

cultural geographies in practice

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Postprint / Postprint

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

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Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Whalen, K. (2005). cultural geographies in practice. *Cultural Geographies*, 12(2), 229-237. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1474474005eu327xx>

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cultural geographies in practice

SISRA: . . . more of the Real FloridaTM

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FIGURE 1 Sign just within the boundary of SISRA. (Photo by author.)

I had never seen that sign before (Figure 1). I was heading to ‘the Inlet’, driving on A1A, the famous coastal highway running along the eastern edge of Florida and extending from Maine to Key West. I have known this small part of the world for 30 years. During the 1970s and early 1980s, this 800-acre space, with its beaches and tidal pools, was in many ways the back-country watering place for me, my friends and family. This back-country was where wild(-)life was more than untamed flora and fauna; there it teemed in mind, body and spirit. It was where ‘obey’ was not a state order but rather a parental directive which waned to a whisper in our minds as we played in the narrow coves and shallow pools, in the pine tree groves and sandy dunes.

My story and its motif is a common one – boyhood backwoods razed and developed – but with a twist. In Florida, where the population doubled between 1970 and 1990, from 7 to 13 million,¹ the change from undeveloped to developed landscape is all too familiar, and seems now to be a rite of passage into adulthood for every ‘native’

Floridian, and maybe more so for those who were youngsters during the 1970s. The state government has responded to suburban sprawl, as others have in the United States, by acquiring tracts of land deemed ecologically and culturally significant. In recent years, money for Florida's programs of protection and restoration has come from the Florida Preservation 2000 Trust Fund and the CARL program, which together provide the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP) and its subsidiary, the Division of Parks and Recreation, with tens of millions of dollars a year to purchase in-holdings and park additions.² The twist in this story is that these backwoods (the Inlet) became, in 1992, official backwoods: Sebastian Inlet State Recreation Area (SISRA) (see Figure 2). They have retained some of their past character, though the park has been radically modified and, as a result, become . . . 'the Real Florida', according to the FDEP.³ The 'real' Inlet has left me wondering about the authenticity of the Florida I grew up in.

I will admit, I have become a bit defensive about this issue of the Real Florida – I have my 'real' memories to protect. My attitude proceeds from the fact that to perceive and then posit anything as 'real' comes with the expectation of complete assent, since the real is undeniable – anyone can see that. Nothing but compliance is expected, choices are none. In the case of the Real Florida, if the rhetoric of the real is not enough – which it always should be, for that is the nature of the real – complicity is more easily assured because it is backed by the power of the state. Yet can anyone, including the state of Florida, claim to pluck the real from the swirling tide of surreals, hyperreals and ethereals – or even discern it in between the common hedge words 'actually', 'naturally', and 'essentially' that seem to buffer most opinions?

In this essay, I seek to grasp the Real Florida, which is not at all transparent, obviously. I look for it in the words and images – and the ideas and practices they express – in park brochures, official FDEP and SISRA websites, and the Sebastian Inlet State Park Management Plan. I will point to the objects and practices in the landscape of SISRA that signify the Real Florida. By re-presenting these here, I hope to bring us all to its realization. But by doing this am I reinforcing and dispersing a cultural geography devised by the FDEP, rendered in Florida state parks, and sold as a commodity? And then will it one day become obviously transparent thanks in small part to me? I will begin with a critique of the interesting way Real Florida attempts to overcome the central tension in the ideology of purity which lies in the act of deciding on and asserting what is real. Sightseers searching for an immanent authenticity will be disappointed.

