



IN REPLY REFER TO:
L30 (BICY-S)

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Big Cypress National Preserve
33100 Tamiami Trail East
Ochopee, Florida 34141-1000




Date: January 7, 2015

Memorandum

To: Director

Through: Southeast Regional Director

From: Superintendent, Big Cypress National Preserve 

Re: BICY Wilderness Eligibility Assessment

Per Public Law 100-301, the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577), and NPS *Management Policies 2006* (6.2.1), Big Cypress National Preserve has completed a wilderness eligibility assessment for the 557,065 acres of the original Preserve.

This wilderness eligibility assessment has also been prepared in support of the *Big Cypress National Preserve Backcountry Access Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*. More detailed analysis and intensive review of lands found eligible for wilderness designation will be carried out through a formal wilderness study. Per NPS Director's Order 41, the completed wilderness study may result in revised eligibility determinations for lands within the original Preserve as well as the identification of a need to re-assess adjacent areas in the Addition. The completed wilderness study will result in a formal proposal for wilderness designation to the Secretary of Interior.

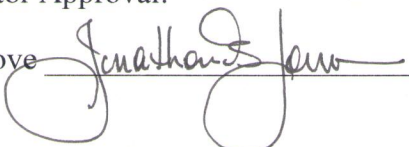
This initial assessment identifies that of the 557,065 acres assessed, 188,323 acres meet the eligibility criteria in the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) and NPS *Management Policies 2006* (6.2.1 and 6.2.1.1).

With your approval, this eligibility assessment will be used to inform the Backcountry Access Plan/Environmental Impact Statement and Wilderness Study.

Southeast Regional Director Concurrence:

Agree  Disagree _____ Date 1/29/15

Director Approval:

Approve  Disapprove _____ Date 6-18-15

Wilderness Eligibility Assessment – January 2015

Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida

INTRODUCTION

This wilderness eligibility assessment (WEA) has been prepared in accordance with legislative and policy mandates requiring an assessment of the wilderness eligibility of all lands administered by the National Park Service. This assessment does not propose wilderness, potential or otherwise, nor does it recommend wilderness boundaries. The purpose of this assessment is solely to assess the eligibility of lands pursuant to the Wilderness Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-577) and NPS *Management Policies 2006* (6.2.1). This WEA has also been prepared in support of the *Big Cypress National Preserve Backcountry Access Plan/Environmental Impact Statement*.

Per Director's Order 41 more detailed analysis and intensive review of the eligibility of these lands will be carried out through a formal wilderness study. The completed wilderness study may result in revised eligibility determinations for lands within the original Preserve as well as the identification of a need to re-assess adjacent areas in the Addition. The final outcome of the wilderness study may result in a formal proposal identifying areas that could be established as Designated Wilderness by the United States Congress.

Wilderness eligibility determinations were made by analyzing each unit of Big Cypress National Preserve, excluding non-federal lands and not including the Addition¹, relative to the wilderness criteria in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the primary eligibility criteria in NPS *Management Policies 2006* (6.2.1.1), with consideration for the criteria in *Management Policies 2006* (6.2.1.2). These are the same criteria for wilderness eligibility that were previously applied to the Addition. This analysis was completed using the best available data related to existing conditions within the various areas of the original Preserve. The team that assessed the conditions was made up of Preserve staff that has extensive knowledge of the area. Many members of the team were involved with the assessment of the Addition.

WILDERNESS CRITERIA

The following criteria were used to evaluate all federal lands within the original (1974) Big Cypress National Preserve boundary for wilderness eligibility:

- The area is at least 5,000 acres or of sufficient size to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition.
- The earth and its community of life are untrammeled by humans, where humans are visitors and do not remain.
- The area is undeveloped and retains its primeval character and influence without permanent improvements or human habitation.
- The area generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of humans' work substantially unnoticeable.
- The area is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions.
- The area offers outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation.

¹ A wilderness eligibility assessment was completed for the Addition on April 20, 2010. A Wilderness Study of the Addition lands was completed in October 2010.

