

Florida's Natural Purifier: The Everglades

By Robyn Kulich

People use water every day all over the world, and most of us never stop to think about where it's coming from or how long it will last. In South Florida, most of the water flows from Lake Kissimmee, down the Kissimmee River to Lake Okeechobee and into the Everglades. It is here that the water purifying cycle begins.

The Everglades is about the most important water source in South Florida. It begins with Lake Okeechobee, where levels of nutrients in the water are very high, partly due to the natural sources of phosphorus in its watershed. The saw grass of the Everglades, south of Lake Okeechobee, extracts the nutrients, thus enriching the northern Everglades soil and leaving the lower Everglades with the low-nutrient water. The sparsely vegetated marsh helps promote adequate gas exchange between the water and the air. This helps to maintain a normal oxygen level in the water.



The Everglades' waters are directly connected to the water supply for Florida's urban southeast coast. The same highly porous limestone bedrock that is continuous from the central and southern Everglades is a conduit known as the Biscayne aquifer.

Our clean water supply will not last forever, and neither will the Everglades if we continue to destroy them. The Everglades' problems stem from collecting plants and wildlife, introducing exotic plants and animals, and extensively altering the natural hydrology of the area. Collecting or gathering specimens of interesting and beautiful plants and rare animals takes a toll on the natural reproduction cycle. One of the most extensively intrusive newcomers to the Everglades is the *Melaleuca quinquernervia*, also known as the Australian melaleuca. This pesky plant is sucking up all the water. New animals are taking over the habitats of native species. And changing the waterflow patterns changes the natural water cycle of the Everglades system.

If we want to keep playing in the sprinklers and drinking from water fountains after a hot day outside, then we need to keep our "purifier" pure. Let nature's cycle run its course, and we keep our way of living with clean water now and in the future.

Reference: Thomas E. Lodge, *The Everglades Handbook: Understanding the Ecosystem*, 1994.

Taken from *River Voices II*, an environmental education publication by students from Lee County School District, funded through a grant from the former Florida Advisory Council of Environmental Education.

The Challenges – Teacher Resources

Name _____

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Quiz

1. In South Florida, where does water flow from to reach the Everglades?

2. Explain how the purifying process takes place in the Everglades.

3. What human activities in the Everglades have endangered the natural water cycle of the Everglades system?

4. The author believes that protection of the Everglades is important. Use details from the text to explain why you agree or disagree.
