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Down in the Swamp

Swamps occur in all parts of the world in low-lying lands near the ocean, and near slow-moving rivers. All swamps have surface water, although there may be more water some times of the year than others.

The most famous swamps in the United States are the **Great Dismal Swamp** near the coast of North Carolina and Virginia, the **Everglades** in Florida, the **Okefenokee Swamp** in Georgia and Florida, and swamps near the **White River** in Arkansas and the **Atchafalaya River** in Louisiana.

Swamps are home to fish, frogs, reptiles, alligators, snakes, and turtles, but there are also animals you might find in a much dryer forest area, like bears, deer, and rabbits. The surface water provides a good breeding ground for insects, and many kinds of birds come to feed on them. Owls and hawks find good hunting in the swamps. Their cries make part of the mysterious night sounds.

Swamp Plants

Many people think of swamps as dark, mysterious places, but some swampland is in sunny, open areas. Swamps may have fresh water or salt water and may be flooded all of the year, or only part of the year. The length of time a swamp is flooded and the depth of the floodwater determine the kinds of plants and trees that grow there.

In very wet swamps, water lilies, duckweed, and other aquatic (water) plants are common. So are poison ivy and other vines. Drier swamps have hardwood trees, like red maples, or even oaks and elms. In areas that are damp but don't flood, algae, lichen, and mosses cover the tree trunks, and there are many wild flowers.

In very wet swamps, poison ivy and other vines wrap around the tree trunks as they grow. In these swamps, an unusual plant called Spanish moss grows on the tree limbs. It lives on the moisture in the air and is a gray-green color.

The Everglades

The Everglades covers 2,746 square miles (7,112 kilometers) in southern Florida, from Lake Okeechobee south to the Bay of Florida and the Gulf of Mexico. There are many types of swamp areas, from the very wet mangrove swamp near the southern end, to the much drier prairie-like area in the northern end. On certain high areas, called *tree islands*, willow, bald cypress, and wax myrtle trees grow.

The Everglades was formed during the Ice Age (between two million and 10,000 years ago). The ice did not come anywhere near Florida, but the movements of the ice made the ocean rise. The area was flooded repeatedly. When the last large ice sheet melted about 10,000 years ago, there was heavy flooding. The outlets of the streams were blocked or destroyed.

Today, the Everglades is a national park, with alligators, deer, fish, panthers, pelicans, and snakes. It is hot and humid in most parts, for most of the year.

The Everglades in Danger

Although many of the animals that live in the swamp have a reputation for being fierce, swamps themselves are a very delicate part of our ecology. When dams are built for flood control, or when rivers are re-routed for irrigation, swamps are easily destroyed unless special care is taken to preserve them.

Let's look at the history of the Everglades to show how this happens. In 1906, the state of Florida began to drain parts of the swamp so that the rich mud that was left could be used for farmland. The state built canals to link Lake Okeechobee to the ocean, and people moved in to raise sugar cane and vegetables.

But there were some problems. The newly-dried soil caught fire easily, and salt water from the ocean sometimes seeped into wells meant for drinking water. Federal government officials noticed these problems and noticed also that the swamp was disappearing. In 1947, the federal government set aside the southwestern part of the swamp as Everglades National Park.

But it was almost too late. After World War II ended in 1945, Florida's population began to increase very rapidly. More people meant a greater demand for space to construct new buildings, and for water.

During the 1960s, the US Army Corps of Engineers built a dam on the Kissimmee River, which runs north of the swamp. The purpose was to direct more water to the growing cities, especially those in southeast Florida. But the dam meant near-disaster for the swamp, because the flow of water into Lake Kissimmee and the swamp areas south of it was cut sharply. The loss of animal life was alarming.

Meanwhile, the population of Florida continued to grow. In 1983, the state of Florida and the federal government started a program to save the swamp. It has three main goals:

1. To restore the Kissimmee River to its original riverbed
2. To re-flood some of the drained marshland to provide habitats for swamp wildlife
3. To plan for the future preservation of the swamp.

Sidebar

Here are some facts on one of the Everglades' most famous residents. Alligators are found in only two parts of the world, the southeastern US (Florida and Louisiana) and southeastern China. Most of them are in the Everglades.

Alligators

- DO bite.
- Get their name from the Spanish word *lagarto*, lizard.
- Can hold their breaths for an hour.
- Have 80 teeth, which grow back if they fall out.
- Have their eyes, ears, and nose on TOP of their heads, so that they can see, hear, and smell while nearly covered with water.
- Make a lot of noises: The babies hiss and grunt, and the adults hiss, bellow, and roar.
- Live 50 years or more if they are left alone (but many are killed for their skins).
- Start out about 8 or 9 inches long but grow to somewhere between 9 and 13 feet.