ASSUMPTIONS

The following assumptions were used when applying the criteria above to evaluate all federal lands at Big Cypress National Preserve within the original boundary for wilderness eligibility. These assumptions are identical to those developed for the wilderness eligibility assessment of the Addition:

- The participants' definition of what was considered an example of a "substantial imprint of humans' work" included roads, trails, or other areas that were created by man and used significantly over time that would require substantial human intervention to restore.
- Whether the imprint of humans' work is substantially unnoticeable was reviewed from the perspective of a land manager and not a casual visitor. Man's past work is, in many cases, substantially noticeable to a land manager, but may not be to the casual visitor.
- If needed long-term restoration techniques would be inconsistent with wilderness eligibility, then the area to be restored would not be wilderness eligible.

Width of Non-wilderness Corridors along Roads, Off-road Vehicle Trails, and Canals.

The non-wilderness corridor width was established as 0.5 mile (0.25 mile from the centerline of all established roads, off-road vehicle (ORV) trails, and canals; 0.25 mile from either side of the right-of-way for roads and highways US 41, SR 29, and I-75). Established ORV trails include primary trails, recently closed secondary trails, and trails recommended by the Off-Road Vehicle Advisory Committee (ORVAC). For the purposes of this eligibility assessment, it was assumed that evidence of ORV use is substantially noticeable on recently closed secondary trails and ORVAC recommended trails. A more detailed assessment of the level of disturbance associated with these trails will be conducted within the context of a wilderness study and may result in revised eligibility determinations.

These non-wilderness areas (or corridors) were established to accommodate environmental protection and safety considerations, such as fire management; nonnative/invasive plant and animal control; traditional uses including gathering native materials; and all past disturbances from highway engineering, construction and maintenance, as well as continued motorized use and access for infrastructure maintenance. Additionally, all constructed roads, trails, and canal embankments represent a change in elevation that provides an opportunity for non-native plant invasion. The road shoulder, even if represented by only inches in elevation change from natural wetland grade, provides space above standing water for seeds to germinate if a source is nearby. Most nonnative invasive plants become established more easily in disturbed areas such as raised road shoulders and other significant constructed features. Specific management techniques, including mechanical treatment, are required in these areas to maintain the ecological integrity of the Preserve. These corridors are generally not untrammelled by humans, do not retain their primeval character, and do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation. Per Director's Order 41 a more detailed analysis and intensive review of the eligibility of these corridors will be carried out through a formal wilderness study, the outcome of which may modify areas that are deemed eligible in this initial assessment.

With non-wilderness corridors along roads, trails, and canals identified, Preserve staff proceeded to analyze all remaining areas, using the criteria described above. The results of this analysis are described below.

FINDINGS

Of the 557,065 acres assessed, 188,323 acres were determined to be eligible for wilderness designation. For a detailed presentation of the eligibility analysis and findings, please refer to the maps on pages 8 and 9.

Specific Area Analysis²

Not Eligible for Wilderness Designation

Zone B (polygons 1-8, 10, 12, 16-17, 19-23, 25-26, 29):

This area of the Preserve contains a dense network of airboat trails that are frequently used by visitors as well as by landowners to access private property and a variety of recreational opportunities. When segmented by airboat trails, the resulting polygons are not of a sufficient size to practicably manage as wilderness. Additionally, frequent use of these trails by airboats results in limited opportunities to experience natural quiet and detracts from the sense of solitude. These polygons do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Polygon 26 does contain fragmented areas where wilderness character dominates; however when areas of past disturbance are removed from eligibility, the remaining lands become fragmented and management as wilderness is not practicable. Additionally, the polygon is bounded by frequently used airboat trails, the noise of which diminishes the wilderness character of the area.

Zone C (polygon 31):

Polygon 31 does not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation, primarily due to its small size and the airboat trail around its border.

Zone D (polygons 47, 48, 52, 55, 61, 65, 66, 68, 72, 72_A 73, 74, 75, 78, 86, 85, 88, 91, 93, 108):

Polygons 47, 88, and parts of 72 are among the largest blocks of contiguous land within this area of the Preserve. Area 47 is largely trammled due to persistent and extensive treatment of non-native, invasive plant species and evidence of past dispersed ORV use, which was discontinued in the area only three years ago. Its proximity to the jetport and flight paths out of the jetport also diminishes opportunities for solitude. The southern half of this area also bears the noticeable imprint of humans' work, including disturbances from past human activity, such as borrow pits, and structures including aviation beacons.

