

The Whales Have Not Been Saved

Aldemaro Romero

Several years ago I attended a ceremony to honor Marjory Stoneman Douglas, the "mother of the Everglades." She was an environmental activist, feminist and independent thinker who died in 1998 at the age of 108. Her name is synonymous with the Everglades because of her tireless, ground-breaking efforts to protect this watery region—a region her adversaries considered a worthless swamp.

Douglas reached notoriety for her best-selling book, *The Everglades: River of Grass*. First published in 1947, *River of Grass* awakened residents and visitors by suggesting the Everglades was a vast, flowing river. Her descriptive, fluid prose portrayed the region's strange beauty and diversity of its wildlife; recounted the history of the native peoples, explorers, and conquerors who traveled there; explained its importance as the region's watershed; and addressed human impact on the fragile ecosystem.

She was also known for her outspokenness.

The master of ceremonies in the event I mentioned earlier introduced Douglas as "the woman who saved the Everglades." Then, while slowly moving her 104 year old body, but with a great deal of determination, nearly brushing aside anyone who tried to help her, she approached the microphone and with her strong voice said one thing and one thing only: "The Everglades have not been saved, yet." The stunned audience then watched her walk back to her chair.

I thought to myself, "How right she is!" And, in that moment many images crossed my mind. Images of a subsidized sugar industry, located in the Everglades Agricultural Area, that had been pouring millions of tons of agrochemicals into the water, changing the water quality of the "river of grass," forever. Images of U.S. agencies that at the beginning of this century, had introduced melaleuca in South Florida swarmed in my brain; melaleuca is an Australian tree famous for sucking up water, and was planted in South Florida to drain the Everglades Swamp. I pondered the uncontrolled urban development in South Florida.

How right Douglas was.

Only two weeks before I wrote this article, three American

environmentalists—two of them people of color who had gone to Colombia to advise indigenous people in their fight against oil exploitation in their native land—had been murdered. I began thinking of the dozens of environmentalists that are captured, tortured, killed, or deemed “missing,” every year around the world, and whose stories are rarely told by the ever growing tabloid “mainstream” media. These are wrongs that are never made right by alleged human rights organizations or by a totally incompetent international justice system.

I remembered reading about the well-organized and better-funded anti-environmental movement: people skillful at twisting the truth, who perfect systems of extracting scientific statements out of context in order to mislead politicians, the media, and, as a consequence, the general public. By doing this, this movement destroys the reputations of all those who actually have an appealing environmental message.

I thought of how the United States has reversed its policy from banning the importation of tuna into this country—if tuna had been caught while killing dolphins—to a new policy that allowed importation “as long as the crew of the ship made significant efforts not to kill dolphins.” The administration I allude to is the same administration that supported the efforts of some Makah in Alaska to resume whaling “for cultural reasons”; never mind that the people had not whaled in over 70 years, and that they were only planning to sell the caught whale meat in the Japanese market. At the same time that these decisions were being made, the Icelandic parliament agreed to demand that the Icelandic government resume commercial whaling, Japan was killing more than 500 whales every year for “research” purposes, and Norwegians killed hundreds of whales, despite a ban on commercial whaling as mandated by the International Whaling Commission.

No, the whales have not been saved. Not yet.

Douglas wrote in her autobiography:

Since 1972, I've been going around making speeches on the Everglades. No matter how poor my eyes are I can still talk. I'll talk about the Everglades at the drop of a hat. Whoever wants me to talk, I'll come over and tell them about the necessity of preserving the Everglades. Sometimes, I tell them more than they wanted to know.

Maybe that is the problem with us. We just don't want to know.

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