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Book Review

The History of an Imperiled Lagoon

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Osborn, Nathaniel. *Indian River Lagoon: An Environmental History*. (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2016) xii +211 pages. \$26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8130-6161-0. [All citations in this review are from this book.]

Throughout human history there has been an urge to improve upon nature, to see raw land and natural resources as something in need of change to be more perfect.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Florida where the peninsula's early settlers and promoters did their best to drain wetlands, remove predators, and build and/or redesign waterways to suit navigation. We are living with the

results of their ignorance and boosterism as evidenced by damaged Everglades, dwindling bird populations, polluted springs, and toxic chemical dumps. The list is long and disheartening.

Today the Indian River Lagoon (IRL) sits on the brink of environmental collapse, owing in large part to human "makeovers." Its waters are polluted with runoff from suburban yards, leaking septic tanks, and the periodic outflow of muddy, contaminated water from Lake Okeechobee. Algae blooms have left only a few inches of visibility and environmentalists worry that its sea grasses and species such as manatees and pelicans may be threatened.

The enormity of this loss is made clear in Nathaniel Osborn's *Indian River Lagoon: An Environmental History*. In this concise book, Osborn, a Hobe Sound educator,

surveys the human damage to this extensive estuarine system on Florida's east coast, documenting two centuries of dreams and destruction that set the stage for what may be the IRL's final act.

Osborn recalls first-hand accounts of the lagoon from its earliest Anglo settlers who entered lands largely emptied of native people who had succumbed to disease, slavery, and warfare. Soldiers who were part of federal efforts to remove the last of the area's native people were amazed at its natural bounty. Osborn provides the reader with a quote from a military surgeon in 1838. "Inadequate are words to express the quantity and quality of fish that abounded in those waters. We all of us began to grow so fat upon this good living, that we were afraid that unless something turned up very soon to produce a change in our felicitous mode of life, that we should have to borrow from our neighbors, the Indian their style of dress, for our clothes every day became tighter" (31).

The IRL, stretching 156 miles south from Volusia County, was a

wonderland, a natural inland system of four bodies of water – the St. Lucie Estuary, Mosquito Lagoon, Banana River Lagoon, and the Indian River—where salt and fresh water mixed to create a shallow estuarine nursery teeming with marine life. Dating to 125,000 B.C., the IRL evolved into an important ecosystem, even after native peoples inhabited the area by 5,000 B.C. (1-2).

Early Anglo settlers exulted in the area's nearly frost-free climate, growing a range of crops from bananas to pineapples to the valuable citrus that would come to be associated with it (73-76). A stable steamboat system was important to transport produce to market, therefore justifying the dredging of channels through the system's shallow waters (78).

As technology and ambition advanced, so did manipulations of the IRL system, particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with projects that included nineteen canals or altered creeks, five permanent inlets, and sixteen causeways (1). Waterways that had shifted periodically with

nature's unstable forces were put into the control of humans and the IRL was never the same. The greatest project—which today may cause the southern IRL's ruin—was the 1923 completion of the Okeechobee waterway, which drained the great lake in the center of the state via canal into the St. Lucie Estuary that had been connected to the Atlantic Ocean in 1892 through a man-made inlet (79). These projects “established a pattern that would define and reshape the peninsula in the twentieth century,” Osborn writes (122). And they, combined with rising coastal populations, would lead to today's ecological problems.

The book often strays into a lengthy battery of facts and dates; Osborn is at his best when he recounts early descriptions of the IRL, of the amazed reaction of early visitors. Unfortunately he overlooks some fascinating stories including that of Frances “Ma” Latham, a Micco boarding house operator, who helped ornithologists understand the value and natural history of Pelican Island, the

nation's first national wildlife refuge. He also skims over the passionate, years-long efforts by modern activists to get protective federal designations for IRL and to create Canaveral National Seashore. Their work established the environmental and economic value of the IRL system; they certainly are worthy of more attention, maybe even an entire volume.

In the meantime, Osborn's book serves as a primer for those seeking basic information and history about this important ecosystem and how human manipulations may be the death of it. “The Indian River Lagoon stood at a crossroads in the second decade of the twenty-first century,” writes Osborn. “Longtime observers wondered if the lagoon had reached a tipping point and would collapse, as had central Florida's Lake Apopka” (160). Let's hope Florida's leaders help the IRL achieve a different ending.