

2016 METRA SCHOLARSHIP ESSAY

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“How can Central Florida emphasize environmental protection while welcoming a growing population with increased land development requirements?”

To the rest of the U.S., Florida is a land of contradictions. Mainstream news media is quick to take shots at the peculiar occurrences happening in our state, many of which are the product of nearly 20 million people living entangled in natural landscapes that are home to a diverse population of wildlife. To merely mention our state’s name has become a joke in itself. *Tampa Bay Times* reporter Craig Pitman has formed a side-career from his Twitter feed that details the bizarre happenings of Florida—his Oh, #Florida, series of tweets recently culminated in a book published on the topic. Yet 23.8 million visitors from the other U.S. states came to Florida in 2015, so even if they are laughing at us, they are likely making plans to come and visit.

In 2015, nearly 1.2 million people were employed in tourism, making tourism the state’s most economically influential industry. Tourism brings recognition, money and masses of visitors. However, by nurturing a dependence on tourism, we as residents jeopardize our natural resources by sacrificing for those who are just passing through. The tension between developing Florida lands or preserving the natural spaces that draw so many people has been long-lived in this region. John Muir, naturalist and co-founder of the Sierra Club, was enchanted by the wildness of central Florida in the 19th century on his trek from Amelia Island to Cedar Key. During his hike, Muir became ill with malaria. He spent several months recovering in Cedar Key, where he developed a preservationist philosophy. He realized that it wasn’t man’s destiny to lord over all of Earth and its wildlife. Instead, he realized that some places exist for their sake, not solely for the sake of human use and development. Florida’s swampy wilderness still draws many tourists to the region, but many visitors don’t understand the fragility of these ecosystems or the respect that they demand. The tragic death of a 2-year-old child attacked by an alligator in a lagoon near the Walt Disney World hotel in Orlando last June is an unfortunate symbol of what happens when visitors are uneducated about Florida’s ecosystems and the species that call these lands home.

Tourism is the foundation of Central Florida’s economy, and Florida’s natural resources are the bulk of Florida’s touristic appeal, but the preservation of both of these elements at once is often contradictory—so how do we resolve this conflict? Many scientists, land managers and developers have attempted to answer this question. One suggestion is to focus future development in high-density urban areas. According to the U.S. Green Building Council, by concentrating development on existing infrastructure, high-density development preserves wildlife habitat, protects natural resources and promotes transportation efficiency. This action would require substantial capital investment to reinforce existing infrastructure and

accommodate a growing number of people, but the results would help to lighten the load on areas of the state that are essential for the habitation of wildlife communities, such as the Florida Wildlife Corridor—a wildlife thoroughfare that runs from the Everglades to the Okefenokee.

Turning to scientific research for insight into land management is another key step, but it must be only one part of the process. Scientific consensus is rarely definitive. The nature of science is investigation, and uncertainty often accompanies that dynamic. This is especially true in unprecedented circumstances, such as the effects of global climate change—which are already being recognized in low-lying areas of Miami. As Central Florida’s population grows and its climate warms, conflicts will not become easier. The answers will not become more certain. So how do Florida government and land developers make responsible and ethical decisions that represent the interests of Florida residents, the tourism industry and the protection of Florida’s natural resources?

The answer to this lies in the collaboration and communication between key stakeholders. Every point-of-view needs a seat at the table to help inform and participate in the decision-making process that determines the fate of Central Florida’s land. This should include a diverse group of invested participants, particularly those who depend on Florida land economically and for sustenance—farmers, fishermen, conservationists and natural resource users. Each of these stakeholder groups holds unique and valuable knowledge about the environment and their community’s relationship with Florida’s natural resources. A culture of inclusive land management is the most comprehensive way to move forward in a state with so many different interests to represent.

Gathering diverse stakeholder groups together is an important first step to confront the decisions that must be made now and in the near future, but in the long-term, Central Florida must learn to prioritize its future by planning for the next generation now. This means investing in education and training for young Floridians that focuses on the challenges that lie ahead in the environmental future of the state. Banning the terms “climate change” and “global warming” is a poor example of communication leadership from Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection. As a state surrounded by water, Florida must do a better job of accepting the inevitability of rising seas and move forward. The city of Miami has set a notable example with their Climate Change Action Plan, a document that focuses on the steps essential to making the community more resilient to effects of climate change in the next five years. This is the kind of realistic planning that should become commonplace in the minds of future leaders. It is our responsibility to embed the urgency of their responsibility within them and help to guide a balanced approach to land development and natural resource management, both by offering education and by setting an example now.