All Our Relations

Native Struggles for Land and Life

By Winona LaDuke

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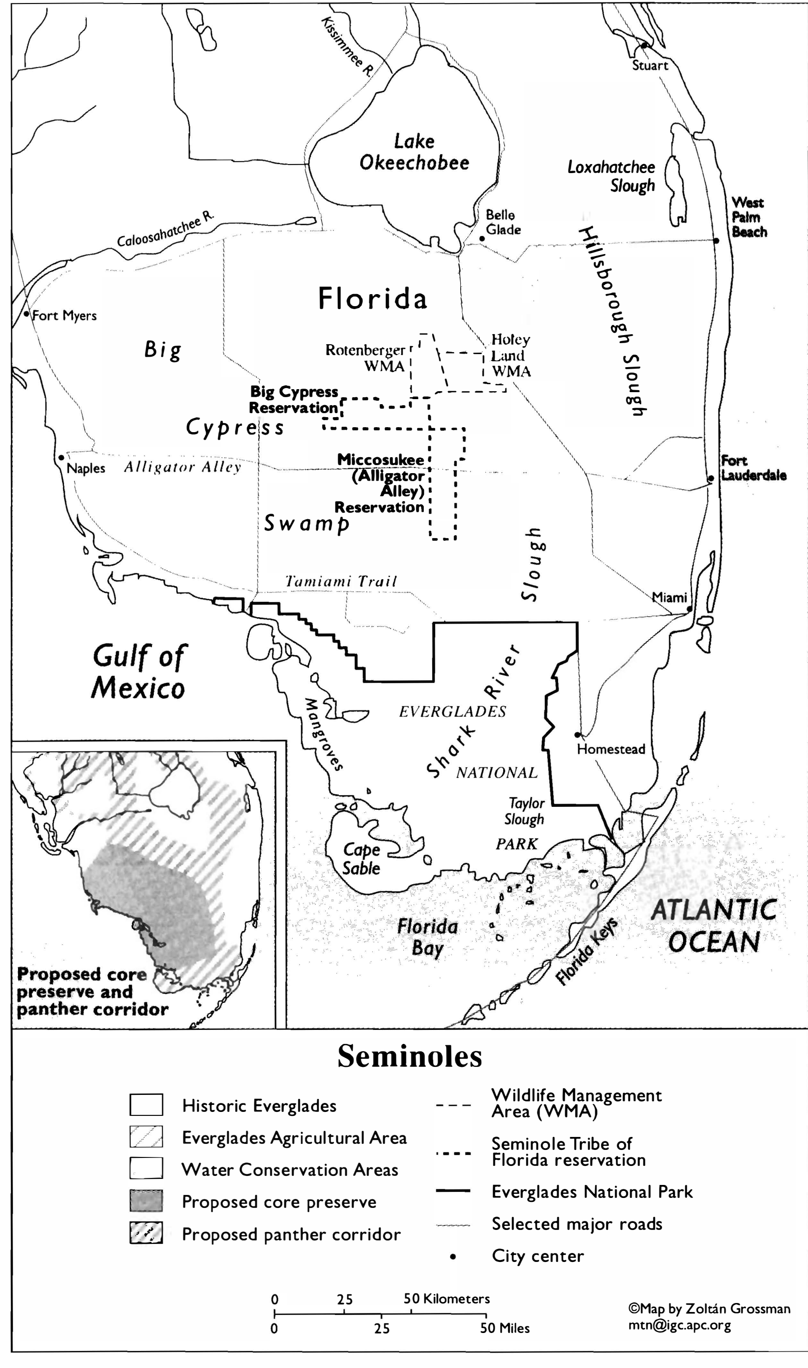
Seminoles

At the Heart of the Everglades



Kissimmee R.
Stuart
Lake Okeechobee
Loxahatchee Slough
West Palm Beach
Caloosahatchee R.
Belle Glade
Hillsborough Slough
Florida
Fort Myers
Big
Rotenberger WMA
Holey Land WMA
Big Cypress Reservation
Cypress
Naples
Alligator Alley
Miccosukee (Alligator Alley) Reservation
Fort Lauderdale
Swamp
Slough
Tamiami Trail
Miami
Gulf of Mexico
Shark River
EVERGLADES
NATIONAL
PARK
Mangroves
Homestead
Taylor Slough
Cape Sable
Florida Bay
Florida Keys
ATLANTIC OCEAN
Proposed core preserve and panther corridor
Seminoles
Historic Everglades
Everglades Agricultural Area
Water Conservation Areas
Proposed core preserve
Proposed panther corridor
Wildlife Management Area (WMA)
Seminole Tribe of Florida reservation
Everglades National Park
Selected major roads
City center
0 25 50 Kilometers
0 25 50 Miles
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Where the natural world ends and the human world begins, there you will find the Seminoles. There is no distinction between the two worlds—the Creator's Law governs all. It has always been like that, since the beginning.

