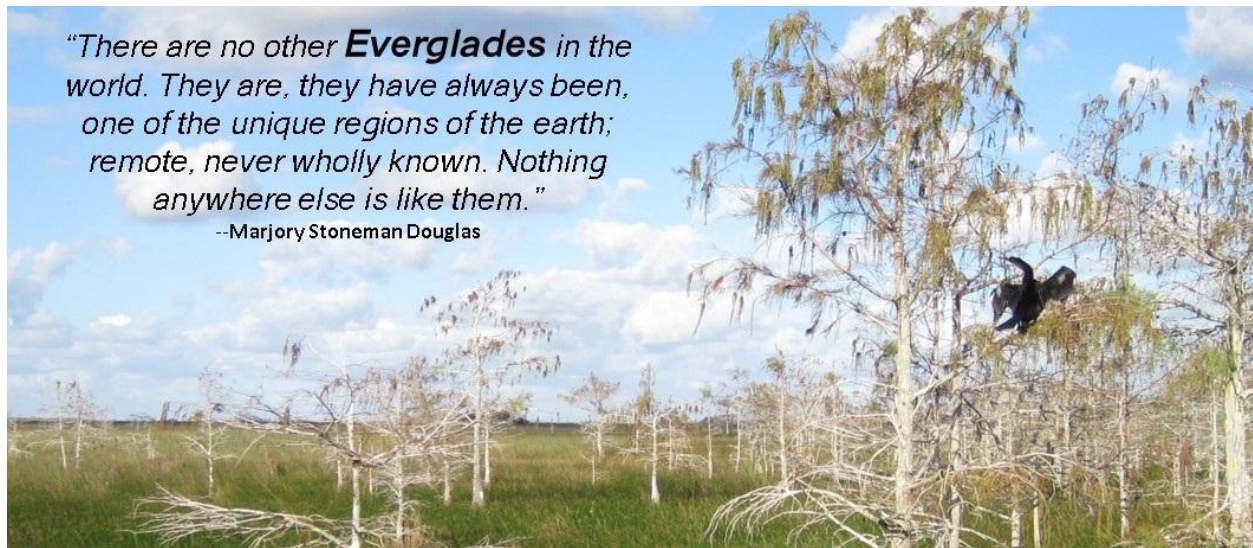




Organizational Information

Instructor:

Dan Shustack, Ph.D.

D.Shustack@mcla.edu

225D FCSI

413-662-5301

Office hours: by appointment

Class meeting times:

- Travel dates: 10 days/9 nights over spring break 2027** (exact dates dependent on final airline scheduling and will be finalized later this semester)
- Two ~2 hour in-person sessions TBA during spring semester before travel
NOTE: These sessions are MANDATORY for reviewing course materials and planning for packing and materials for the trip. We will schedule these sessions based on participants' schedules.
- The evening before our departure, we will finalize packing for an early departure the next morning.
- ON-LINE: Prior to course travel, there are required reading and research assignments that must be completed. You will meet with Dan to review these readings.

Cost of the 2027 trip: \$1550 total: \$775 deposit and enrollment due by **Oct. 23, 2026** & \$775 due Jan. 29, 2027

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Requirements:

- Species report (20%)
- Site visit/theme report (20%)
- Pre-trip planning, overview and packing meetings (10%)
- Reading assignments (20%)
- Course journal (20%)
- Course and travel participation (10%)

Prerequisite: permission of the instructor. You must have permission from Dr. Shustack before you can sign up for the course. Reach out to chat about whether this class is a good fit for you.

Textbook and additional materials:

There are two required books for this course:

1. [*The Swamp*](#), by Michael Grunwald, 2006.
2. [*A Land Remembered*](#), by Patrick Smith, 1984.

Additional pdfs and weblinks will be posted on Canvas. You are expected to locate additional sources for your species report and site theme papers.

Canvas Course Area:

Course materials including descriptions of assignments and travel planning information will be available through Canvas. The two required reports and reading assignments should be submitted on Canvas.



