

South Florida Everglades Restoration



Location: South Florida

Client: Department of Interior/US Fish & Wildlife Service, and South Florida Task Force

Outcome: Science-Based Resolution of Complex Litigation over Ecosystem Restoration Project

In the midst of a legal battle over the competing needs of different endangered species, Dr. Brosnan was brought in to resolve the issues at hand. Through investing in creating the right framework, she was able to refine the questions at stake, assemble the right experts, build cooperation, and bring people together on the core issues, even when they had diverging opinions. Dr. Brosnan was able to find common ground and develop creative solutions to get the South Florida Everglades Restoration project back on track. Valuing her unique insight and ability, the US Fish & Wildlife Service has continued to engage her from time to time to for additional scientific reviews.

Smart Solutions to Environmental Risks

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Project Overview

The Department of Interior (DOI) requested our help to resolve an impasse over endangered species and the South Florida Everglades ecosystem restoration project. Despite a \$5.8 billion investment, the restoration project was stymied by the competing needs of several endangered species, leading to advocates of each species pitted against each other. Opinions were bitterly divided and distrust was high. Different interest groups charged that the Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) was favoring selected endangered birds at the expense of others. The issues were already in litigation; several lawsuits had been filed and more were pending. Initially, the USFWS requested that we convene a panel of avian experts, however, once we were able to drill down on the issues and create clarity in identifying their underlying problems and questions, it became apparent that understanding habitat dynamics and hydrology was critical to evaluating the endangered species issues and addressing the concerns of all stakeholders. Bringing in the right experts allowed us to provide a better, more comprehensive and useful review.

A critical part of the success in the project was Dr. Brosnan's upfront investment in reaching out to all the parties in order to build trust in the process. She worked intensively with each group to ensure that she knew their issues, and that they felt their voices were heard and concerns addressed. As a direct result, the parties showed up to public meetings as active participants in a more cooperative process. We were able to reframe the debate away from pitting species and interests against each other, to one of managing species, habitats, and stakeholder needs through the transition to a fully restored ecosystem. Our expert panel developed a set of priority actions that could be incorporated at no cost into existing efforts and monitoring, which, when implemented, resolved the impasse. The panel found that the apparent conflicts among the species were short-term and could be resolved through more effective management. In a major agreement, the regulating agencies recognized that changes in abundance of endangered species were to be expected in differing habitats during the restoration, and that issuing a jeopardy call under the Endangered Species Act (a Biological Opinion) would not always be warranted in these circumstances. This proved important to the stakeholders and other government entities as a previous jeopardy call had stalled the water-flow restoration and created mistrust and litigation.

We were also able to outline an action plan for gathering information going forward, and for helping species through the restoration process. For instance, the scientists concluded that developing a translocation plan to relocate critically endangered populations would help to secure recovery and prevent extinction. By carrying this out in advance, it would provide greater assurance of success and avoid problems later. The USFWS and SF Task Force incorporated all of our recommendations and the restoration has continued to move forward. This included the raising of the Tamiami Trail (E-W highway through the Everglades) to allow for more normal and historic water flow from the Lake Okeechobee area in the north, through the Everglades National Park, and to Florida Bay – a step deemed critical for the survival of the Everglades and its species.

When new information emerged on other Everglades issues, the Service continued to request our re-engagement to review and incorporate the knowledge. We carried out two additional and successful scientific reviews for them.

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