"The Creator made our people and gave us the laws on how we're supposed to conduct ourselves," explains Danny Billie, spokesperson for the Independent Traditional Seminole nation, which consists of about 300 people in the midst of the Florida Everglades. He is trying to keep that law: the Creator's Law, the Breathmaker's Law.[1]

The Independent Traditional Seminole nation of Florida steadfastly keeps its traditions—language, culture, housing, ceremony, and way of life—against the forces of colonialism, assimilation, globalization, and all that eats cultures. The presence of these traditions in the Native community provides a yardstick against which to measure your own values, your own way of life, and your choices. That is the lesson these traditions will teach without speaking. And that is a great gift.

In the center of their chickee (traditional house) Seminoles keep a fire—always, it seems. It is the fire of culture, the fire of life. I am not so different. I tend my fire, that one in the woodstove, which keeps my northern house warm. Watch the fire, nurture it, and it will feed your soul and warm your body. Leave the fire, and it may get away from you. That lesson is worth remembering.

The Panther Clan of the Seminole nation consider the Florida panther their closest animal relative. There are only about 50 of these panthers left.[2] Both the panther and the Seminole have fought for their land, and they intend to remain there. But industrialization and the drive for profit are squeezing the lifeblood out of the Everglades, and it's not possible for the Seminole and panther alone to change that.

Two hundred years ago, the Seminoles and the animals had most of the Everglades to themselves. Blooming flowers of every shape and color were intertwined with the textured green of shrubs, grasses, and trees. Small hills rose among the great waterways, in whose fertile soils the Seminoles planted small gardens. In their massive dugout canoes, they traveled as far as Cuba and the Bahamas.[3] At home, they prayed for and feasted on fish and animals, and made their shelter from the great cypress swamps and palm trees. From other plants they made their medicines, and each day they gave thanks to the Creator for their way of life. To the Seminole, like other Indigenous people, the way of life

is a ceremony in itself, and they acknowledge it historically and today through a language called *Hitchiti.*

The Seminoles, it is said, had once been closely affiliated with the Creeks. Their name, *Seminoles,* came from a Creek word meaning "runaway," or "wild," or alternatively, "people of the distant fire." When they decided to keep to themselves, they started an independent, village-based system of governance. But their land was coveted. First by the Spaniards, who imagined a Fountain of Youth amidst the sea of grass, pink flamingos, blue herons, and brilliantly colored birds, and then by the Americans, who, as time would tell, coveted all.[4]

The Seminole Wars

> You have guns, and so have we. You have powder and lead, and so have we. Your men will fight, and so will ours—until the last drop of Seminole blood has moistened the dust of his last hunting ground.
>
> —Osceola, Seminole leader

In 1817 (according to the laws of colonialism), Florida became a Spanish possession. And the United States was in an expansionist mood. (Each subsequent colonizer has sought to attain that which they could not—the heart of the Everglades and the souls of the Seminoles.) What was worse to Eurocentric eyes was that the Seminoles had taken in runaway Black slaves. That was a sore point with southern slaveholders. Most of those escaped slaves became members of the community. Even those who lived separately had their own villages, ran their own affairs, and grew their own crops. The Africans were sometimes adopted as members of a Seminole family, and the freeing of Blacks was common practice. Mixed-bloods and Blacks became chiefs and sub-chiefs in the regular Seminole settlements.[5] In fact, to this day, there are still, primarily in Oklahoma, Black Seminole families, or Seminole Freedmen, who remain as a bridge between two cultures and histories.

All of this was infuriating to the southern slaveowners and provided a large part of the impetus for the First Seminole War, fought under the command of one General Andrew Jackson, who was later made military governor of the new territory. Thus provoked, in 1816, the military sent a detachment into Florida to pursue runaway slaves. Under the command of General Andrew Jackson, a year later they attacked a Seminole village in northwest Florida. So began the Seminole Wars, which lasted from 1817 to 1855. The First Seminole War technically began in 1817 and came to a close two years later when the Spanish ceded Florida to the United States. The Second Seminole War was a military di-

saster. It required 50,000 soldiers and, between the daunting natural tangle that is the Everglades and the fierce resistance of the Seminoles, the United States suffered an expensive and humiliating defeat. The Second Seminole War, which was waged between 1835 and 1842, took the lives of almost 1,500 American soldiers with a federal government price tag of at least $40 million.

In 1830, Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, giving him the power to remove all eastern Indians from their land to "Indian territory"—government-established areas west of the Mississippi. The Florida Seminoles were to be relocated to Oklahoma, for, among other things, their villages had impeded white settlement of what the local Florida Legislative Council deemed the "fairest part of Florida." In the various dubious treaties and agreements signed over the next years, Jackson tried to force the Seminoles to leave Florida, but, as reporter Catherine Caufield notes,

> One young warrior, Osceola, resisted and inspired others to follow him.... As the deadline for the move to Oklahoma approached they went on the offensive against the troops who had been sent to organize the exodus. A series of surprise attacks in the last days of 1835, in which a handful of Indians killed more than a hundred soldiers, launched the Second Seminole war, which continued for nearly eight years and was one of the bloodiest, costliest and least successful wars in American history.[6]

In 1837, 33 Seminole leaders, including Osceola, were captured while negotiating under a flag of truce. Osceola later died in captivity, succumbing to complications from malaria. The U.S. Army imported bloodhounds from Cuba in an unsuccessful attempt to track the remaining Seminoles. Even without the dogs, the odds were heavily against the Seminoles. Fifty thousand federal soldiers served in the Second Seminole War, and there were never fewer than 3,800 soldiers in the field at any one time. The Seminoles, by contrast, had no more than 1,500 warriors total.

