

**Grandmother of the Everglades**  
**By TERRY ELLIS**  
**Contributing Editor**

‘The miracle of light pours over the green and brown expanse of saw grass and of water, shining and slowly moving...,’ writes Marjory Stoneman Douglas in her book ‘River of Grass,’ the work that changed people’s minds about Florida’s Everglades.

There are no other Everglades in the world.” With this simple statement, Marjory Stoneman Douglas began her 1947 book *River of Grass*. That same year, she helped lead the successful campaign to designate nearly 1.6 million acres as Everglades National Park.

Ms. Douglas died at the age of 108 on May 14 in a small cottage in Miami’s Coconut Grove neighborhood, where she lived for 72 years. She captured the world’s imagination with her book, which was a forerunner to such environmental classics as Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. She skillfully mingled scientific facts about the Everglades with detailed word pictures and romantic lore.

“They are unique in the simplicity, the diversity, the related harmony of the forms of life that they enclose,” Ms. Douglas wrote about the Everglades. “The miracle of light pours over the green and brown expanse of saw grass and of water, shining and slowly moving, the grass and the water that is the meaning and the central fact of the Everglades. It is a river of grass.”

With her words, Ms. Douglas began the work of changing the prevalent view that the Everglades was a poisonous marsh to tamed. From the time of the Spanish conquistadors, the Everglades conjured up in visitors’ minds images of dangerous pirates and outlaws, not to mention poisonous water moccasins and ferocious panthers. Its marshlands were so forbidding that when the Seminoles retreated there, they became the only Native Americans to escape signing a peace treaty.

Douglas, whose parents divorced when she was 6, came to Florida after the 1915 death of her mother. Here she joined her father, founder of the *Miami Herald*. She had been a talented writer since childhood, but she discovered her mission in writing about the land surrounding her new home.

When Douglas arrived in Miami, developers and farmers were beginning to drain the marshes. But the Everglades still extended well into what is now the Greater Miami metropolitan area. Hammocks — islands of trees in the middle of the flowing river of grass — grew where hundreds of planes now land every day at the Miami International Airport.

During her lifetime, the water flowing from the north began to slow and at times stop, and it became increasingly polluted by run-off from pavement and agricultural land. But she never seemed to tire of the battle.

Well into her 90s, she championed the cause of the Everglades, even appearing at planning board meetings in South Florida to convince angry landowners that they shouldn’t drain their swampy land. And her strong voice of reason, still as strong as it was back in 1947, often proved to be the turning point. Over and again, she explained that the river of grass was like a huge circulatory system keeping South Florida alive.

“I’m just a tough old woman,” she once said. She traced her spirit to her father’s Quaker heritage: “Of all the religious people who found refuge in America, the Quakers were the most independent — and the most pigheaded. I feel both independent and pigheaded, as well.” Her ancestors, she pointed out, read books constantly. “They remembered what they read and made up their own minds concerning it,” she said.

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Keywords: Douglas Environmentalists Everglades Grandmother Marjory People Stoneman Tribune World  
Worldview

In 1993, when she was 103, President Bill Clinton awarded Douglas the Presidential Medal of Freedom, calling her the Grandmother of the Everglades. The organization, she helped found, Friends of the Everglades, continues to be instrumental.

On June 2, Joette Lorion, third president of the Friends of the Everglades, was out on the river of grass with 70 school children wearing T-shirts they designed in Ms. Douglas' honor. That day, they joined the ranks of a thousand students who are Young Friends of the Everglades.

"The voice of the river is not still, as some people have said about Marjory's death," said Lorion. "Her voice and spirit remains with us and the thousands of people all over the world she inspired."

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