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Saving the Everglades

The engine that spurred restoration of a dying eco-treasure

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On a sweltering day in June, Florida Gov. Charlie Crist convened a press conference at the edge of the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge near Palm Beach to make a blockbuster announcement. The state, he declared, had agreed to buy the U.S. Sugar Corp. for \$1.75 billion in a bold effort to accelerate restoration of the Everglades. The company's vast swath of land would provide a "missing link" reconnecting Lake Okeechobee with marshlands to the south that depend on it for nourishment. Widely hailed by environmentalists, the deal nevertheless came as a shock to most of them. But not to the folks at the Everglades Foundation, a tiny conservation group that was dialed in to the negotiations months earlier. At the June announcement, its representatives were already armed with gleaming press kits touting the buyout proposal.

The deal has put a spotlight on the foundation, a pint-size powerhouse little known outside Florida, and even within. Though the group didn't play a direct role in striking the accord, it helped pave the way with years of battles against the sugar industry, which is considered a major polluter. Founded by George Barley, a wealthy Orlando developer, and Paul Tudor Jones II, a billionaire Wall Street investor, the Palmetto Bay-based Everglades Foundation is a unique creature in the conservation world. It's not a lefty granola-and-Birkenstock outfit but rather a bipartisan assortment of power brokers, society swells and science whizzes. It has a staff of only 11, yet it wields outsize influence through prodigious fund-raising and well-placed connections. Often, "advocacy organizations take a back seat to special interests," says Eric Draper, policy director for Audubon Florida, which has received funding from the group. But "the Everglades Foundation is one place where environmental advocacy has had a real effect."

The organization boasts a roster of high-profile figures. Its board of directors includes Jimmy Buffett and Jack Nicklaus. Its CEO is Kirk Fordham, a former chief of staff for former U.S. representative Mark Foley and finance director for Sen. Mel Martinez. But the heaviest hitter of them all is Jones, who serves as chairman. With a net worth estimated at \$3.3 billion, he ranks No. 334 on Forbes's 2008 list of the richest Americans. He has injected tens of millions into the foundation and has given generously to both political parties, including \$405,000 to the state GOP only weeks before Crist's 2006 election. A few months after taking office, Crist joined Jones on his boat for a fishing trip in Florida Bay. The two bonded, and Jones impressed upon the governor his passion for Everglades restoration, according to Audubon's Draper and a Crist spokesman (Jones is on vacation and didn't respond to an interview request).

Jones has helped make the foundation a fund-raising force. The group is known for throwing glitzy events, including an annual gala that's been held in recent years at Donald Trump's Mar-A-Lago Club in Palm Beach. At this year's festivities, Diana Ross performed as Everglades advocates hobnobbed with politicians like Crist and Florida Sen. Bill Nelson. Trump gave more than \$50,000, according to CEO Fordham. With events like these, the foundation generated \$4 million in revenues in 2007. In turn, it disbursed \$1.3 million to other organizations like the Sierra Club and World Wildlife Fund.

Meanwhile, a sister entity, the Everglades Trust, handles lobbying in Washington, D.C., and Tallahassee. Among the recent successes its team has contributed to: Congress's passage of the 2007 Water Resources Development Act, which, among other things, authorized spending on Everglades projects, and the Florida legislature's reauthorization this year of the Florida Forever Act, which allows the state to buy up land for restoration purposes.

In recent years, the Everglades Foundation has significantly beefed up its scientific work. For a long time, "the sugar industry in particular would hire ... engineers and consultants that would produce whatever results they wanted, and it would drive a lot of the decision-making in the state and local level," says Fordham. So the foundation responded by conducting its own research that could challenge such data. Led by senior scientist Tom Van Lent, the foundation's four researchers have tackled a variety of issues: how much water the Everglades needs, where exactly it should go, how many acres are necessary to cleanse it before it enters marshlands. During the U.S. Sugar negotiations, Van Lent provided state planners with models showing how the acquired land could be used most effectively. The foundation has "been a fantastic source of not only support but information," says Michael Sole, secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

The Everglades are in dire need of such aid. A century ago, water flowed uninterrupted from the Kissimmee River into Lake Okeechobee and then south through the Everglades before emptying into Florida Bay. But decades of agricultural, residential and commercial development fundamentally altered that ecosystem. Water was drained, rerouted and polluted. As a result, the nation's largest subtropical wilderness--which is home to dozens of federally threatened and endangered species, including the Florida panther and American crocodile--has shrunk to half its former size. It is literally dying.

More than 15 years ago, Jones and his friend Barley grew aghast at this ecological disaster, which was ruining their beloved sport of tarpon fishing with pollution-induced algae blooms. So in 1993, they started the Everglades Foundation. Two years later, however, Barley died in an airplane crash while on the way to a meeting in Jacksonville about the Everglades. At Barley's graveside, his widow, Mary, and Jones vowed to carry on the fight. "We all became more committed," says Mary Barley, now the foundation's vice chair. "It gave me something to do to shut my pain down." One of the foundation's earliest battles, in 1996, was a drive to levy a penny-per-pound pollution tax on sugar growers. Though Jones poured \$11 million into that effort, the industry responded with a \$24 million countercampaign that succeeded in stifling the measure. But another proposal backed by the foundation--a constitutional amendment requiring that polluters bear the brunt of cleanup costs--was approved by voters that same year.

The foundation has found an ally in Crist. When Jones took him on that 2007 fishing trip, he urged the governor to appoint more eco-sensitive people to the South Florida Water Management District, which oversees Everglades projects. Later that year, Crist named a former Everglades Foundation board member, Shannon Estenoz, to the SFWMD's board. Along with other Crist appointees, she helped shift the balance of power away from agribusiness interests. The effect became clear last summer, when the board voted to halt the agricultural industry's longstanding practice of pumping excess water back into Lake Okeechobee.

In response, U.S. Sugar dispatched a few of its lobbyists late last year to complain to Crist, according to the governor's spokesman (the company declined to comment). In the course of that meeting, Crist broached an idea that took the industry representatives by surprise: buying out U.S. Sugar. That launched the discussions that produced the landmark deal, which is scheduled to close in November. The accord is "the most stunning news since we started working on Everglades restoration," says Mary Barley. Her husband would undoubtedly be proud.

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