By 1842, almost 4,000 Seminoles had been shipped west to Oklahoma Indian Territory, and at the close of the war in 1855, fewer than 500 Seminoles remained in the Everglades and Big Cypress Swamp, north of the Everglades.

In the ten years following the end of the Second Seminole War, Florida's non-Indian population almost doubled, and the newcomers wanted the Indians out of the way. With bribes, bounty hunters, and armed troops, the United States managed by 1861 to move 200 more Seminoles to Oklahoma. Finally, the looming Civil War and the western Indian wars forced the U.S. government to

end its war against the Seminoles. Three hundred Seminoles remained in the Florida swamps.[7]

The Land

The Everglades begin at Lake Okeechobee, one of the largest freshwater lakes in the continental United States. The Everglades originally sloped 200 miles south in a natural drain system of rivers, lakes, and wetlands. This rich ecosystem of water, grasses, cypress, meadows, marshes, and waterways provides a haven for a wealth of life. Rare birds such as wood storks, whooping cranes, and American peregrine falcons, along with crocodiles and Florida panthers, all find a refuge there.

Wetlands are often called the kidneys of the earth, recharging or cleansing water that enters the system through flooding or rainfall. The wetlands remove sediment, pollutants, minerals, and other materials from waters washed in from upland areas. The water is then either stored in the vast root and vegetation systems or released through evaporation. Although the Everglades and other wetlands are an important source of many medicines and biological diversity and are crucial in the ecosystem, for the past hundred years, the U.S. government, Anita Bryant, and all those citrus and sugar growers, along with some big-time development money, have been messing with them.

As a result, America has lost half of its wetlands.[8] It is estimated that 458,000 acres of U.S. wetlands were lost annually between 1954 and 1974—87 percent due to agricultural conversion. The state of Florida contains 20 percent of the nation's wetlands and lost over eight million acres between 1850 and 1984. From 1960 to 1984 alone, south Florida permanently lost one-fourth of its wetlands.[9]

The Seminoles, like many other Native people, will tell the great engineers who move the rivers and drain the wetlands that man should not do the Creator's work. Or, perhaps, as the Cree said, in reference to the mega-dams of northern Quebec: "Beavers are the only ones allowed to make dams in our areas."

Over the past 50 years, half of the Everglades—1.5 million acres—has been drained by 1,400 miles of canals, cutting a five-mile straight channel and roads through the heart of the ecosystem. Pollution has vanquished wading bird populations, which have plummeted to less than a fifth of their 1930s levels. The ivory-billed woodpecker, once common in Big Cypress Swamp, is now extinct. About one-third of the plants and animals on the federal endangered species list

can be found in the Florida wetlands.[11] Adding insult to injury, a nuclear power plant was built on the freshwater diversion created by the St. Lucie canal.

Through the years, the canals have been enlarged and interconnected into a vast network, and even the once-meandering beauty of the Kissimmee and Caloosahatchee Rivers has been lost to dredges and straight-line engineering. Today, the movement of water through the Everglades is entirely unnatural, and the Everglades are considered one of the most endangered ecosystems on the planet.[12]

As 106-year-old Marjorie Stoneman Douglas, longtime Everglades advocate explains,

> The lake's entire southern rim was diked by a high levee, so that the only outlets were the canals, all fitted with gates to control the waters in an effort to put man, not nature, in charge of the Everglades. All this provided an enormous area upon which agriculture, mostly sugarcane, developed to the south and southeast of the lake.[13]

Since the mid-1970s, Florida wetlands have been converted less for agriculture and more for development. According to the *National Real Estate Investor,* two of the top-ten growth cities in the United States are in Florida.[14] All of which means that the wetlands are getting more and more squeezed.

The Animals

The steep decline of the Florida panther population was initially brought on by widespread hunting. Next it was the cars driving down the highways cut through the swampland that killed the big cats. Today, pollution in the ecosystem has moved up the food chain to endanger big cats and humans.

Because the Everglades function like kidneys, most of the toxins that are in the larger ecosystem end up in the Everglades eventually. More pollution and less Everglades means less filtering, and the system becomes a toxic sink. In 1989, federal and state scientists discovered that freshwater fish in the Everglades had high levels of mercury, largely, they surmised, from the post-harvest burning of the cane fields. Raccoons, alligators, and panthers in the area are also contaminated with large amounts of mercury.[15]

High up on the food chain, the big cats and the big crocodiles are the first to go from pollution. In mid-1989, a Florida panther was found dead in the Everglades. Liver samples from the cat found 110 ppm of mercury, indicating that mercury poisoning may have been the cause of death. This particular panther frequented the Shark River Slough, where deer were scarce, but likely was

living on raccoons and alligators, which are even higher up on the food chain. In 1991, the last two female panthers living in the Everglades National Park died. Their mercury levels were lower than that of the dead panther found in 1989, but heavy metal poisoning was considered a contributing factor in their deaths.[16] The mercury, along with the other pollutants found in the Everglades, also makes the animals sick. One of the most frightening and foreboding problems faced by the panthers today is their declining ability to reproduce: scientists estimate that 90 percent of today's male panthers have testicles that have not descended from their scrotums. Two females are known to have benign vaginal tumors and haven't bred in nearly seven years, despite being around the males.[17]

Danny Billie and Bobby Billie, the spiritual leader of the Traditional Seminole, took a walk with reporter Catherine Caufield and remembered the Fakahatchee Strand, a small remnant of cypress forest that is now a state park.