The central tension

If deconstruction has taught us anything, it is that any projection and promotion of the real prompts an almost obsessive tendency to establish fixed boundaries around essential elements such as ideas, objects and meanings. Yet the porosity of these boundaries instigates an inevitable movement towards their preservation, either by purging or by incorporating elements deemed unreal. The way the FDEP deals with this tension of protecting borders is guided by the fundamental principle of development

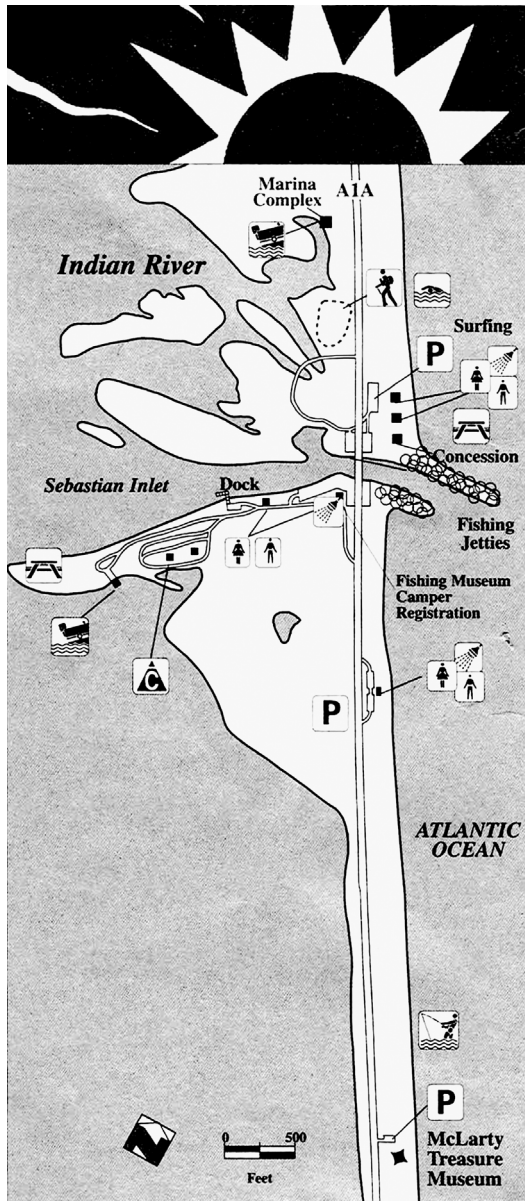


FIGURE 2 Map from the official pamphlet of Sebastian Inlet State Park. (FDEP Division of Recreation and Parks, revised July 2001.)

in state parks: ‘Managed to appear (as closely as possible) as they did when the first Europeans arrived’.⁴ This celebrated moment in time – not ‘before’ or ‘after’ – is a Florida in its original, pure state of nature, one whose protection and restoration is the primary concern of the FDEP.

Real Florida cannot be before the Europeans arrived, because that would exclude the Europeans, whose progeny, having run roughshod over the peninsula, cannot be ignored. Nor can it be after, for then it would exclude the original and, therefore, pure nature and Native Americans, whose cultural heritage is also commemorated throughout the park system. Moreover, 'after' would include exotic species that continue to 'invade' Florida. 'When' is ultimately an attempt at conciliation between the contradictory elements of the natural and imperial landscapes. Yet, 'when' also leaves open, intentionally or not, the borders of the Real Florida allowing for the vicissitudes of science and capitalism to continually alter the *nature* of the real. At the heart of the Real Florida, then, lies the enduring cause of impurity: imperial culture.

Practising Real Florida

The impetus to create the Real Florida comes primarily from the unique presence of the unreal touristic worlds, such as Disney and Sea World, constellating around Orlando, and the consequent neglect of the natures and cultures of Florida beyond. Without the apparent worlds of central Florida, the state would not be in the business of promoting its own reality, which is presently limited to 158 state parks, covering 940 square miles of a total land area of 58 560 square miles.⁵

