

SwampScapes

A Creative Practice of Commoning in Florida's Swamps

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with Kim Grinfeder, Evan Karge and Grant Bemis**

Photographs by Grant Bemis



Fig. 1 Swamp Guides Eric (far left) and Rita Bauer (far right) orienting our team.

Many of us are disconnected from the beauty of swamps and the vital role they play in filtering water, fostering life, and buffering storms. Today, coastal development, pollution, and sea-level rise are threatening these invaluable ecosystems.

One of the biggest threats to swamps is a lack of understanding of the role they play in human survival. In a time of global warming and unpredictable weather, it has never been more important to look, listen, and learn from the swamps around us.

This is especially true for South Florida, home to the Everglades, one of the largest swamps in the world. Up until 1900, all of South Florida was one big swamp. To make way for development, the city drained the area and diverted the natural water flow, changing this essential water filter and supply system forever. A rapid expansion of urbanization and agricultural growth has led to a host of environmental problems and today the Everglades is a skeleton of what it once was. While we cannot turn back the clock, we do need to figure out how to coexist with the very ecosystems that can help protect us from increasingly extreme weather. What

is the role of media in fostering a connection to this vital ecosystem and what new tools can we utilize to connect urban audiences to nature?

In this essay, I discuss the making of *SwampScapes*, a collaborative multi-platform documentary that I co-directed with Kim Grinfeder and Juan Carlos Zaldivar, while in residence for a semester at the University of Miami as a visiting Knight Chair. The project involved fifteen students, community partners and the seven individuals featured in the project including Betty, a Miccosukee water activist who runs her own airboat business; Donna, a raptor biologist who monitors hawk nests



Fig. 2 Liz Miller and Juan Carlos Zaldivar interviewing water activist Betty Osceola.



Fig. 3 Kim Grinfeder stabilizing the VR camera in a remote area of the Everglades.

in urban swamps; and Win, a disturbance ecologist speaking to human-caused disturbances. We call the project “multi-platform” because we employed diverse media forms resulting in a Virtual Reality (VR) film, a photo exhibit, a website with 2D films, an interactive Swamp Symphony, and a study guide. By presenting the material across platforms we hoped to engage diverse audiences.

Throughout the process we tried to be self-reflexive about the intended and unintended impacts that our project might have on the people and ecosystems we were representing. Making media can be rewarding, but it can also be an intrusive experience. Acknowledging entanglements is a necessary part of any critical media practice. While multi-platform projects hold the promise of increased circulation, outreach, and education, they can just as easily be associated with new forms of consumerism and electronic waste. For example, as we were developing the VR film, a new standalone VR headset, Oculus Go was released. The headset offers an affordable way to present the project but is also just one more electronic device advancing standalone technological innovation and consumerism rather than collaborative frameworks. By engaging with new VR technologies might we inadvertently be promoting screen practices that

put stress on the very environments we hope to protect? At the same time, we cannot dismiss the advantages of using immersive VR technologies to reach audiences who might never be able to visit a swamp. How can we come to terms with our aspirations as well as the contradictions inherent in any contemporary environmental media endeavor?

Praxis in the classroom

My first step in this collaborative endeavor was to identify partners, a process that requires taking risks, building trust and discovering shared values. The first group of collaborators were the seven class members in the course I was assigned to teach. The course was a praxis lab in documentary production involving graduates and undergraduates from diverse disciplines. I proposed that we create an i-doc, a documentary for the web that makes use of interactive digital technology and permits opportunities for multiple voices and authorship. I had just completed a three-year i-doc on global shorelines (www.shorelineproject.org) and I felt that swamp stories were largely absent from discussions around climate challenges and solutions. I was also in close proximity to the Everglades and was eager to immerse myself in Florida’s swamps.



Fig. 4 Documenting our team experiencing a swamp walk in the Fakahatchee Swamp.

To set the tone for our shared endeavor I assigned David Bollier's article, "Commoning as a Transformative Social Paradigm" that defines commoning as a social practice that works against the logic of the extractive market economy and instead works to foster people's social connections with each other and with "nature" (2016, 4). Bollier explains that commoning is a practice where groups engage in acts of mutual support, communication and experimentation to explore ways of managing shared resources (2). I suggested that we use commoning as a prompt for our own media production and consider how our collective actions might influence both the process and the representation of a shared ecosystem that we need and depend on. I also assigned reading from Helen De Michiel and Patricia R. Zimmermann's *Open Space New Media Documentary* (2017) to offer a context for how collaborative media initiatives are not just about representation but can be used to help expand the public commons.

I asked each student to identify a personal goal, skills they might contribute, and their hopes for potential impacts. These exercises helped to establish a common agenda and an understanding that the project was not pre-determined but would be shaped by our shared input. For example, the active participation of one graduate student, Grant Bemis, a skilled photographer, resulted in a photography exhibit that helped us to

document our commoning practice and articulate an unexpected dimension of SwampScapes. Another graduate student, Evan Karge, had experience filming underwater and so we incorporated his expertise into the project. Graduate student Savannah Geary contributed her skills in design and cinematography.