> [Bobby] remembered that thirty years ago, "We used to go to Marco Island to hunt gophers and pick mangos," he said. "Now it's full of big old hotels and condominiums." We walked a bit farther, and then Danny said, "Only about twenty years ago, you could go [down the Everglades] and see all kinds of birds. The water would stand all year round, but now you'll be lucky if there's a swamp pond that stands year round."

Another day, Caufield reports, she was taken to see a place at Collier-Seminole State Park that locals use as a garbage dump.

> As we stared in silence at piles of construction rubble and household rubbish, Bobby whispered, "Let me lie down and cry."[18]

The Reservation and the Village

At each intersection on the path of life, there is a choice to be made, and it is weighed against the values, the history, the present circumstances, and the futures of generations of people. These decisions are not taken lightly in most Indigenous societies, but are carefully deliberated, in the best of circumstances.

In the worst of circumstances, these decisions are made behind closed doors by a select few—all too often, those few selected in some fashion by the federal government or some other vested interest. These decisions, however, in the case of most peoples, will affect the entire social and political fabric as well as the next set of decisions, the next forks in the road, whether on an individual level, a family level, or a community level.

The choices made over the past decades by the various Seminole leaders and their people on the reservation and in the Independent Traditional Seminole nation have led to distinctly different ways of living today. While they are all the same people, they are living in almost different worlds.

In this century, two major events pushed the Seminoles apart: the creation of the Everglades National Park in 1947 and further subsequent development, and a 1976 Indian Claims Commission (ICC) settlement offer. The former left hundreds of families homeless and pushed some onto the federally created reservations. Some traditional Seminoles feared this move would further change Seminole culture.

The ICC settlement, like others across the country, also increased divisions. In 1976, the claims commission recognized Seminole title to 30 million acres of Florida and offered to buy it for $16 million (or a little more than 50 cents an acre). The pressure to accept meager settlements was and is immense in Native communities. But others feel, as traditional Seminoles' Buffalo Tiger says, "It's like accepting a couple of dollars for selling a piece of your mother."[19] For similar reasons, the Lakota nation and Shoshone nation have thus far resisted their ICC settlements. For the Seminoles, the internal debate over whether to accept the offer delayed the final judgement for 14 years.

By 1990, the settlement, including interest, amounted to $47 million, and some Seminoles accepted the money. Those Seminoles came to be known as the Seminole Tribe of Florida.

The Seminole Tribe of Florida, Inc.

On August 21, 1997, the Seminole Tribe of Florida celebrated the 40th anniversary of the creation of its single governmental unit, the Seminole Tribal Council, and their business managers, the Board of Directors of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. Under the leadership of a series of charismatic leaders, the Seminole Tribe of Florida has since the 1950s survived and flourished, using the economics of the white man, matched with the unique location and savvy of the Seminoles.[20] In 1957, the Seminole Tribe of Florida received its charter from the secretary of the interior. Each person who signed up received 25 bucks and became eligible for various federal benefits. Today, there are about 2,000 members and five reservations totaling 78,000 acres.[21]

Patricia Wickman, director of anthropology for the Seminole Tribe of Florida, describes the predicament that faces many Native nations—the struggle of dealing with immense poverty and its related social implications:

> The economic battle for survival was so fierce that the late 20th century might be termed the Fourth Seminole War.... Throughout the 1970s, federal dollars from the Great Society programs and the War on Poverty...supported the rapid expansion of Seminole social service programs...clinics, Head Start, education, and housing programs were established.... Cattle, land leases, citrus, and federal loans provided an economic base for the Seminoles through the 1970s. The smokeshop business was a shot in the arm also, but bingo had the greatest potential.[22]

The Seminole Tribe found its cash cow in the late 1970s, when it opened up the country's first high-stakes bingo hall in Hollywood in 1979. Subsequent court decisions (such as *Butterworth v. Seminole Tribe of Florida)* determined that Indian tribes could conduct bingo enterprises without state regulation, and their operation quickly became one of the most successful gaming ventures in Indian country.[23] That gaming enterprise has been the foundation of new tribal development and a great source of pride for each subsequent administration. In their public relations literature, the Seminole Tribe notes,

> The economic impact of Seminole gaming reaches far beyond the reservations and contributes significantly to the economy of the State of Florida. Seminole gaming establishments employ 2,200 Floridians, 95% of whom are non-Indian. With a payroll of almost $25 million, Seminole gaming activities generate more than $3.5 million a year in payroll taxes and unemployment insurance payments. Seminole gaming establishments purchase more than $24 million in goods and services from more than 850 Florida vendors each year, as well. These dollars go to education, health care, infrastructure development, fire and emergency management services, economic development activities, and delivery of other basic government services to tribal members.[24]