Polygon 88 contains high densities of nonnative vegetation that will require persistent and mechanized management intervention to restore the area to more natural conditions. The trails bounding the polygon receive high levels of visitor use as compared to many more remote areas of the Preserve due to the proximity to a number of private properties. This area does not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation and is not untrammled by humans. The area also has substantial signs of past human disturbance due to dispersed ORV use, which was discontinued in the area only three years ago.

Polygon 72 includes areas with substantial signs of past human disturbance due to dispersed ORV use which was discontinued in the area only three years ago. The area also does not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation due to its proximity to the Dade-Collier Training and Transition Airport and associated facilities.

Polygons 48, 52, 61, 55, 68, 73, 78, 75, 65, 72_A, 74, 72, 66, 91, 93, 96, 102 and 108 are surrounded by both active ORV trails (i.e., primary trails in the Preserve's ORV trail system) and inactive former ORV trails. Impacts from the latter are such that the impact of human activity is substantially noticeable throughout these areas. When the 0.25-mile corridor around trails is excluded from eligibility, the resulting polygons that comprise these areas are not large enough to practically manage as wilderness and do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

² Only areas that did not fall within the 0.5 mile ineligible corridor around trails are described in the specific area analysis.

Zone E (polygons 43, 45, 46, 49, 50, 56, 59, 64, 77, 79, 80, 89, 92, 98, 100, 103, 105, 106, 109):

Polygons 80, 106, 92, 56, 77, and 43 are among the largest blocks of contiguous land within this area of the Preserve. Portions of area 80 have been substantially altered by humans, and thus the area does not retain its primeval character or influence. This alteration is primarily due to a network of inactive former ORV trails. Impacts from these inactive former ORV trails are such that the impact of human activity is substantially noticeable throughout the area. Nonnative invasive species are also abundant in the southern portion of this area and have altered its natural character. When disturbed areas are removed, the remaining lands become fragmented and management as wilderness is not practicable.

Area 106 is a popular visitor destination and receives heavy ORV use on surrounding primary trails. This area therefore does not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The imprint of man is also substantially noticeable on the landscape, as evidenced by old camps and evidence of past ORV use throughout the area.

Polygons 92 and 77 contain substantially noticeable evidence of past ORV use. When these areas are removed from consideration, the remaining lands become fragmented and management as wilderness is not practicable. Surrounding primary ORV trails around area 77 receive heavy ORV use that detracts from opportunities for solitude. If disturbed areas within the polygon are removed from consideration, the resulting fragmented polygons become impractical to manage as wilderness.

Polygons 43 and 56 contain the noticeable imprint of humans' work, mainly due to substantially noticeable disturbances from past agricultural activities and evidence of past dispersed ORV use. This area also has diminished primeval character due to private parcels of land with dwellings, outbuildings, and access roads.

Polygons 45, 46, 49, 50, 59, 64, 79, 89, 98, 100, 103, 105, and 109 are surrounded by both active ORV trails (i.e., primary trails in the Preserve's ORV trail system) and inactive former ORV trails. Impacts from the latter are such that the impact of human activity is substantially noticeable throughout these areas. When the 0.25-mile corridor around trails is excluded from eligibility, the resulting polygons are not large enough to practically manage as wilderness and do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

Zone G (polygons 42, 54, 71):

Polygon 42 has been altered by humans and does not retain its primeval character or influence. This is largely due to substantially noticeable human disturbances including canals and borrow pits associated with past development and agricultural use. Polygons 54 and 71 do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude, are not untrammelled by humans, do not retain their primeval character, and bear the noticeable imprint of humans' work. This is primarily due to proximity to Highways 41 and 29, as well as the presence of structures, buildings, and access roads. Additionally, frequent use of adjacent areas surrounding Everglades City by commercial airboats results in limited opportunities to experience natural quiet and detracts from the sense of solitude.

Zone H (polygons 111, 112, 114, 116, 118):

Polygon 116 is the largest polygon within this zone. While this polygon is recovering from past dispersed ORV use, evidence of that use remains throughout much of the polygon. If disturbed areas were removed from consideration, the resulting polygons would not be large enough to practically manage as wilderness. Future eligibility assessments would re-assess the eligibility of this area as it continues to recover from past dispersed ORV use.