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Course Summary

Florida is a state with a rich history, a diverse ecology, and a dynamic present. During this extended field trip, we will explore the historical and contemporary interactions of people with their environment, with the goal of understanding why modern environmental issues and conditions of ecosystems are the way they are. We will consider the human history (including Calusa [Native Americans], Spanish, and US colonists) and the historical and modern ways in which people have altered the Florida landscape and existed in Florida. During site visits to preserves and natural areas, students will learn about and explore the ecology, characteristic species, natural communities and ecosystems of Florida. Through a series of site visits and on-site presentations, students will consider modern conservation issues confronting Florida. Some of these issues include: agricultural practices, development pressures, Everglades management, threatened and endangered species management, water conservation and others. During this travel course we will be camping in state and federal parks and visiting diverse natural, cultural and historical sites throughout the Everglades and south Florida. Students should be prepared for physically demanding days and active participation in all aspects of the course.

Graded Activities

NOTE: This course is structured so it is “front-loaded” so all the work is completed prior to our travel. If you complete your journal during the trip (encouraged!), all the requirements of this course will be completed at the end of our trip. This does mean that there is a good amount of work to do beforehand, with weekly assignments due during this timeframe.

Required Reading: You are expected to read two assigned course books. One book is a historical fiction about Florida human, cultural, and ecological history from ~1840–the present. This book, *A Land Remembered*, is pretty light reading, and I hope you enjoy this book as much as I do! The other book is a dense book about the ecological history of South Florida. You will meet with

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Dan to discuss *A Land Remembered*. You will annotate your personal copy of *The Swamp* and meet with Dan to discuss that book as well.

Species Report: In consultation with the instructor, each student will select one species or natural community found in Florida. Students will generate a 1200–1500 word report summarizing relevant biology and ecology of this species or natural community. The report should also describe the threats and conservation actions for this species or community. When we encounter this species or community during our field trip, students will give an informal presentation to the rest of the group about this species. During your research phase of this report, you will meet with Dan to demonstrate the progress of your research and understanding on the topic.

Site visit/theme report: Each student will select one topic or theme related to a specific site we will visit in South Florida. Each student should generate a 1200–1500 word report that summarizes the importance of this topic or theme. Major themes and lessons learned from this site should also be described. When we reach a relevant site during our field trip, the student will serve as our “expert” by providing an introduction and overview for this topic. The “expert” will help focus the attention of the other students on key aspects of this topic. During your research phase of this report, you will meet with Dan to demonstrate the progress of your research and understanding on the topic.

Trip planning: Prior to leaving on this trip, attendance at two overview and planning sessions are required. As a group we will coordinate to ensure that meals are planned and equipment requirements are met for all participants. As a class we will approach this course as a learning community where all participants collaborate to participate in a fruitful and enjoyable experience. These meetings are part of establishing this important group rhythm and interactions. (Having taken student groups on this trip previously [in 2012, 2014, 2015, 2017, 2019, and 2025], I can say that these group dynamics are a very rewarding aspect of this course.)

Journal: The journal should be written while we are on our travel in Florida. Journal entries should be copious and frequent. Your journal should include several major components including 1) observations about what you see, experience or read, 2) further questions that come to mind based on your observations, 3) thoughts that relate your observations to prior experiences and comparisons with Massachusetts, 4) subjective, personal reflections on what you are learning and experiencing, 5) anything else you think is worth

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writing down! You will be graded based on insightful and meaningful journal entries that clearly demonstrate your processing and learning of concepts and content. You will also be given several directed entries throughout the trip. Journals are due two weeks after we return from Florida. I recommend a size A5 journal. For each day, write one page summarizing the day's activities, and write one page that connects that day to your prior reading and research for this course.

Equipment (final packing list will be provided during planning meetings)

Tent (or space in someone else's; must have rain fly and good staking system)*
Tent ground tarp (recommended)
Sleeping bag (for March, I recommend a 50 degree bag + blanket)*
Sleeping pad (optional)
Field clothes (we will be able to do laundry every 3-4 days; field pants that unzip to make shorts are really handy)
Warm clothes in layers
Winter hat
Rain gear
Field guides (optional)
Towel/wash cloth
Hat with visor (highly recommended!)
Binoculars*
Camera (optional)
Two pairs of sneakers: one to stay dry and one to get mucky and wet (should lace up; boots and sandals are not recommended).
Swimsuit
Refillable water bottle
Day backpack
Flip-flops/sandals
Headlamp*
Notebook/pen/pencil

* The ENVI Department has headlamps, tents, sleeping bags and binoculars that you can borrow.

Space will be tight. Please pack your gear in soft-sided baggage (e.g., a duffle bag, would be ideal).