The Florida Seminoles have also dealt with the desire of many Americans to see "real Indians." Hoping to divert traffic through their own communities, they created the Billie Swamp Safari, which opens 2,000 acres of the Big Cypress Reservation to the tourist market. How all this came to be was explained by Chief James Billie, chairman of the Seminole Tribe of Florida. "The idea of presenting a safari experience here on the reservation was developed as many people traveled through our reservation looking for native village chickees and Indian culture.... However, they couldn't find it. So we planned Billie Swamp Safari and opened it up to visitors from around the world."[25]

The federal government and the state of Florida are likely somewhat pleased with all the economic contributions made by this branch of the Seminole people and their leadership. (The state, however, in typical style of states with any Native population, did challenge in court the Seminole Tribe's rights to have virtually any enterprises.) To others, the spreading enterprises of the *Bingo Seminoles* may rankle their sensibilities. There is an internal discussion on cultural transformation within the Seminoles.

"They broke away from us," Danny Billie explains about the decision of some Seminoles to change their path. James Billie, the tribal chairman, offers a similar explanation when asked about the differences between the traditional Seminoles and the Seminole Tribe. "We are the same people. They have their way of doing things, and we have ours.... Those different ways are pretty distinct."

But the Seminole Tribe makes no apologies. Tribal attorney Jim Shore explains that "the fact that Indians are not sitting around by the railroad station selling their moccasins and beads, and are instead traveling in three-piece suits in Lear jets to New York doesn't mean the culture is dead."[26] The Florida tribe also takes a different eye to the environment and what can be done to preserve the remaining ecosystem. When asked by reporter Jordan Levin about the tribe's concern for the ecosystem of the Everglades, Shore continues, with somewhat defeatist nonchalance, "I'm not sure the Everglades can be saved.... If there's any plan out there we can all agree with that can save the Everglades, we're in favor of it. But we're not taking any lead to save the whole of South Florida. After all...no one ever listened to us before, so why get into it now?"[27]

Shore's beleaguered defeatism is echoed by tribal chairman James Billie. (Note there are lots of Billies, Tigers, and Osceolas down there in the Seminoles. In some deep sense they are all related, but don't make the mistake of generalizing them in any other sense.) James Billie's comments to Levin resonate with phrases and terms used at times by other Indian Reorganization Act Native leaders nationally when trying to come to terms with a bad deal and, quite often, their own eventual or coerced complicity in it.

> How can we be worried? We're already sitting in the cesspool. The Seminole Indian didn't exactly create this problem. See, we were confined to the reservation. We were animals in cages, being looked at, ridiculed, laughed at. Stab at 'em a little bit, throw a peanut at 'em. Let's experiment on him to see if he acts like a white man. Then one day, when they need to use us as a stepping stone, they say the Indians are supposed to be the earth keepers. What a bunch of jack-asses. The thing I like about

> this race that condemns the others is that they never accept their own failures. They just want to throw it on somebody else.[28]

The Independent Traditional Seminole Nation

> The Creator didn't mention reservations. Where does it say we have to live on a reservation to live the way we want?
>
> —Bobby Billie[29]

Danny and Bobby Billie's people, the Independent Traditional Seminoles, made sure they stayed out of the mud-wrestling over federal money from the ICC and for tribal programs. They have pretty much stayed out of everything. Their villages could be 300 years old, except for the pickup trucks and the big van. A group of thatched-roof houses, a central cooking tent with their fire, gardens, and a few scraggly chickens. Near the fire is what I called the Sewing Machine Shrine, the head of an old Singer sewing machine planted in a mound and surrounded by flowers. That machine had undoubtedly seen a lot of fabric, an immense amount of that stunning Seminole patchwork, before they retired it. Bands of young children and toddlers play in the middle, scooped up by hovering mothers and aunties in long, willowy Seminole skirts. There is a different feel here. Like a different world, not America. It is a world these Seminoles made and kept. This is their path. They speak their own language, live in their own traditional chickees, conduct their own form of governance and ceremonies, and teach their children their own way. They are strict.

The traditional Seminoles and their attorneys at the Indian Law Resource Center, went to Congress to get an amendment added to the distribution bill to insure that the settlement money would not be forced on them. It began, however, almost 30 years earlier when, on March 1, 1954, George Osceola, Jimmie Billie, and Buffalo Tiger, representing the Seminole General Council, climbed the steps of the Capitol, carrying a large buckskin scroll. The Buckskin Declaration was a formal petition to the president of the United States from the General Council of the traditional Seminoles. It said, in part:

> We have, and have had for centuries, our own culture, our own customs, our own government, our own language, and our own way of life, which is different from the government, the culture, the customs, the language, and the way of life of the White Man.... We are not White Men, but Indians who do not wish to become White Men but wish to remain Indians and have an outlook on all of these things dif-

> ferent from the outlook of the White Man. We do not wish to own lands because our land is for all of us. We have failed to have your Indian Agent or your Secretary of Interior or your other government officials understand our outlook.[30]

According to Tim Coulter of the Indian Law Resource Center,

> Even among Indians, these people were known to be particularly adamant about their refusal to become involved in the outside world.... And the cost of keeping to their principles was high—they had no land of their own, no reservation, they were ignored when the government made decisions that affected them, and there they were fighting like hell against having this compensation money forced on them. I was impressed, I think anyone would be impressed, with their determination and their success at actually maintaining their way of life in the face of an overwhelming culture, a culture that has practically dominated the entire world.[31]