Identifying how each student might contribute to the project was a gradual process that involved individual and collective discussions. Our process was impacted by the people we were meeting in the field, the research we were conducting as a group, and the skillset and availability of those engaged in the class. Our method was a far more complex process than simply assigning each student a role in a pre-configured initiative because the project was constantly evolving. Evan Karge explains in the class's final reflection exercise (May 2018):

The emphasis on the process as opposed to the result is something that has resonated for me throughout this class. Between learning and being immersed in the creative process, increasing my ecological literacy in regards to Florida's unique terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, learning about shot composition, and learning about a whole different outlook on documentaries as an art form/educational tool, SwampScapes has been a shining example of social engaged



Fig. 5 Liz Miller and Evan Karge in the Fakahatchee Swamp.

art where the process has undeniably been more important to me than the end result. On a personal level and related to this, I feel as though I have not only increased my understanding of the production process but I also I feel as though I have been exposed and sort of indoctrinated into a privileged labyrinth of collaborations between like-minded individuals that has given me a unique vantage point of the ecological crisis occurring right beneath our feet, that I was largely unfamiliar with.

One of biggest challenges in our coming experiment was finding the right amount of structure to guide the experience. Student collaborators needed support and guidelines but also the freedom to find their own way. Karge explains:

I really appreciated the balance between guided direction and creative freedom that was allowed on our shoots. Because I am relatively new to videography, I was hoping to get some specific structure and feedback to have some sort of framework to be able to put together compelling shots, but I also feel as though I have this skill, especially in the underwater realm and I felt as though I was able to exercise my own creativity.

An additional challenge that we faced throughout the production was aligning student

schedules with the demands of documentary production, a process that requires flexibility and time. The class met once a week for several hours. The Everglades is a two-hour drive from our urban classroom, so productions were planned outside of class time. Furthermore, we had to work around the busy schedules of the individuals we were filming. This meant that students with tight schedules and competing work or family demands were not able to participate in what were often spontaneous production opportunities. For example, we wanted to capture the fires that were burning through the Everglades and were on stand-by for over a week waiting for a safe moment to film. This was not a shoot that we could coordinate in advance. The students who participated on production field trips benefited from “being there” and it appeared to strengthen their commitment to the project and their connection to the swamp. Students with fixed or tight schedules worked more on post-production tasks such as editing or sound design.

Another challenge was that our project evolved quickly, and it was hard to keep track of all the moving parts and contributors. As graduate student Grant Bemis in his final reflection explained, “There was an excessive amount of moving parts, and a never-ending flow of creativity. So, with the time allotted for completion, I am impressed how well it all came together.” Our challenges touch on a key tension in any participatory project, which is the work it takes above and beyond structured



Fig. 6 Documenting our Fakahatchee guide, Mike Owens.

class time. Throughout the class, I was engaged in a balancing act of offering students a chance to participate in a meaningful project and needing to respect the competing demands upon their time.

Our class produced the media and we involved students from a web production class taught by Kim Grinfeder, co-director of SwampScapes and director of the Interactive Media Program at the University of Miami. Kim supervised a team of six graduate students and they designed and built the SwampScapes website as part of a web production course Kim was teaching. By engaging students across classes, our commons was expanding; Kim's students were approaching storytelling

from an interactive design perspective while my students were thinking through documentary concerns. This new interdisciplinary dynamic infused new ideas into the project, and generated important discussions about how to present media and how it circulates.

Exploring the Possibilities of Multiple Forms

Before arriving in Miami, I had not anticipated that SwampScapes would involve a Virtual Reality (VR) film project. Once I met Kim, who is committed to environmental issues and has the technical know-how to make a VR project, it



Fig. 7 Deb Vanslet filming in the Fakahatchee Swamp.



Fig. 8 Juan Carlos recording sound in “Spy Mode” on an airboat in the Everglades.

seemed like perfect opportunity to explore how we might bring an environmental justice perspective into an evolving storytelling platform. In a VR film, place becomes the lead character and we had an ideal location to explore this form of filmmaking. To resolve my concerns about access, we decided to also develop an interactive website to reach a broader audience. The fact that Kim's office was just minutes from mine was a critical ingredient in the process. Daily encounters and briefings helped to foster the patience and trust that was essential to this elaborate and sometimes overwhelming process. Kim explains his commitment to collaborative endeavors:

A lot of people see collaboration and partnerships as a burden. Things can go wrong or fall apart, but I see collaboration as a necessity. We don't live in a time where we can do meaningful projects alone; there are just too many angles, too many technologies. If you want to make a strong project you have to collaborate. While we can learn technical skills on our own online, we can't learn how to collaborate, how to assess other people's skills and engage their strengths, unless we practice it.

