

The Conch Republic: Human Rabble on the Coral Rubble

By Thomas T. Ankersen

In 1982, the Florida Keys seceded from the United States and officially established the Conch Republic, replete with flag, motto and mascot. In 2000, the City of Key West voted to join the alliance of small island states within the United Nations, a voting bloc of countries especially concerned about the repercussions of global warming and its attendant sea level rise. In truth, the Florida Keys have always been tenuously tied to the United States, at least in a biogeographical sense. Its political affinities are equally strained. The Keys are a tropical archipelago of coral rubble exposed by the sea and ringed by one of the world's most spectacular coral reefs; its inhabitants a human rabble of misfits and miscreants with a common disdain for the "foreign governments" seeking environmental hegemony over the Keys.

The Keys sweep southwesterly from mainland Florida along the edge of the continental shelf. To the South lies the forbidden island of Cuba, festering with revolutionary fervor. From the West, the great Gulf of Mexico pours its contents through the narrow Straits of Florida, creating one of the great climate changing features on earth, the Gulf Stream. The Keys themselves are little more than limestone pimples on the face of the South Florida platform, which geologists consider one of the great carbonate accumulations on earth. The term Key comes from a poor English translation of the Spanish word *Cayo*, which means reef.

Geologically speaking, there are really two sets of Keys; the modern mud keys of Florida Bay and the older coral Keys that face the Atlantic Ocean. These formed after episode upon episode of the rise and fall of sea level, spawning reef upon reef until the modern keys emerged in the wake of the latest, greatest oceanic recession, some 100,000 years ago. Since then sea level has risen more than it has fallen, and it has risen steadily for at least the last 15 thousand years, a little longer than the period of human habitation in Florida. The tropical reefs that now ring the Keys began forming themselves only 7 thousand years ago, well within Florida's human history. Sea level continues to dictate the fate of the Florida Keys. Even the tallest Keys are only a few meters above sea level. Assuming current, non-anthropogenic trends in sea level rise, most of the Florida Keys will be drowned within 1400 years. Global warming only accelerates the inevitable. Its little wonder Keys inhabitants are the way they are. Why save what's doomed?

Ecologists call the Keys "rocklands," and the forests that once covered them are tropical forests and Caribbean pinelands. For the most part the species that characterize the tropical forests are at the northern extreme of their range and bear names tinged with tropical flavor like gumbo limbo, wild tamarind, strangler fig and mahogany. Few venture far up the peninsula where arctic blasts still make their presence felt. Those that did were for the most part paved over. Lignum Vitae is the Keys most famous tropical tree. Renowned for its remarkable hardness and self oiling quality, the tree was exploited to near extinction by the commercial shipping industry which used it to make wooden ballbearings. Those that survive do so on a protected island that bears their name. Keys fauna suffers from what island biogeographers call the "peninsula effect," continental dispersion squeezed down a bottleneck becomes increasing depauperate. To this add the fact that they are islands. As a result the Keys version of charismatic megafauna is the doll-like and endangered Key Deer, its eyes now firmly fixed in the headlights of extinction. Its refuge carved out of suburban backyards. Road signs record the

species deathwatch for speeding tourists. Death by traffic.

Assuming fresh water collected somewhere at the surface, Paleoindians may have ranged throughout the region we now call the Keys. Theirs was the geographic climax to a human odyssey that began in the arctic and swept across North America in span of twelve to fifteen thousand years. The keys were probably limestone hills on an otherwise flat savannah that extended to the continental shelf. While there is no archaeological evidence to support the view, few believe that these indigenous wanderers saw the narrow Straits of Florida as a barrier to cultural interchange with their Cuban counterparts, whose own odyssey had wrapped all the way around the Central American isthmus and northern South America. As Florida receded in front of the rising sea, its human inhabitants must have also retreated, returning only when climate began to stabilize. By then the Keys were islands; its re-inhabitants the fringe of the larger indigenous social systems to the north.