"I have a lot of respect and admiration for the Billie family," says Lori Pourier of the Indigenous Women's Network, who among others has visited the traditional Seminoles and worked with them on projects ranging from grassroots gatherings to United Nations meetings in Geneva, Switzerland. "They stand strong, true to their traditional way of life, despite the dominant world that surrounds their community. They never did lose sight of their original instructions from the Creator. That is something we can all learn from as we strengthen and restore our nations," Pourier says.[32]

Even today, when the traditional Seminoles arrive at a meeting, it is an event. The Billies show up in what I call the Billie-mobile, a 12-passenger van full of Seminole shirts, skirts, and Seminole babies. They all pack into that van and drive from Florida to Haida Gwaii (northern British Columbia) if they think it's important, then they talk and converse among themselves in a group. Amidst giggles and teasing, their *Hitchiti* transcends the din and is both urgently whispered and a source of laughs. Those of us meeting with them always smile knowingly: that's the best strategy, we figure. They are not people to decide quickly. Each decision is made by the collective, their different representatives, and is then communicated to us, those who are meeting with them, through their spokesperson, usually Danny Billie.

The traditional Seminoles are clear that they do not want to go to the reservation. They have never wanted to. "What's wrong with a reservation," Bobby Billie explains to me,

> I can tell you from what my elders told me, when I was growing up. A reservation is called a dead land. A place of death. They put you in a cage and put a number on you and keep an eye on you all the time. They kind of like put a string on you and they tell you what to do and who to do it.
>
> The elders said, When you go onto the reservation, it's like you're giving your life away to someone else to control it. You don't have to be recognized by another entity. Our people say that you are who you are, because you already know and the Creator knows. And that's all you need.
>
> It's like a cattle pen...the farmer comes to the pen, and the farmer throws a bale of hay in there, and then they all come running to it. Then after he feeds them, he does what he needs to do to them—milk, or meat. That bale of hay is the money, that housing, health service. I give you so much of this, if you do something for me.

Not only do they refuse to go to the reservation, they refuse federal recognition. "We know who we are, and the Creator knows who we are," Danny Billie explains. "We do not need the government to tell us that." Ironically, theirs is an immense struggle just to be left alone. To keep the federal and state government out of their lives. And to keep on answering the question of why they don't want to be like other Indians and go to the reservation, the place where Indians are supposed to go and be Indians.

The traditional Seminoles have lived for the past four generations on some land near Immokalee, land which, according to the white man's law, belongs to a family named English. In the 1880s, the first Englishes moved south from Georgia to grow winter vegetables and citrus crops. It was then, as the story is told, that some otherwise reclusive Seminoles, who used the name Billie in their interactions with non-Indians, were willing to help the English clan out, with some tips on how to make it in the subtropical jungle. That began a friendship and, a generation later, a deathbed wish that the Billies would always have a place for their chickees on the Englishes' property. Today, the traditional Seminole community is nestled in the middle of this citrus farm. The story is that the handshake has been replaced with a lease for a dollar a year. The English family is a friend of the Billies and, when the state of Florida and Collier County have shown up with complaints in the past, the family has stood by its friends. Ironic as it may be, the state of Florida is concerned about the health and environmental impact the traditional Seminoles have on the Everglades.

A few years ago, a Collier County code-enforcement housing official inspected the traditional Seminoles' village without a warrant and cited the Billies for housing code violations. The official claimed that their chickees had been constructed without proper building code permits and that the county was concerned about their way of life. The fire in the center of the cooking house, for instance, was a concern to the county—they threatened to fine the Seminoles $550 a day until the cooking fires were removed. The fire, in the Billies' eyes, is about who they are. Fire was a person once, an ancestor from long ago, Martha Billie Davis recounts. "My grandfather taught me that long ago. The fire is really important to me. All my kids are grown up. Sometimes I start missing my mother. I come at night and talk to her in the fire. It makes me closer to her. If you take my fire away, it's like taking my mother away from me. I don't think I could take that."[33]

The Seminoles fought the county's fine and found they had a lot of supporters, at least for this. In 1996, they mustered up a march to support their people: three days and 39 miles, from the village to the Collier County government building. Their legal help grew, and even local editorials in the *Naples Daily News* pointed out the county's discrimination. One editorial noted that "the embarrassment for all county citizens will end only when the government musters the skill to mind its own store and the grace to leave the Indians alone." After marches, press conferences, major articles, TV coverage, thousands of postcards, and legal gymnastics, the Billies fended off the county and eventually won a victory to preserve their way of life.

It is ironic that in the face of all the white man's laws and their alleged violation by Indians, it is the Billies who actually preserve the ecosystem. Their reverence for life is in stark contrast to the agribusinesses that encroach on their land. As Bobby Billie looked across the moat-like channel that separates one of their traditional villages of chickees from a freeze-burned field of a big farmer, he sighed: "You look out there, and everything is dead. But look in here, and everything is alive."