Nevertheless, it should be recognized that drawing and spreading tourists and their dollars into the back-country is not the only motivation behind the insertion of Real Florida; another is to provide Floridians with, as one 'native' on the official SISRA website put it, 'our own little piece of paradise right here at home'.⁶ A piece of paradise in the home does not make the home paradise. Rather, the implication here is that paradise, that space of truly perfected nature and being, is set off from the mundane workaday world – the Florida outside of the park system. Certainly we all want to live in paradise, but an occasional jaunt on weekends and holidays to the play-, green- and recovery room of our homeland seems to be enough for many of us, especially if we are promised by the director of Florida State Parks that 'while participating in [our] favorite recreation, [we] will find the tranquility and beauty of our state parks truly justify our slogan, The Real Florida'.⁷

The stated vision of the park service is to 'create a sense of place', in areas where 'visitors connect to the Real Florida'.⁸ In 2002, 17.7 million visitors made this connection, with the help of a \$70 million operating budget supporting close to 2000 employees and 6000 volunteers.⁹ Also emanating from the cultural hearth is the 100 000 hours of community service, which includes garbage collecting and edifice-painting by convicted drunk drivers and drug offenders, and inmate labour for manufacturing the fashionable automobile plate¹⁰ (Figure 3). Like the other merchandise of the Real Florida for sale at park concessions and on the internet – the teeshirts, pins, buttons and posters – the contents of the plate display the primary concern of the FDEP, which is the natural landscape. By connecting to it, which does not require a car plate but in most cases a \$3.50 entrance fee, we not only gain a sense of the real, we learn to become, in the words of one visitor to SISRA, 'good environmental citizens'.¹¹



FIGURE 3 Automobile plate (FDEP). (Photograph by the author.)

A citizen of the Real Florida should understand, even unreflectively, that it is a 'land in balance'.¹² This conceptualization of nature drives the application of scientific research and the monitoring of the parks. Any flora or fauna tipping the scale are classified as 'unruly and unwanted guests'¹³ and eradicated. Inhabiting the life-world of the Real Florida are fauna such as bottlenose dolphin, Florida panther, scrub jay, and manatee; and flora such as wire grass, longleaf pine, cabbage palm and sea grape. If they are missing, they will be returned to the land. The undesirables are: the Texas armadillo, English sparrow, Argentine fire ant and feral hog (Eurasia); and, Brazilian pepper, Chinese tallow, Japanese climbing fern and Australian pine. The FDEP acknowledges that exotic species are a 'double-edged sword' and therefore lays out specific guidelines of selectivity that distinguish the useful and beautiful from those that disrupt the 'balance of nature'.¹⁴ 'Prescribed burnings' are a common ritual used to restore harmony within the community of the Real Florida.¹⁵

At SISRA, the third most visited state park,¹⁶ the removal of exotics has dramatically changed the scene. The park is shaped around an inlet that during the last century has been recut several times into the barrier island that separates the Atlantic Ocean from the Indian River (Figure 4). The original reason for the incision, which is now crossed by a 1548 foot-long arch bridge, was so that local fisherman would have easy access to the Atlantic. By 1947, a permanent channel was blasted through the limestone rock



FIGURE 4 From an FDEP website, www.floridastateparks.org/sebastianinlet/default.asp

beneath the sand, and granite boulders – chips off the old Appalachian block – were imported and piled on both sides, forming jetties that gird the Inlet for a quarter of a mile.

In 1971, the state recognized the ‘historical, cultural and ecological significance’¹⁷ of the area and turned it into a recreational park. Not until the 1990s was it designated part of the Real Florida, thus beginning eradication/restoration.

Most missing from SISRA but not from the rest of Florida are the groves of tall Australian pines and Brazilian pepper trees, both of European imperial descent. The pine groves gave cool shade, offered seductive passageways and crooned as wind surged through the soft, dark-green pine needles. The pepper trees grew pungent, piercing red berries my friends and I used as ammunition in our games of war. Today, the pervasive asphalt roads and parking lot – which were once made of white sandy crushed coquina rock, and overlaid with ruts often filled with the rainwater of thunderstorms – are aligned with cabbage palms. They offer as much shade as a telephone pole, and by no stretch of the imagination could they ever suggest a lovers’ lane.