Polygons 111, 112, 114, and 118 are surrounded by both active ORV trails (i.e., primary trails in the Preserve's ORV trail system) and inactive former ORV trails. When the 0.25 mile corridor around trails is excluded from eligibility, the resulting polygons that comprise these areas are not large enough to practically manage as wilderness and do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation.

Zone J (polygons 122, 123, 124, 125):

These polygons are surrounded by both active ORV trails (i.e., primary trails in the Preserve's ORV trail system) and inactive former ORV trails. When the 0.25-mile corridor around trails is excluded from eligibility, the resulting polygons that comprise these areas are not large enough to practically manage as wilderness and do not offer outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Polygon 124, while relatively large and adjacent to eligible wilderness in the Addition, is not eligible due to substantially noticeable evidence of past agricultural use and the need for continued intensive non-native plant treatment. This area is not untrammelled by humans and does not retain its primeval character and influence.

Zone K (Jetport area)

This area is a large plot of non-federal land held by the Miami-Dade Port Authority. Since the parcel is not owned by the Federal Government, it was not analyzed as part of this assessment.

Eligible for Wilderness Designation

Zone A (polygons 14, 24, 14_A): This is a large, wild area where natural processes and conditions dominate and man's imprint is substantially unnoticeable. It also harbors important habitat for the endangered Cape Sable seaside sparrow. The area contains outstanding opportunities for solitude due to its remote location, relatively few bisecting ORV trails, and intact natural soundscape as well as the wilderness status and low visitation in the adjacent area of Everglades National Park. The area does contain three private parcels and designated trails in the area will continue to be necessary to provide reasonable access to landowners.

Zone C (polygons 27, 30, 32-35, 39): Natural conditions and processes prevail in these polygons. They are undeveloped, largely untrammelled and appear to be primarily affected by the forces of nature. The area is bisected by few trails resulting in large, intact natural areas that would be practical to manage as wilderness and offer outstanding opportunities for solitude. Opportunities for solitude are further enhanced by adjacent designated wilderness in Everglades National Park. The area does contain approximately eight private parcels; designated trails in the area will continue to be necessary in order to provide reasonable access to landowners.

Polygons 35 and 39 were subjected to agricultural use in the past but in this initial assessment appear to have substantially recovered and are primarily affected by the forces of nature. The furrows from past agricultural use, while still visible in some places from satellite imagery many not be substantially noticeable on the ground. Native vegetation in these areas has recovered and now dominates the landscape. Further analysis of these areas will be completed as part of a future wilderness study, and based upon the outcome, a more informed determination would be made.

Zone F (polygons 119, 120): This is a large wild area that appears to have been primarily affected by the forces of nature where natural processes and conditions prevail. The area is largely undeveloped and untrammelled. The imprints of man are few and there are outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. The area is adjacent to areas of proposed wilderness within the Addition, which further enhances its wilderness character.

Zone I (polygons 117, 121, 126):

Polygon 117 was determined during this initial assessment to contain expansive areas that appear to have been primarily affected by the forces of nature, where natural processes and conditions prevail. While some evidence of past ORV use is visible on the landscape, the area largely retains its primeval character.

Polygons 121 and 126 contain outstanding opportunities for solitude and primitive and unconfined recreation. Polygon 121 contains some nonnative species but still appears to have been primarily affected by the forces of nature, where natural processes and conditions prevail. Both areas are largely undeveloped and untrammelled by humans.

In this initial assessment the areas in Zone I appear to contain lands primarily affected by nature; however, there are concerns with land management of the area as it relates to fire and nonnative plants. Further analysis of the suitability of this area as wilderness will be carried out through a more in-depth wilderness study.

SUMMARY

The table below lists the reference areas and the corresponding acreages for the eligible wilderness depicted in the reference maps on pages 8 and 9.

