

# H-Net Reviews

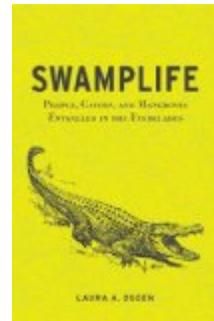
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Laura A. Ogden. *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011. xiv + 185 pp. \$67.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8166-7026-0; \$22.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-7027-7.

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Published on H-Environment (October, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac



Laura A. Ogden's *Swamplife* is an ethnographic examination of "gladesmen"—defined by Ogden as poor rural whites whose ancestors settled in southern Florida in the mid-nineteenth century and who subsist largely through commercial hunting and fishing and through small-scale agriculture—and their connections with the land, flora, and fauna of the Everglades.[1] Ogden, an associate professor of anthropology at Florida International University, came to her subject after Glen Simmons, a gladesman, asked her to help him author a book about his experiences in the Everglades. This was eventually published as *Gladesmen: Gator Hunters, Moonshiners, and Skiffers* by the University of Florida Press in 1998. After that book's publication, Ogden performed oral histories and fieldwork with other gladesmen, primarily to learn about their displacement as alligator hunters from the Everglades. As Ogden indicates in her first chapter, her goal in writing *Swamplife* is "to understand the processes by which [gladesmen's] history and experiences ... became marginalized, illegal, and largely forgotten" and to restore those gladesmen to the story (p. 3). In doing so, she shows that the Everglades is a place of human activity and not just a swampy wilderness devoid of humankind.

Ogden approaches the book from an anthropological view, using what she calls "landscape ethnography" to explore "the ways in which *our relations with non-humans produce what it means to be human*" (p. 28, emphasis in the original). She discusses several different models and tropes that she feels illuminate gladesmen's interactions with the environment, particularly the "rhizome," a spatial philosophy promulgated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, two French philosophers. The rhizome emphasizes the importance of interaction

and relationships between material, semiotic, human, and nonhuman worlds in the formation of a landscape, providing a compass for understanding the ways that humans encounter landscapes and that landscapes experience the human presence. Using the rhizome concept, Ogden concludes that landscapes—and the Everglades in particular—are assemblages constituted by humans and nonhumans, material and semiotic processes, histories both real and partially remembered" (p. 35).

Using the framework of the rhizome, Ogden discusses how gladesmen encountered and shaped the Everglades, and how the Everglades encountered and shaped gladesmen. To emphasize these points, Ogden intersperses her book with short vignettes on "the notorious Ashley gang," a gang of outlaws led by John Ashley, a southeastern Florida hunter and trapper, who used the Everglades in the early 1900s as both a base of operations and a hideout. The presence of these outlaws emphasized the Everglades' "wildness," while the landscape provided shelter, sustenance, and protection for Ashley and his band. More important, Ashley and his followers became the most well known of the gladesmen, influencing popular opinion regarding those living in the Everglades.

Most of the book, however, focuses on less sensational inhabitants and the processes by which alligator hunting, the livelihood of many in the region, became marginalized and eventually outlawed. The Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission seemingly had good motives in regulating alligator hunting in the twentieth century, yet, according to Ogden, its actions were a type of class warfare against gladesmen and really did little to reverse the alligator's decline. Instead, Ogden argues,

the loss of the alligator population was mainly caused by drainage due to the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project (first implemented in 1948). This discussion of class displacement fits in well with the trend in environmental history of examining social justice and the politics of environmental displacement, providing a concrete example of how decisions intending to protect the environment affected those most in contact with the landscape's flora and fauna.

However, Ogden fails to connect in a meaningful way the effects of drainage, water management, and the corps' subsequent turn to ecosystem restoration on the experiences of gladesmen. Ogden's first chapter briefly examines the history of drainage in the area; as mentioned above, she also discusses the impact of the corps' Central and Southern Florida Flood Control Project on alligator populations. Yet she does not really explore what the gladesmen thought about drainage and the management of water, how they represented their interests in discussions with other stakeholders about water management, and what effects the corps and other agencies' water management decisions had on their day-to-day life—including the corps' decision in the 1960s to drastically curtail the amount of water running into Everglades National Park. Since 1948, water management in South Florida has been influenced by a number of different interests, including those still living in the Everglades. Not adequately treating how gladesmen fit into this larger picture—and especially how they contributed to water management policies—leaves a piece of Everglades his-

tory missing from Ogden's work.

In general, however, *Swamplife* is an engaging and well-written book that brings to the foreground the importance of treating landscapes as not just powerless victims of humankind's "progress," but as an active participant in humans' encounters with the environment. Moreover, Ogden capably shows how the "politics" of alligator hunting affected those dependent on the Everglades for survival. One of the strongest aspects of the book is Ogden's ability to not condemn the gladesmen for their way of life in the Everglades, but to show how they became a part of the landscape as well. Whether or not the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission and other agencies intentionally waged a type of class warfare against gladesmen, the effect was the same—drastically curtailing a way of life in which gladesmen had participated for decades and essentially removing them from the region's history. With *Swamplife*, Ogden has successfully restored them to this history.

#### Note

[1]. Ogden writes that she uses the term "gladesmen" with "misgivings," because it was not commonly used by rural whites in the area and because it obscures women's roles and activities in the Everglades. However, she concludes that it was too awkward to use "gladesfolk" and "gladespeople." "Gladesmen" eventually became more palatable to her, "as it suggests the unbreakable ties these people had to the landscape itself and the rich associated Everglades culture that these ties entangle" (p. 18).

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**Citation:** Matthew C. Godfrey. Review of Ogden, Laura A., *Swamplife: People, Gators, and Mangroves Entangled in the Everglades*. H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. October, 2011.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33782>



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