The imprint of the Real Florida is marked by a concern for cultural heritage. The Florida Division of Historical Resources provides technical training and funding assistance to the FDEP, which is ‘responsible for restoration, preservation, and interpretation of many of Florida’s most significant cultural resources’.¹⁸ At SISRA, this responsibility includes the preservation of New World gold and silver salvaged from the 1715 hurricane-induced shipwrecks of 11 Spanish galleons riding the warm Gulf Stream to Europe. These artefacts, as well as ship riggings and conquistador accoutrements, are exhibited at the McLarty Treasure Museum, itself now a ‘cultural treasure’, which is located where survivors camped. Remnants of the material culture of the Ais, a tribe of Native Americans who inhabited the region but who by 1760 had disappeared, succumbing to European diseases and maltreatment,¹⁹ are also on display. As the FDEP explains, ‘[w]e maintain and restore these artifacts of our heritage so that future generations of visitors will experience Florida’s remarkable history firsthand’.²⁰

The Inlet cut too has become a cultural treasure: it is one of only a handful of man-made inlets of Florida and unique in its lack of federal oversight. It is also the park system’s premier recreational site, providing opportunities for camping, fishing, boating, diving and hiking. The cynosure of SISRA has always been the jetty – a concrete pier on the north side straddling the pile of boulders that extends over 700 feet into the ocean. From the platform and behind its steel railings, anglers cast their lines into the fish-rich swirls of tidal currents moving through the inlet. On the beach side, the jetty enhances wave action, making Sebastian arguably the best ‘surfing hole’ on the eastern coast of the US.

When I was younger, what we enjoyed most was surfing, and jumping off the catwalk, under the bridge, and into the rush of high tide. Once in the water, the challenge was to swim out of the powerful current and into the cove pool. Timing was everything, and if you did not have it, the tide would carry you into the river, where eventually the inlet widened, the current slowed and the swim to shore simply satisfied.

We also looked forward to the annual professional surfing contest. It was sponsored by beer and liquor companies. The spectators were mostly tattooed bikers and long-haired hippies wearing cut-off blue jeans. Many were there just for the bikini show held on a special stage set into the sand dune. These days the sand dunes are off limits and, for better or worse, the 'edge' has been taken off the contests. Now there is the National Scholastic Surfing Association Surf Contest and the Doctors and Lawyers & Weekend Warriors Surf Contest.²¹ The FDEP preserves the 'best of Florida's diverse natural and cultural heritage...while providing quality and appropriate resource-based recreational opportunities...'²²

The 'best' of Florida's culture is also trumpeted from 'Capt'n Jack Forte's Crows Nest', a gazebo siting atop a sand dune celebrating modern western middle-class values in the ideal of the independent masculine hero, also a prominent figure of American mythology. The plaque inside reads:

A legendary gathering place called the Crow's Nest stood not too far from here until the tract on which the building stood became a state recreation area in the 1970's Its proprietor, Jack Forte, was known to fisherman from all over the world. He was a one-man weather station, fishing expert, first aid station, and provided many colorful tales. He's known as Captain Jack and is a reminder of the *bardy individualists* who settled Florida. (Emphasis added.)

Within a bowshot of SISRA is the Pelican Island National Wildlife Refuge, founded in 1903 by Theodore Roosevelt as the first wildlife preserve in the US. Roosevelt was a conservationist because he believed that with the closing of the American frontier at the turn of the century and the unfolding of urban capitalism, Americans were losing their exceptional qualities, rooted in individual hardiness, initiative and self-reliance. These characteristics were born at the line of struggle between the European and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American wilderness, later mythologized as 'far tougher to conquer than it really was'.²³ Roosevelt offered his principles of alfresco 'manliness' as a corrective to 'overcivilized man[is]' 'flabbiness' and 'slothful ease'.²⁴

