

New documentary depicts political and environmental muck of Big Cypress

By SCOTT CLAIR

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"Ochopee #3" by Clyde Butcher.

BIG CYPRESS NATIONAL PRESERVE — There have been hundreds of books and films detailing the history and wonder of the Everglades. But the story of Big Cypress National Preserve, the nearly one million acres which make up the western Everglades, has pretty much remained untold.

Until now.

Longtime collaborators Clyde Butcher, noted for his black-and-white portraits of the South Florida swamp, and filmmaker Elam Stoltzfus have teamed up once again, this time to lead viewers into the muck -- political and environmental -- of Big Cypress.

"(This film) was a napkin idea," said Stoltzfus, producer, director and cinematographer of "Big Cypress Swamp: The Western Everglades." Stoltzfus said the story of the swamp is an untold one.

"I always told Clyde, I wanted to do this," Stoltzfus said. "It's a great feeling to tell a story that's never been heard."

The film has its premiere today before a private audience at the new Big Cypress Welcome Center.

Of Butcher's many Everglades photos, perhaps the most iconic is "Ochopee," a broad landscape shot that captures the area's tumultuous skies and miles of saw grass in the foreground.

A few years after he took “Ochopee” in 1986, Butcher realized that it wasn’t miles of natural Everglades’ saw grass in the photo, but cattails instead, an invasive plant not native to the region.

“I found out cattails don’t belong there,” Butcher said. “They were the result of farmers bringing in truckloads of fertilizer to grow tomatoes. I thought about destroying the image, but it’s become a great teaching tool to discuss what’s right with Big Cypress and what’s wrong.

“That’s what we’re trying to do with this film. The reason for this is to talk about nature.”

As depicted in the one-hour film, if developers and politicians had their way, there would have been little nature in Big Cypress to talk about.

“Big Cypress,” filmed in high definition during a two-year span beginning in 2007, jumps immediately into the proposed Everglades jetport battle waged in the late-1960s and early `70s.

Before it became a preserve in 1974, Big Cypress was, as “The Swamp” author and Time magazine correspondent Michael Grunwald called it, “a commodity to be exploited.”

With the backing of the federal government, local politicians were determined to drain Big Cypress and erect an international jetport, with railways and cities soon to follow. So eager were they, that they laid down a runway before the project even got underfoot.

But with a coalition of environmentalists, Native Americans, politicians and locals, led by TV reporter Joe Browder and Florida Gov. Claude Kirk’s environmental adviser Nat Reed, the jetport never came to fruition.

That’s when the Big Cypress, as it is now legally and topographically constituted, began to take shape.

Big Cypress, compared to Everglades National Park, is in fine shape. Because it is sustained as a rain-driven system and not reliant on lakes and rivers as is the Everglades, Big Cypress isn’t facing environmental peril as is its eastern neighbor.

Stoltzfus and Butcher, the film's host, hope their documentary helps keep it that way.

"It's going to be a tough, tough road and very expensive to try to save the Everglades," Butcher said. "Big Cypress is a jewel. It's wise to protect it now and not have to save it later.

"We want people to understand the importance of the park. This film will make Big Cypress more apparent to politicians in Florida. It could have been a four-hour special."

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Big Cypress Swamp: The Western Everglades shows on WGCU on Sat., Sept. 26, at 7 p.m.. It also will be aired nationally.

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