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Scenic Watch is a free bi-monthly publication of Citizens for a Scenic Florida, Inc., dedicated to the preservation, protection and enhancement of Florida's scenic heritage. Individuals, organizations and government agencies are welcome as members. [Join Scenic Florida now](#) to protect our scenic qualities.

National News:

Spot a digital billboard? Fill out Scenic America's digital billboard questionnaire

Digital billboards are popping up all across the country. Have you seen one go up near you? If you have, we'd like to hear from you. We're interested in your opinion and in finding out how the sign(s) affects your commute or your neighborhood. Please take a moment to complete our digital billboard questionnaire.

[Click here to complete the questionnaire.](#)

The purchase by the State of Florida to save the Everglades has to be the biggest story of the year so we are running another article on it from a different perspective. Also, here is a link to a photo gallery on the Everglades with comments:

[Everglades - A Walk Through Photo Gallery](#)

Farmland Protection

Florida to Purchase U.S. Sugar Corp. Farmland

[By Jim Wiesemeyer](#)

via a special arrangement with Informa Economics, Inc.

\$1.75 billion deal would provide 'missing link' to protect state's coastal estuaries and the Everglades

Florida Gov. Charlie Crist (R) on Tuesday (June 24) announced the state will buy out the assets of United States Sugar Corp., including the company's 292 square miles of sensitive farmland in the Everglades Agricultural Area.

State and federal officials, environmental groups, lawmakers, and others hailed the news and said it would speed restoration of the Everglades. Crist said the \$1.75 billion deal would provide the "missing link" needed to protect the state's coastal estuaries and the Everglades.

More negotiations ahead. The South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) and

U.S. Sugar officials are to negotiate a final agreement, with closing expected in about six years, the statement said. During that time, U.S. Sugar will continue to farm and manage the land, which is located south of Lake Okeechobee in Palm Beach, Hendry, and Glades counties.

Crist said. It would be the largest conservation purchase in state history. Part of the land would be turned into a series of reservoirs and pollution filtering areas that would restore the flow of water between the lake and Everglades National Park. Part of it could be swapped for more desirable land for the project. But more than 100,000 acres of it could be turned back to farming — perhaps growing crops for use as fuel, said Department of Environmental Protection Secretary Mike Sole.

Key to the deal: According to Crist, the key to getting the deal started was a federal lawsuit filed by Earthjustice and the Florida Wildlife Federation, challenging the practice of backpumping farm runoff containing phosphorous, pesticides and other chemicals into the lake. The suit contended that backpumping triggered massive algae blooms and compromised drinking water quality for small towns such as Pahokee and South Bay that draw their supply from the lake. In December 2006, U.S. District Judge Cecilia Altonaga ruled that backpumping violates the Clean Water Act. Then in August 2007, the South Florida Water Management District — the defendant in the case — voted 4-3 to end the practice.

Surprise, surprise. Crist said that when he first proposed buying everything U.S. Sugar owns, "originally there was some surprise" among even his staff. "But the more people thought about it, they thought, why not?" U.S. Sugar vice president Robert Coker said when he heard about Crist's idea, "I just about passed out. That's a pretty big deal in my world." The eight months of negotiations were conducted in such secrecy that not even federal officials leading the Everglades restoration knew about it before Monday.

Background: U.S. Sugar produces 700,000 tons of sugar a year, or about 8 percent of all sugar produced in the nation. The company, which operates its own railroad, employs 1,700 workers.

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Scenic Highways & Trails

Loop group to try for national designation

Staff Report

One year after getting a Florida Scenic Highway designation for the Loop, an advocacy group for the 33-mile scenic roadway and trail wants go national.

The Ormond Scenic Loop & Trail Corridor Management Entity approved applying for status as a National Scenic Byway.

Joe Jaynes, chairman of the advocacy group, said it would take six months to complete documentation and a plan to manage the Loop as a National Scenic Byway. Approval might take a year.

"If we get it, it also opens the door for a lot more grants for projects we're looking at doing around the Loop itself," Jaynes said.

Projects include opening up more trails, making trails more accessible to the public and planting more trees.

The Florida Department of Transportation is providing a consultant to help apply for the National Scenic Byway designation, Jaynes said.