The Panther and the Seminoles

> When we talk about the environment and our way of life, it is all connected. When red people talk of our ways, land claims, and rights to self-determination, some white people look at us as greedy, wanting everything. They don't realize where we are coming from. They don't have common sense. When we talk about saving our rights, we are protecting them, too. We are the caretakers of the Creator's creation. It is our job to follow the instructions that he has given us. If we don't do

> our job, then we are going to get fired. If we don't follow our own ways, our laws and ceremonies, the Creator is going to say that we are not doing our job and will clear everything and start all over again.
>
> —Danny Billie[34]

Most of the traditional Seminoles are Panther Clan. In their way, the panthers are saying the same thing as the traditional Seminoles. Let us be. Leave us alone.

"There are 30 of them panthers left. And they're killing them. If they would quit tinkering with them day by day, if they would just leave them alone, and their environment and their habitat, they would regenerate this population," Bobby Billie explains.

> They're out there saying they want to help the panther population, but the way they're going about it is endangering and killing them. They're tranquilizing them, and capturing them, and putting collars on them, and doing whatever they do and that's what's killing them. Even when they're not doing that, they're killing the environment. And when they have those hunting seasons, they kill all the deer and the hawks. And when that happens, the panthers have nothing to eat. They starve and die. A lot of them they capture to look at, they're starving when they get them.

The analogy is quite apparent to Bobby. Bobby, Danny, and I were sitting in a small backstage area at an Honor the Earth show, where the performers (the Indigo Girls) and the Billies were working together to secure a state exemption for their zoning. We talked, and two or three young Seminole women looked over my shoulder as I furiously typed on my portable computer. Keeping up with the Billies. That is a task. They all seemed to nod approvingly at my white man's technology put to use. It may not be their path, but they can work with it.

"It's like our own people. There are certain things that they need in their diet that keeps them in good health," says Bobby. "And their body functions in the right balance. But once that food or whatever is in their own diet is taken away, they start deteriorating inside. They say that the male panther can't reproduce with the females because they are not eating the things that they need. It's no different with our people. Our natural world is disappearing. Our habitat, our foods." Danny interjects: "Our elders talk about wanting to eat turtle soup or garfish. They haven't tasted those kinds of things in years. But nowadays, you know, everything is contaminated and polluted."

Bobby comes back again: "Now we have to eat these chemical-infested foods. Who knows what's in these foods? Even our people, some of them are getting sick. Their body organs are giving up, and it's the same with the panther."

> Once they keep those collars on, they follow them around and chase them every day. Checking on them, and where they're at. That's another factor in their daily survival, stress. And just look at it. If someone put a big old collar on you, you aren't able to look down or twist your head the way you want to. The panthers go through thick woods and stuff, what happens if a big old branch gets caught and they'll get caught and struggle and get exhausted. And then they're going to die. They've been finding panthers dead with collars on.

The Panther Reservations

As it turns out, all this ecological maneuvering, all this playing god (in the "development" of the Everglades and all the subsequent managing that is then undertaken) has been a huge ecological mistake that, today, Congress, President Clinton, and a host of others are trying to unravel, in a twisted and complicated fashion. There are a range of ideas on how to preserve the ecosystem of the panther. Conservation biologists such as Larry Harris and Reed Noss at the University of Florida and Oregon State University are studying the state's endangered panther and its threatened black bear and hope to design nature reserves for the species that are more than outdoor museums or zoos. The plan requires the utmost care, since isolating small pockets of animals exposes them to additional threats: inbreeding can lead to genetic defects, and they are more vulnerable to extinction. A zoo is like a reservation to the traditional Seminole, a place of death. The panthers, like the Seminoles, need room to live.

The bravest proposals from Noss and others include a bio-reserve system with large wilderness cores, buffer zones, and biological corridors, which could be carefully managed to preserve habitat and species.

The politicized practice of panther-restoration work includes the sales of specialized license plates that go toward helping the panther and the endangered manatee. Funds from those sales go into special government bank accounts, which are supposed to be used to buy rights to the animals' natural habitats and support preservation of the species. However, according to reporters, the panthers aren't doing much better than Indians did in national Indian appropriations by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Enviroworld, an environmental reporting service, noted in 1996 that less than 20 cents of every dollar raised for the animals

had gone toward panther-recovery programs so far. The Florida Panther Research and Management Trust Fund (one of the state agencies charged with managing the money), according to newspaper reports, receives 45 percent of panther-tag revenues, or about $1.7 million a year. Nearly $1 million was stripped from the fund in 1997 to make up for a cut in the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission's general operating budget. Another $675,000 went to pay for the tagging and monitoring of the panther, although money seemed to end up in multilingual environmental classes and courses in green construction for building contractors at the University of Florida.[35]

Here, in the so-called twilight of the panthers, there are a lot of interested players. Everyone comes in from a different angle. There are a host of proposals to save the Florida panther and to restore the Florida Everglades. The Army Corps of Engineers itself submitted ten different proposals to Congress, which ranged from a plan calling for only operational changes, which even the Corps admitted was inadequate, to full restoration alternatives. The most significant and comprehensive effort would reconnect Lake Okeechobee, Florida's great south central lake, to the Everglades; restore natural, seasonal waterflow from the lake; store water now dumped from the lake and from urban areas; restore sheetflow (waterflows that make a distinct channel) throughout the Everglades ecosystem; and improve water quality standards. Many environmentalists fear that the boldest proposals will end up being compromised, which, when there are only 30 big cats left, is a dangerous gamble.