It is ironic that this ideal citizen of Real Florida is enshrined in a landscape that has so hardened. Surveillance cameras – also the optic tool of choice for monitoring prisoners stamping auto-plates – and imperative signage with terms such as

No,
danger, caution, do not,
unauthorized, safety, keep-out,
prosecuted, attention,
prohibited, restricted,
violations, protect, obey,
violators, warning, one-way,
share,

are the new 'transparent eyeballs' in nature. But rather than seeing the realm of truth beyond the veil of appearance, as Emerson would have us do,²⁵ these 'eyes' avail the truth of the (dis)appearing power that pervades the landscape of SISRA. As SISRA informs us of our human potential for freedom and re-creation, its eyes condition us to

think and behave in ways that seem to domesticate the 'wild-life' of mind, body and spirit.

But no matter how the culture of Real Florida delineates and polices its boundaries at SISRA, inevitably there will be 'unruly...guests' transgressing these boundaries, as pollen and seeds blowing in with the wind, sea creatures drifting in on the tides, animals and birds entering by land and air, or, of course, human beings arriving now from A1A. Yes, Real Florida desires to strike an ecological and a cultural balance, but balance is not synonymous with the real, and neither is imbalance.

Yet I also desire to discover a balance between my memories of the inlet, SISRA and the Florida of Captain Jack. Like the imaginary moment between high and low tides when the water is suddenly still, I see what the inlet really was, to me. But, then, like the shifting movements of the water between the Atlantic and Indian River that continue to change the ocean floor, my image washes away, only to be recast differently by the flux of experience. Become a citizen of the Real Florida, I say to myself: accept SISRA in all its unwieldy contradictions; do as other citizens do: 'sit down in [my] beach chair and have the water literally inches away...just sit and watch the boats go by...spend a day over at the cove just soaking up the sun and relaxing as *we only can* at Sebastian Inlet'.²⁶

Never mind that, I'll see you in the cove if the current's not too strong – 'Geronimo!'

Notes

¹ E.A. Fernald and E.D. Purdum, *Atlas of Florida* (Gainesville, University of Florida Press, 1996), p. 130.

² Florida Department of Environmental Protection, *History of the Park Service* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/information/history.htm#Directors (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

³ Trademark of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

⁴ *Sebastian Inlet State Recreation Area...more of the Real Florida* (FDEP, Division of Recreation and Parks, 2001).

⁵ D. Marth and M.J. Marth, *Florida almanac 1999–2000* (Gretna, FL, Pelican, 1999), p. 160.

⁶ FDEP, *Testimonials* (www.sebastianinlet/testimonials/asp (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

⁷ FDEP, *Welcome from the Director* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/information/director.asp (accessed 9 Dec. 2002)).

⁸ FDEP, *About Us* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/information/about.htm (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ FDEP, *Index* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/os/index.htm (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

¹¹ FDEP, *Testimonials*.

¹² FDEP, *Invasive* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/ncr/natural.htm#Invasive (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Fernald and Purdum, *Atlas of Florida*, p. 216.

¹⁷ FDEP, *History* (www.sebastianinlet/history.asp (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).

¹⁸ FDEP, *Index*.

- ¹⁹ Fernald and Purdum, *Atlas of Florida*, p. 79.
- ²⁰ FDEP, *Restoration* (www.dep.state.fl.us/parks/ncr/restoration.htm (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).
- ²¹ FDEP, *Sebastian Inlet State Park* (www.floridastateparks.org/sebastianinlet/default.asp (accessed 10 Nov. 2003)).
- ²² FDEP, *Welcome from the Director*.
- ²³ M.J. Bowden, 'The invention of American tradition', *Journal of historical geography* **1** (1992), p. 4.
- ²⁴ T. Roosevelt quoted in R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American mind* (New Haven, CT, Yale University Press, 1982), p. 150.
- ²⁵ R.W. Emerson, *Nature* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1991), p. 25.
- ²⁶ FDEP, *Testimonials*.