Regarded by many area residents as the most scenic drive locally, the Loop winds past a diverse landscape of ocean dune, hammock, pine land, estuary marsh and primeval forest. Visitors can watch loggerhead, green and leatherback turtles swim. They can see pods of dolphin play.

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Myakka park offers exercise among vegetation, wildlife

By Annabelle Tometich • atometich@news-press.com • July 13, 2008

SARASOTA - After a morning of hiking through the canopied trails of Myakka River State Park, Annette Bleser had a confession.

"I used to always dream about moving to Georgia for their great trails," said Bleser, 47, an activity leader with the Alligator Amblers chapter of the Florida Trails Association.

"But once I discovered all of the hiking Florida has to offer, I completely changed my mind."

A little more than an hour northeast of Fort Myers off Interstate 75, Myakka is a playground for outdoor enthusiasts.

Flora and fauna abound throughout the park's 37,000 acres, which are bisected by a winding, 14-mile stretch of the Myakka River. Myakka (the word is derived from the Native American pronunciation of "big waters") is one of just two rivers in the state that are designated as "wild and scenic."

If mountain biking and windsurfing are Southwest Florida backyard adventures, then hiking through the 39.5 miles of trails in Myakka is like venturing to your friend's house down the street. The one with the cool tree fort on an oversized lot, with the giant swimming pool and tons of fun things to do on an otherwise lazy summer day.

The best way to check out everything Myakka has to offer is to throw on a pair of hiking shoes and trek into some of the park's most remote regions, which are only accessible by foot.

JUST BEAUTIFUL

On the 3-mile trail to the Mossy Island campsite in the northeast section of the park, the vegetation is lush and overwhelming.

The limbs of giant live oak trees span the skies overhead, creating a natural lattice that mutes the pummeling heat of the sun. The oaks are feathered with wisps of resurrection fern in various stages of hibernation - some green and splayed, others brown and desiccated - patiently awaiting the water necessary for their resurgence.

Long tendrils of Spanish moss drape the trees like gray-green lengths of crepe paper marking some unseen but ongoing woodland celebration.

The plants are so captivating that the animals of Myakka can be lost in the fray. As a barred owl called from the treetops and a family of wild turkeys pecked the ground for food, a lone deer crept almost silently from the cover of the forest into view, its ears keenly and constantly scanning for any hints of trouble.

"It's just beautiful back here," Bleser said.

"I'm one of those people, I can't just sit at home and relax. I'm always looking around, trying to figure out something to do. But out here it's just totally relaxing for me."

Like all of Myakka's trails, the one to Mossy Island is primarily flat, making it easier on the legs. But there are enough roots, rocks and hog-dug ruts to keep a hiker on his or her toes.

SWEATY AND REJUVENATING

Away from Mossy's cool canopies, the trails can be more open and exposed. Shady maple and laurel trees give way to the low-lying fan palms and shrubby myrtle oaks that carpet the park's many prairies.

Stan Liner and his wife, Betty, both 66, understand the heat of those prairies all too well.

After a recent five-mile hike through Myakka, the retired Sarasota residents were slick from the rising late-morning temperatures. Stan's University of Connecticut T-shirt could have doubled for a white wet suit, but the Liners' spirits were anything but damp.

"It's rejuvenating and it's good exercise, and we love nature," Betty, formerly of Connecticut, said.

"We've always hiked. When we moved to Sarasota, we just looked up state parks and there was Myakka. It sounded interesting, and we've really like it so far."

Stan added: "Even as a kid, I used to play Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn and hike around. I've always had the curiosity to go into the woods and see what was there. I've seen a lot out here."

A VIEW TO CLIMB FOR

To see more of Myakka, you can take a short hike along the Nature Trail and climb 74 feet to the top of one of the towers that support the park's canopy walkway. Yes, there is a canopy walkway, like those you'd find in Costa Rica or the rain forests of the Amazon, in Sarasota.

The walkway, completed in 2000, is suspended 35 feet above the forest floor amidst tree branches and leaves. A few months after it opened, scientists discovered that the exotic Mexican bromeliad weevil had arrived in Southwest Florida.

If hiking, weevils and heights aren't your thing, don't despair.

"There is so much to do here," Bleser said.

"Hiking is a huge part of it, but they have horse trails, bike trails, bird watching, airboat rides, kayaking, scenic drives, concessions, picnic areas, fishing, camping - it's really endless. If you like to be outside, or just see the outdoors, this is a great place to be."