As one reporter notes,

> In the end, the endangered cat's fate will likely depend on the goodwill of the orange growers and ranchers in southwestern Florida. They are receiving government overtures of possible tax incentives or cash payments to continue using their lands in ways that allow the panther to exist on their property. The trouble is, of 756 square miles considered prime panther land in Florida, one quarter has been permitted to grow oranges. And the panthers steer clear of orange groves due to the dearth of cover and food—such as hogs and deers—found there.[36]

On January 8, 1999, the South Florida Water Management District, the Nature Conservancy, and the St. Joe Company agreed to what some note as the largest single conversion of developed land back to its natural state. Over 60,000 acres were acquired by the federal and state governments in what was referred to as the Talesman Trade Agreement.

Additional proposals call for 251,000 acres ofland to be acquired and for restoration of the Everglades back to pre-1950s channelization. These combined efforts would restore hundreds of billions of gallons of freshwater, which presently flows into the sea as a result of Army Corps of Engineers' projects of the past.

Buttressed additionally by the Clinton lands legacy initiative, the federal government plans to use hundreds of millions of dollars collected from oil and gas leases to help pay for the Everglades Restoration Project.

Joining these initiatives is the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida (another Seminole entity), which had Clinton extend its 50-year lease on ancestral lands within the Everglades to "forever."

The People and the Ceremony

> You cannot live in the modern way and think in the traditional way. The way you live affects the way you think.
>
> —Danny Billie

Where the people and the land are the same is in ceremony, Danny Billie explains. The Green Corn Dance is an annual cultural and religious ceremony of the Seminoles. Says Danny Billie, "It defines who we are and what we are as traditional Indian people. It is the heart and soul of the traditional Seminole way of life." That dance has taken place forever, and for around the past 250 years in the same area of cypress wetlands and pine forest north of Lake Okeechobee. In 1993, Seminoles were forced off the site, victims of progress, once again.

The Independent Traditional Seminoles in the 1990s have found that they have a group of allies. The Montana-based Indian Law Resource Center expanded their historically legal base into the policy and conservation arena and, with the guidance of the Seminoles and an amazing gift from a private Santa Fe–based philanthropic institution called the Lannan Foundation, orchestrated a solution. In late 1997, the Lannan Foundation purchased 1,750 acres of pristine Florida for a trust set up by the Indian Law Resource Center for the Seminoles, adding another 650 acres in February 1998.[37]

J. Patrick Lannan, the board chair of the Lannan Foundation, says the foundation's relationship with the Independent Traditional Seminoles

> inspire[s] us deeply in many ways.... In South Florida—the epitome of overdevelopment, mindlessness, and fast decisionmaking—the Independent Traditional Seminoles live their lives based on values and actions that are in direct contrast to everything else around them. Their struggle to survive has been surrounded by a world bent on destruction.

> In spite of everything, they have continued their sacred ceremonies of renewal and their caring relationships to land, water, animals, plants, and other human beings.[38]

The new homecoming of the Green Corn Dance in 1998 lifted the spirits of many Seminoles and the Indigenous community everywhere. It is said by many Indian people that preserving the sanctity of the ceremony is the central responsibility for each subsequent generation and sustains all life.

"My oldest brother has this saying that explains it really clearly," Danny Billie explained to writer Dagmare Thorpe.

> He says, "The way of life of the red people is like a clay cup, and the way of life of the white man is like a Styrofoam cup. The clay cup takes a lot of care because if you drop it, it is going to break. The Styrofoam cup does not take much caring; if you drop it it doesn't break. You have to be real careful with the clay cup because if you put something hot in it, it will burn you, compared to the Styrofoam cup, which you use once and throw away; it takes a lot of work to keep that clay cup intact. The Styrofoam cup is the white man's way. They have no rules or regulations in their way of life. They say they do but in reality, they do not."[39]

The big questions posed by the dilemmas of both the Independent Traditional Seminole nation of Florida and the Florida panthers are about exactly how much Florida, the developers, the citrus and sugar cane growers, the hunters, and the environmentalists are willing to back off. If Florida is willing to give up a culture of strip malls, then the panthers and the Seminoles might have a chance.

Danny Billie, talking with reporter Jordan Levin, did what the Seminoles do best. He pointed out, once again, that this whole discussion is really not about the Seminoles and the panther. It is really about America.

> You know for a fact and I know for a fact that in reality we can't have what we want. You may sit there and ask what we want, but what we want is what you need, too. It's what this society needs, if they want to continue to stay alive on this earth. What we do is for all things, for all people. Because if you don't stop now with the destruction, with the development and the poisoning of the environment, we're all gonna go. So when you ask the question of what we want, you might as well go ahead and include yourself. Because not only do we want to survive as who we are, I'm pretty sure that you want to survive as who you are, too.[40]

As J. Patrick Lannan reflects, the Independent Traditional Seminoles "continue to teach us about how to be better citizens."[41] Perhaps, in the end, to be better humans.

K. Naeme Tuglavina from Nain, at the Innu and Inuit camp set up to protest the Voisey's Bay Nickel Company.
CP Picture Archive (Jonathan Hayward)