At the same time that I was getting to know Kim, I was in conversation with an accomplished documentary artist, Juan Carlos Zaldivar. We were exploring story ideas together and if we might engage biologists working in the swamps of Cuba, his country of origin. Juan Carlos had worked on a VR project about Cuban dance and had years of experience in sound design, a key element to any VR project. He has also collaborated with Good Pitch, an organization dedicated to connecting filmmakers to movements for social change. We were excited for an opportunity to collaborate and he suggested an activity to align our goals and visions. We both produced an artist statement articulating the guiding principles behind our practice. We then read each other's statements to prompt a discussion on what we connected to in the other's statement, how we usually contributed to production processes, and how we would want this collaboration to play out. It was a creative and interesting way to initiate a collaboration.

For each location we had our "local guide,"

our documentary protagonists. We represented their experience through still photographs, 2D video, and VR video. Getting coverage for each platform made for rather chaotic shoots, but we hoped that each platform would appeal to diverse audiences and contribute something unique. Furthermore, we were learning about the strengths and weaknesses of each form. For example, a VR or 360 perspective offers users a sense of actually "being there" but does require the negotiation of a bulky plastic headset and is not yet accessible to larger audiences. One challenge we faced with VR was how much story or information we could include without taking away from this largely sensory experience. We had to experiment with the right balance between story and presence. We shot the 2D videos for our i-doc with teachers in mind who may not yet have access to VR technology but would want to bring the Everglades alive through first person narratives. On our website (<http://www.swampscapes.org>) we embedded the videos with additional information and a companion study guide. The photograph exhibit permits users to pause, engage, and make their own connections without the intervention of a script or soundscape. Kim suggests that "photography is about the moment, 2D filming can deliver a lot of information and 360/VR can really deliver an experience." Our objective was to better understand how we might use each form most effectively together to foster connection and to encourage swamp literacy.

Commoning as a method to connect

In a time when market culture is ubiquitous and invasive, commoning cultivates new cultural spaces and nourishes inner subjective experiences that have far more to do with the human condition and social change rather than the manipulative branding and disempowering spectacles of market culture. Finally, the real significance of commoning may be that it is not ultimately about a fixed philosophical vision or political agenda, but about engaged action in building successful commons. (Bollier 2016, 4)

A critical part of commoning is strengthening networks and as a Knight Chair I was invited to collaborate with The Conservancy of Southwest Florida, a key player in environmental issues in the

region. The organization is based in Naples, a two-hour drive from Miami and was the first site I visited when arriving to South Miami. Communications officer Catherine Bergerson offered leads and possible directions for the project and introduced me to the Director of Environmental Education, Heather Scaza Acosta, who has a joint appointment at Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). FGCU is a leader in environmental education and has designed a required course on sustainability for students across disciplines. Over the course of the semester my students and I imagined this sustainabil-

ity course as our “target audience” and collaborated with several professors at FGCU in both the conception and the production of SwampScapes. For example, Brenda Thomas, the course coordinator, shared the goals of the course and we used these to develop our SwampScapes study guide. Win Everham, the founder of the sustainability program at FGCU and a disturbance ecologist is featured in our documentary project as well.

Through our collaborators at FGCU we met Kathleen Smith, the biologist at The CREW Land and Water Trust in the Corkscrew Regional



Fig. 9 Win Everham explains the impacts of a recent fire in Picayune Strand State Forest to Liz Miller.



Fig. 10 The VR Camera is in the front of the boat and Kim, Juan Carlos and I are on the floor of an airboat in “Spy Mode” to avoid being in the 360 shot.

Watershed, who donated sounds for the development of Swamp Symphony, an interactive feature on our website where users can identify and even play sounds together. Swamp Symphony is our humble homage to biodiversity. And rather than record the sounds ourselves, we were excited by the notion that by repurposing sounds originally recorded by biologists for research, that we were creating a bridge between science and art. What SwampScapes revealed to us is that active listening and observing are critical skills for artists, biologists, and advocates. Forging new connections with groups and educators was key to our commoning process, and there are many other collaborators who I have not mentioned here but who played key roles in this project. An obvious challenge for most community groups is that they are often juggling multiple projects and responsibilities and finding the right dose of collaboration is key, so that everyone benefits in some small way.

Our SwampScapes project and our exploration of commoning will take a new direction as we begin the outreach stage of this project. The class is over and I am no longer in residence near the Everglades, so we will find new ways to stay connected and connect others. I began this essay explaining that a major threat to the Everglades is our disconnection from swamps but we are also disconnected from each other. The ongoing entanglements of people, media and the environment are always already present. The practice of commoning is one way of activating these pre-existing connections. Media has the power to bring people together, to

foster a process of commoning but it takes work, intention and self-reflexivity to common and in doing so get closer to becoming environmental.

References

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