Once past the Big Lake, this 1300 mile path traces the Kissimmee River Valley. It splits through Orlando, with the western leg running through the Green Swamp and Withlacoochee State Forest, and the eastern section along the Wekiva River System then into Ocala National Forest. With some breaks in the chain, where the distinctive orange blazes follow pavement, the route runs through Osceola State Forest, along the Suwannee River, across Apalachicola National Forest, and onto the Panhandle, skirting the northern edge of Eglin Air Force Base, ending at Gulf Islands National Seashore near Pensacola.

Though one of a dozen designated National and Scenic Trails, the FNST does not meet the same expectations as iconic or better traveled paths, such as the Appalachian Trail. Founded in 1966, and still a work in progress, the trail remains riddled with awkward links. My older brother (by far, the more accomplished backpacker) bristles at the highway connectors, and even routes along the old rail lines, which do not feel much like a nature walk. Volunteers with the Florida Trail Association (FTA) continue to tinker with the route, opening new connections and securing easements. But as a non-through hiker, I must confess, I dig the fragmentation.

Since the Journal of Florida Studies announced this special issue over a year ago, on the eve of a pandemic, I have been testing parts of the trail in various ways. During the worst of the pandemic, last Spring, Julie and I disappeared into the Green Swamp for legal “non-dispersed” camping, basically parking along the side of an old tramway, unspooling the awning on our camper, and cracking open a beer. We biked the Van Fleet Trail (which connects the Kissimmee Valley and Green Swamp), and my son joined me for a wilderness jaunt through Ocala National Forest. You can only travel so far across the state without bumping into the Florida Trail, and I hop on it every chance I get. My wife and I have now circled the lake, and once the world is vaccinated, I’ll be itching to try the leg just south of Orlando, trekking my way from a shopping mall Chili’s to a Hampton Inn for breakfast.

Where the Florida Trail does not always offer an unbroken corridor through pristine Nature, in other words, it does provide a way of exploring the state in all its complexity. When Casey Blanton, Christopher Meindl, and I were first thinking about this issue, we imagined the Florida Trail as a transect. How can you take your particular expertise, we asked contributors, and help us to see the landscape differently?

Travel, of course, brings us new insight into the everyday. “What the map cuts up,” the philosopher Michel de Certeau wrote, “the story cuts across.” The authors of these stories (or essays, poems, and photographs) bring new light into parts of Florida that—like a hidden lake—otherwise remain invisible. Chantel Acevedo, who is both Cuban American and a mom, recounts the frustration with her daughter for wearing brand-new Converse sneakers for a Big Cypress swamp stomp, as well as passing a turnoff for the Krome Detention Center, where Latin American families have been detained during border crises. Alanna Lecher and Nicholas Foreman bring the history of Everglades development into the present, showing how a history of spurious development has engineered Florida’s dysfunctional relationship with the natural world. Some of the paths traced in this issue are shadow routes. Amanda Hagood follows the literary trail of John Muir to Cedar Key; bookstore owner Yvette Rowe pays tribute to the more recent legacy of nature writer Bill Belleville; and archaeologist Uzi Baram reconstructs the paths of nineteenth-century free Blacks, or maroons. Art, science and even

bureaucracy meet. Marty Williams shares a poem, Mark Indig captures the state in photography, Ben Williams guides us through the maze required to create a public easement on private lands, and Dick (Richard) Franz explains his half-century long fascination with a region's natural history. These "hidden landscapes" often require a guide, someone to help us to see the rich stories along the way. Cynthia Patterson takes us to a rails-to-trails segment outside the ghost town of Croom (where bicyclists zip along on their thousand dollar toys) and explores the deep heritage of nearby African-American churches. Julie Armstrong reflects upon a lynching along the Suwannee River, recounting a gruesome series of events that belies our usual stories of hiking as leisure. Andy Huse dives into the botanic legacy, kicking off a new feature of JFS ("From the Vaults") with a discussion of the rare endemic, *Ixia Coelestina*. And Susan Cerulean, in a fitting close to this issue, journeys with us to Tick Beach, where we see for ourselves the consequences of rising seas.

Florida's story will always foreground the interactions between human beings and the natural world. The amazing, 1300-mile route of the FNST showcases what we most love about the state—rare flora and fauna, mature longleaf pine forests, cypress temples in the Everglades, aquamarine springs, catacomb-like karst along the Suwannee, our literary heritage. But the same path also provides an inroad into a long and often unsettling history. Can one cross the bridge in Live Oak and peacefully gaze into the river, knowing its black water has swallowed the bodies of lynched children? Dick Franz' meditations on the naturalized canals along Rice Creek, dug by enslaved African-Americans, reminds us how a painful past can remain present. Chantel Acevedo situates our national parks alongside detention centers. We should journey this path, as the geographer Derek Gregory once wrote, "in a spirit of humility, understanding, and care;" to cut across the map is also to enter "a multileveled dialogue between past and present." The contributions to this issue invite further exploration for physical and armchair travelers alike. By digging into the collective past, we hope, readers may reflect upon what earlier Floridians got right—and what we (or they) also got hopelessly wrong. Once we have done so, when we have traced present-day footsteps into this collective past, how then do we build a better tomorrow?

It all begins with a walk. Because any step into the future, of course, always starts today.