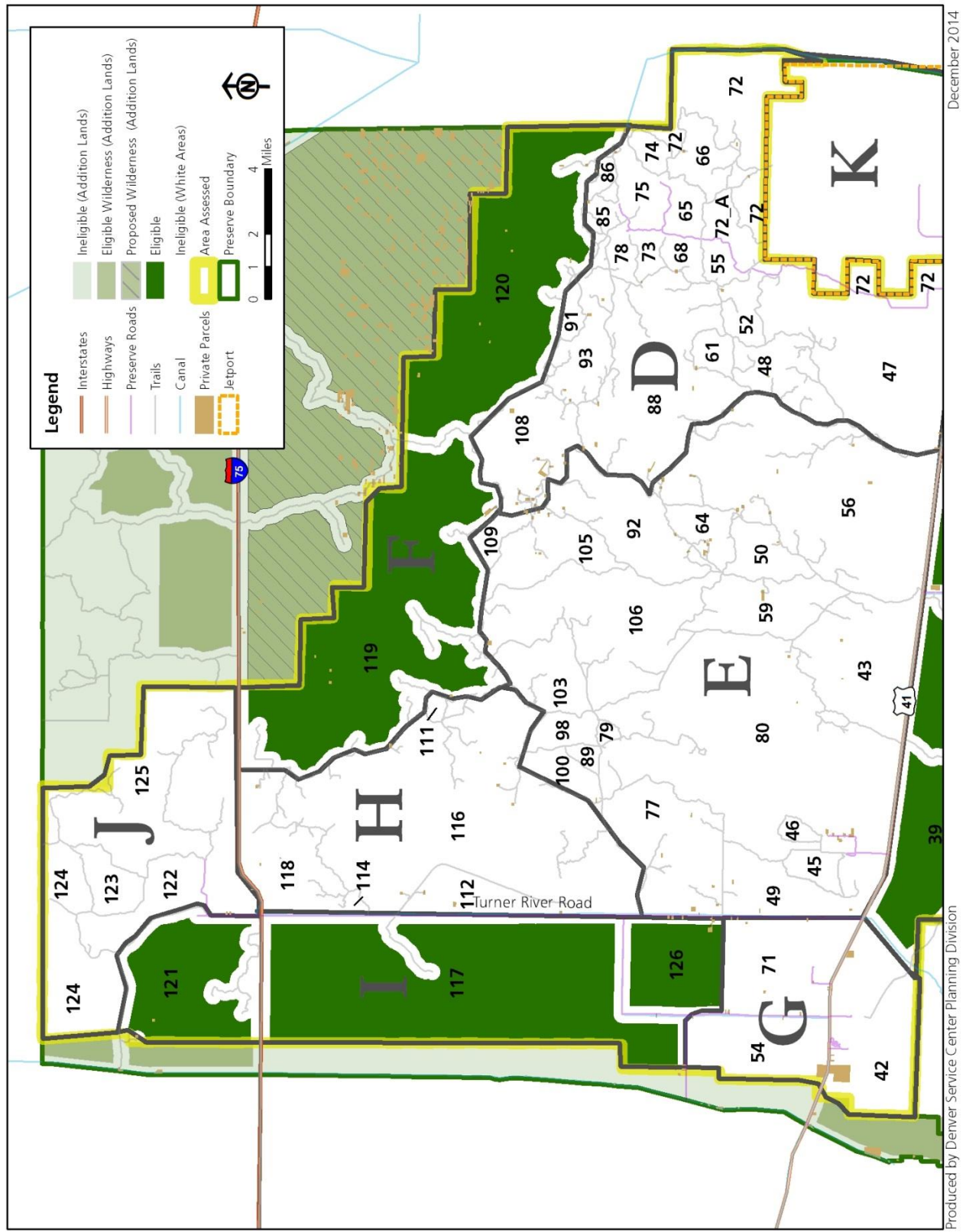
Polygon Number	Acre
14_A ³	99
14	17,033
24	4,938
27	6,734
30	6,177
32	8,590
33	3,707
34	50,412
35	6,376
39	7,662
117	25,560
119 ⁴	21,617
120 ⁵	17,839
121	7,046
126	4,533
Total	188,323

³ Polygon 14_A is adjacent to a large contiguous block of wilderness within Everglades National Park.

⁴ Polygon 119 is adjacent to approximately 8,530 acres of proposed wilderness in the Addition.

⁵ Polygon 120 is adjacent to approximately 29,760 acres of proposed wilderness in the Addition.

Wilderness Eligibility Assessment Reference Map – North



Wilderness Eligibility Assessment Reference Map – South

