

An alligator resting on a large limb is unfazed by our presence.

Alligator Alcatraz has been in the news since June 2025, when an immigration detention facility intended for the worst of the worst was slated to be built on an improved site inside Big Cypress National Preserve. Big Cypress has been occupied by the Micosukee Indian tribe since the 1840s, because an impenetrable wilderness kept them from being captured in the Indian Wars in Florida.

The site formerly known as Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport was constructed in the early 1970s for commercial and military use, and as a place to land the space shuttle.



Generations of Floridians grew up swimming, fishing and even baptizing their young in these headwaters of the Everglades.

Environmental concerns in the late 1970s/early 1980s halted further development.

Alligator Alcatraz is a catchy name designed to garner attention to the problem of the bad hombres already here, process them for deportation and to act as a deterrent for future illegals. As a native Floridian, I consider the entire media campaign ridiculous. The folks who created the narrative of man-eating pythons and alligators in Florida do not realize that there are cities and towns here, full of regular folks who treasure the Everglades. Generations of Floridians grew up taking airboat rides down the ditch, swamp buggy treks through the cypress forest and slogging on foot through the river of grass.

The original settlers lived off the the land. On fertile farmland they planted orange trees and pineapples. On grassy ridges they raised cattle and they fished in the lakes, rivers and ocean. They ate swamp cabbage, a delicacy known as hearts of palm, made from the core of young saw palmetto, Florida's state tree. Frogs legs are Everglades fare... tastes like chicken. They made gopher stew. For the Florida neophyte, that's not stew made by a "go-fer," a low wage undocumented worker.

Alligator Alcatraz is a media concoction reported by those who live in canyons

made of concrete, lined by tall buildings that scrape the sky. Their roads are like tunnels in the form of a rat maze. The only wildlife they know are street rats and park pigeons. Though these reporters may have visited Florida, they probably only made it to the Alligator Farm to watch gators in pens jump out of muddy water to snatch a dead chicken on a stick. They leave Florida with a live alligator souvenir, who after a small starring role in the third-grader's report about what I did this summer, ends up being flushed down the toilet to appear later in a sewer near you.

The new detention facility is close-by the gallery of nature photographer Clyde Butcher, whose black and white photographs bring the wild lands of the Everglades to life. He spent his life photographing with a large format film camera, wading waist deep in the alligator's swamp in order to give the viewer an intimate perspective of a pristine environment worthy of preservation. As far as I can tell, despite photographing in alligator infested waters, Butcher still has all his limbs intact.

Florida is made up of lots of swamp. In predevelopment time Florida was 50% wetland - approx. 20.3 million acres. Now there are only about one-half of the original wetlands remaining.



An ancient oak tree serves as waypoint along Fisheating Creek.

Alligator Alcatraz... CONTINUED - Photos by Carol Ellis



My friend Bill Hutto and the local guide contemplating the first cold one of the day.

Wildlife need wild lands was the callout for land acquisition, and the State of Florida legislature enacted Preservation 2000 & Forever Florida to help do just that.

In 1999 I took multiple trips to the headwaters of the Everglades to document the State of Florida's \$43 million purchase of Fisheating Creek, the State's most pristine wilderness site and unspoiled lands near Lake Okeechobee. Historically the early settlers relied on Florida's web of creeks and waterways as their primary mode of passage through impenetrable swamp. The purchase of this 52-mile western tributary of Lake Okeechobee returned the land from private



The swamp guide had more alligator teeth around his neck than actual teeth in his mouth.

ownership back to the people of the State of Florida.

I traveled Fisheating Creek aboard a jon boat with some well-armed locals and a guide who had more alligator teeth around his neck than actual teeth in his mouth. Sentinel oaks and limbs of ancient trees reaching out over the water were the guideposts along the way. As we traveled to remote areas, touched only by Mother Nature, the cameras' wide angle lens took in the beautiful view, as with open arms, offered a wide embrace for a perfect ecosystem. Back on shore I sampled wild boar stew from the guides' crusty crock-pot. He lived off

the land and provided food for the local women, children and for those who could not provide for themselves.

The residents of Alligator Alcatraz probably possess more skills to deal with the wildlife in Florida than the media gives them credit for. Show me a Honduran man with a machete, and I will show you a survivor.

There is no place like the Everglades. I



CAROL ELLIS photographing at Fisheating Creek, documenting the moment in 1999 when the land was returned to the people of the State of Florida.

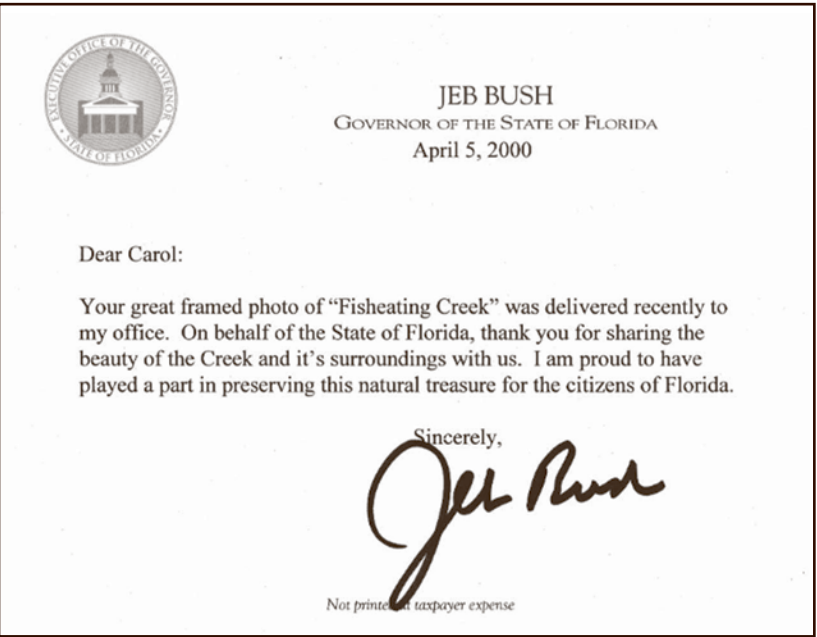
Currently a Master Gardener volunteer, Carol has a degree in Journalism from the University of Florida and is the resident photographer /artist at Ocean Reef Club.

appreciate my Florida roots, and I never want to be planted in a concrete jungle. The beauty and the balance between the water and the air and the natural feel of what was... and is left of our environment in Florida is worth saving.

Repatriate the inmates and when the job is done, restore this scarred land to nature.



A baby gator hidden in the swampy waters.



Governor Jeb Bush recognized Carol for her efforts.