Like the colonists that followed them, the Keys pre-Colombian human inhabitants were a pioneering sort who accustomed themselves to the harsh environment of a region where dry land and fresh water were scarce, even if food was plentiful. Hurricane driven seas occasionally swept over their homelands. Pre-Colombian Keys inhabitants belonged to the "Glades Culture," small decentralized chiefdoms that subsisted on fish, shellfish and game, their Spanish given names preserved as present day islands, the Matecombeses, Bayahondos. The Spanish referred to Key West as Cayo Hueso, the Key of Bones.

The sad colonial legacy of indigenous genocide also played itself out on the Keys. By the middle of the eighteenth century the Keys were devoid of permanent settlement, indigenous or colonial. Reinhabitation took place slowly as the islands began to be populated by the curious amalgam of colonial castaways that would secure the archipelago's contemporary reputation. The treacherous reefs that still the nearshore waters became the proving ground for a bloodsport known as "wrecking," a form of legalized plunder that capitalized on navigational misfortune. But in the always fuzzy legal context of the Keys misfortunes were often made by luring the misfortunate into harm's way. Wrecking eclipsed fishing in economic importance to the Keys until the ragtag remnants of America's indigenous population regrouped at the end the continent that had been theirs and made their last stand in the Florida Everglades. With the Seminole Indian Wars the Keys were once again depopulated. When the White Man returned in the twentieth century to finish the job, the Keys would transmogrify.

In 1935 a natural disaster struck that would forever change the environmental history of the Florida Keys. The storm of the still young century toppled Henry Flagler's crowning achievement, the Overseas Railroad. Completed in 1912, the railroad represented yet another shining example of America's ability to harness technology to overcome nature. In this case the conquest was fleeting. The '35 hurricane's fifteen foot tidal surge swept away the engineering marvel and much of its human cargo. Rather than rebuild the railroad, its new owners chose to build a highway, sealing the Keys fate. The population trickle became a full on faucet and by World War II tourism eclipsed the rural and subsistence economies that had been the Keys mainstays. The Keys began to groan under the weight of the human flotsam now driving up to their shores. The Overseas highway irrevocably linked the Keys to the growth policies of the Sunshine State. Tack trumped all as the Highway became the prototype for Florida's future, a

160 mile long strip mall. Queen conch was mined to commercial extinction, the roadside littered with mountains of coral and conch for sale to tourists. Mangrove forests, tropical hammocks and pinelands gave way to motels, marinas and tourist traps; canals were dug and channels dredged. Old time "conchs" remained in denial, fighting growing concern in Tallahassee that the Keys were being trashed in the name of tourism. In the mid 1950s agitation began to protect a piece of the reef for posterity and in 1960 under the leadership of an activist Miami Herald editor John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park became the nation's first underwater park and signaled the beginning of state and federal meddling in Keys environmental business.

1972 was a watershed year for Florida and the Keys. Amid a spate of high profile state environmental legislation was one which declared all of the Keys an "Area of Critical State Concern," and gave Tallahassee veto power over local decision making. It did not sit well with the Conchs. Ultimately, safety and not the environment put the brakes on Keys growth. As the population grew so did evacuation time, until it became clear that evacuation in the face of an onrushing hurricane would be futile. With nowhere to go, huddling in shelters became the preferred policy option. Offshore things weren't much better, fish populations crashed as commercial and sport fishermen bickered over whose fault it was. The sport fishermen got the better of it, and in 1998 Florida's constitution banned commercial net fishing.

In the early 1990s just to the north, the Florida Everglades had become a national pollution poster child as the federal government sued the state over the 'Glades diminishing water quality. Sensing that cars weren't the only thing that now connected the Keys to the mainland, Keys residents began to see that Florida Bay was the receiving waters for the slow stream of nutrient rich runoff that ran from Orlando South. Keys residents turned out en masse to support the effort to save the Everglades, and maybe Florida Bay, borrowing and bastardizing a Clinton era line, "It's the fish, stupid." The Conchs were decidedly less receptive to the federal government's decision to make everything landward of the high tide line a National Marine Sanctuary, usurping local regulation of the marine environment. The Sanctuary's superintendent hung from the yardarm, in effigy.

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