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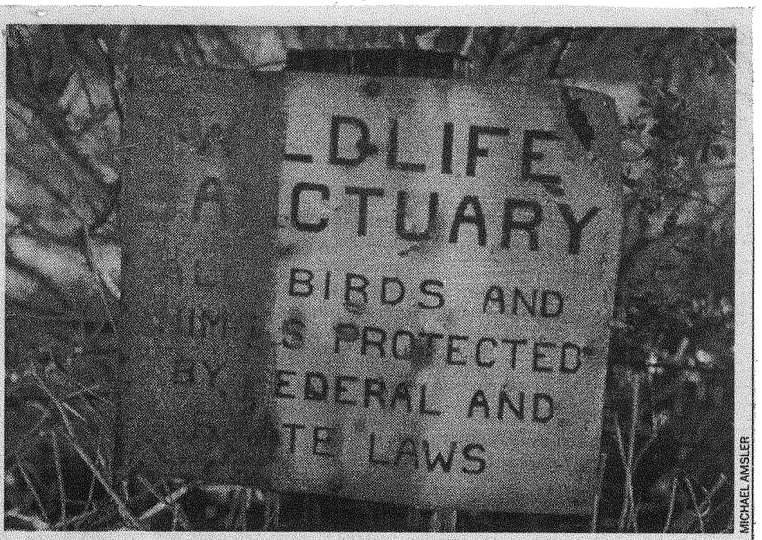

MICHAEL AMSLER

Sign of the times: A rusted relic at the Chanslor Ranch.

Wetlands

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More than 13 million people from six states live in the bay's watershed, and the next 25 years are expected to bring enough people to populate two more Baltimores and two Districts of Columbia, adding to area pollution. "Just one year of stormwater from the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area alone dumped between 1 and 5 million gallons of oil, 400,000 pounds of zinc, 64,000 pounds of copper, and 22,100 pounds of lead into the bay," the EDF reports.

More than one in two Americans now lives on or near the coast, requiring an average of one-half acre of land apiece for new schools, post offices, and other public services, Weinstein notes, and by 2050, 70 percent of Americans are expected to live on the coast. "So the pressures are ever increasing," he adds.

Uneasy Neighbors

THAT PEOPLE and wetlands make uneasy neighbors is nothing new to Burkett Neely. A woman called him to complain that an endangered wood stork had relieved itself in her backyard pool in tony Boca Raton, Fla. What could Neely say? At the time, Neely tended the northern Everglades as manager of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge west of Boca Raton. He knew the stork was—and is—an endangered species. You can't kill it, or even bother it, he says. As urban sprawl marches closer to the marshy refuge, "I think you're going to see all kinds of conflicts," adds Neely. Neighbors already pine for mosquito-spraying, which is only marginally effective, since it isn't allowed in the refuge. "Living next to a swamp, you deal with swamp creatures," Neely replies.

The Everglades are close to the largest wetlands in the nation, despite being reduced to half their original size. Restoring the "River of Grass" is expected to become the largest freshwater wetlands restoration project in the world: It will take at least 20 years and an estimated $1 billion. It's also overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers—the same agency that did most of the swamp drainage a half century ago.

But already, the Everglades may be losing some of their luster with politicians who favor the restoration. Last year, Congress provided $76 million for buying land as a buffer between the Everglades and urban sprawl. This year, a Senate bill slashed that to $40 million for fiscal year 1999, and a House bill provided even less—$20 million. Buying land is widely recognized as crucial in restoring the Everglades, contends the National Audubon Society. Expect more homes and businesses to move in otherwise, the organization warns.

As south Florida adds a new resident every 12 minutes through the year 2020, geographers contend the population center of the region won't be the coastal cities of Miami or Fort Lauderdale—but farther west, near the wetlands of the Everglades. Four out of five new residents are expected to live in or fairly near suburban Sunrise, home to the new arena of the Florida Panthers professional hockey team.

"For the most part, we have come a long way from the old view that wetlands were mosquito-plagued swamp wastelands full of snakes and alligators, and that their only worth was to be drained or filled for construction or agriculture," Proffitt says.

In its simplest form, the threats to wetlands seem to boil down to a curious circle. People need a place to live, work, shop. They look for affordable, attractive choices—which may be in former wetlands. Developers build homes where demand indicates people want to live. So more people move into new ranch houses in the former wetlands. More builders build there. Soon, you have a suburb where herons once stood like statues, waiting silently for a meal to float by.

At any point, people could stop buying homes or doing business in former wetlands, encouraging developers and businesses to stay in centralized cities. Or developers could stop building in wetlands—that would force homebuyers and businesses to look elsewhere. And government agencies could stop granting permits to develop them.

Maybe the cycle can be stopped by the folks in Washington, D.C. But don't bet on it. That city itself is the site of a former wetland.

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