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Other Scenic News

Venice gives wanderers a taste of Old Florida

By Thomas Swick | Chicago Tribune Newspapers
June 29, 2008

VENICE, Fla.—Say "Venice" and people think Italy. Tell them "No, U.S.A.," and their thoughts move to California. Ft. Lauderdale, the so-called "Venice of America," is more famous than the Venice of Florida.

It is a mature town—the median age is 69—and people sometimes overlook the old. It's a beach town in a state rotten with beach towns. It's not as historic as Ft. Myers or as sophisticated as Sarasota. But it's got one remarkable, multi-personality main drag.

It begins (or ends, depending on your perspective) at the Gulf of Mexico. The Venice Beach Pavilion looms just to the west of West Venice Avenue like the lone surviving roof of a 1960s world's fair. Down by the water, stooped figures comb the sand not for shells, as in fanciful Sanibel, but rather the teeth of sharks.

"This is 8 or 9 million years old," a woman said to me early one morning, showing me the tooth she had just picked up. It was dark and small and resembled an arrowhead.

"Contemporary ones are white," the woman explained. "Older ones are black or dark gray."

Her friend pointed out to the Gulf. "That's where sharks come to die," she said. "It's a burial ground for sharks."

Over the years, beach "renourishment" has changed the currents and sent a lot of chompers south to Casperson Beach. Nevertheless, a strong hurricane could still rain shark teeth down on West Venice Avenue. Which would give the street even more distinction.

From the Gulf, the street cuts a straight line east through a pleasant residential neighborhood—neat ranch houses and live oak trees—past some public tennis courts and into a pretty, one-sided downtown.

Shops line the south side; a grassy corridor with towering palms graces the north. Some of the businesses breathe salt air; the sign in the window of Sea Pleasures & Treasures reads: "If you would like to look at some teeth, please ask cashier!" Inside, in addition to shark teeth (running from \$5 to \$1,000), you can stock up on alligator scutes, stingray mouth plates, sawfish bills and the inner ear bones of whales.

Down at Nifty Nic Nacs, Freudian Slippers are for sale, along with countless other novelty items. The store seems right at home in the city where the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus wintered from 1960-1991. A display at the Venice Archives and Area Historical Collection features old front pages—"Venice Welcomes Home the Greatest Show on Earth"—and leaflets for Clown College, which boasted "the World's Funniest Final Exam."

Driving into town from the south on U.S. Highway 41 you cross the Circus Bridge, over which the animals and performers paraded after disembarking from the train that had carried them south. To your left you can see the large trapeze net where Tito Gaona still gives lessons.

The train station sits just north of Venice Avenue after it crosses the Intracoastal Waterway. Built in 1927, it features a statue of legendary animal trainer Gunther Gebel-Williams (what is it with Germans and wild cats?) and blown-up black-and-white photographs.

A caretaker told me about one of Tito's recent trapeze students, an 80-year-old woman who "dressed all in black—black tights and black shirt."

The caretaker also talked about the circus. "They had three trains—the major train was a mile and a half long. The engine would be at the Circus Bridge."

East Venice Avenue, as it has now become—though it's the same street, on the same straight line—heads out of town into an abridged suburbia of small strip malls that soon give way to open spaces, nurseries, a Korean church with a long driveway. A stop sign rimmed by blinking red lights appears, and on the other side of the road the erstwhile main street turned country road suddenly, disconcertingly, dissolves into dirt. It enters a tunnel of live oak trees dripping Spanish moss and ends, 100 yards in, at an old fishing camp on the Myakka River. The street that starts at water is stopped by water.

A restaurant, Snook Haven, hunches under more live oaks. If it's not the best fish restaurant in Florida, it's one of the three most scenic. The deck in the back overlooks the placid Myakka, its opposite bank a jungly tangle. The "No Feeding Gators" sign is a little unnecessary because when your grouper arrives on ciabatta bread, you're reluctant to give even your spouse a taste. The chips are homemade: warm, irregularly shaped, with deliciously crisp edges and soft, salty centers.

You sit there chewing and thinking about how you came from concrete to dirt, from saltwater to freshwater, from sharks to gators, from sun to shade, from urban to rustic, from New Florida to Old Florida.

In the space of six miles, without turning the wheel.

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Wilton Rooks

Scenic Watch Editor