We will be camping throughout the 10 day/9 night trip. Nearly all meals will be prepared at camp on camp stoves. During our pre-trip planning meetings we

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will ensure that all students have the required camping materials. The ENVI program will group materials for our use including camping stoves, food preparation equipment, eating utensils, coolers, etc. The only gear you must provide yourself is your clothes and personal hygiene products.

Policies

Cost of trip: All costs associated with the trip are included in the additional course fee. You will not need to bring any cash or money *except* for sodas and junk food at pit stops, souvenirs, and any airport food. I am very meticulous in budgeting in order to get the best prices for our experiences.

Payment schedule:

\$775 deposit is due by Oct 16, 2026, after your participation in the course is confirmed

\$775 balance is due by January 29, 2027

All payments should be made to the MCLA Bursar specifically indicating “Florida travel course, 2027.”

The deposit is nonrefundable because you will have an airplane ticket with your name on it. This policy is necessary in order to keep trip costs as low as possible. See the FAQ below for explanation of these policies. If *at any point* you decide to cancel your participation, your cancellation must be in writing to Prof. Shustack. You must be enrolled in the course to participate in this class.

Attendance policy:

All students are expected to participate in all activities while in Florida. (If you decide to stay at camp one day you might get left behind as we will be constantly on the move!) All students are also expected to participate in all pre-trip meetings during the semester prior to our trip.

Late Assignment Policy:

The species report and site visit report are due before we leave for the field trip. Assignments that are not completed before we depart will be reduced by 50%. Journals are due 2 weeks after we return from Florida (although you are encouraged to submit journals *as soon as* we arrive back to campus). Your

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possible score will be reduced 25% for each week your journal is late. There is a two day grace period on weekly reading assignments, after which time they will not be accepted for credit.

Laptop and Technology Policy:

Students are welcome to bring their technology with them on the trip to Florida. Opportunities for charging batteries may be limited. Technology should be used in an appropriate and respectful way. For example, you should turn off your phones when taking a tour, in a visitor center, etc. Security for electronics and valuables will be very limited (e.g., locked in a blazing hot van). Each individual assumes the responsibility for any lost electronics or other equipment.

Communications:

Prior to the course travel, email is the preferred method of contact with me. You are also welcome to call me at school (413-662-5301 or by cell 240-469-8388). While on our trip in Florida you will be able to personally contact me at any time. Prior to our trip, I will collect emergency contact information. You are encouraged to share my contact information with a responsible adult at home while we are on our trip.

Academic conduct:

The MCLA policy on academic conduct applies to this course.

Miscellaneous and Frequently asked Questions:

1. **Will this class count towards anything?** I assume you mean besides the life experience and awesome things you will learn. For ENVI majors, this course will satisfy one of your ENVI electives requirements. For all MCLA students, this will counts towards the 39 required upper level credits. This course also counts towards the requirements for the Outdoor Leadership Minor.
2. **What is the weather like in South Florida in March?** Daytime highs average in the 70s-80s and nighttime lows in the upper 50s to low 70s. For us northerners going to FL in March, it typically feels *very* hot. March is still in the dry season of the subtropics of South Florida. However, rain is still possible. Bring a rain jacket, and layers of clothes to adjust to variable temperatures.
3. **What is the format of the course?** This is an intense field-based course. There are several pre-field trip components. You will need to

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do some background reading and writing on your two selected topics before we leave for the trip. You will have to write two papers to be submitted before we depart. We will have two group pre-trip overview and planning meetings. You will also have a few small group or 1:1 meetings with me in the first half of the semester to review the required readings and progress on the research for your reports. The rest of the course is online or in the field in Florida. The days are long but rewarding! We will always be starting early, usually by 8 am, and a couple days we will start closer to 6 or 7 am. Every day will be packed with multiple activities including hikes, tours, swimming, canoe paddling, etc. with conservationists, rangers, and ecologists. The day will “end” with our group dinner between 5-8 p.m. Each night at dinner I’ ll give a mini lecture on the material for the next day and we will also use this time for informal student presentations (i.e., no Powerpoints, a verbal presentation and Q&A based on the research you did before the trip). You should not have any trouble falling asleep each night! Each day will be packed and different!

4. **How much time will I need to devote to this course?** You will need several hours each week prior to our trip. I recommend you read the two course books over the winter break. Then, do your two reports during the semester before our trip. We have a couple in-person meetings before we leave. During our trip, you will have some down time, like riding in the airplane, the van, or between activities. In general, don’ t plan on trying to complete any major assignments during our travel. Once we return from the trip, there are no further scheduled class meetings. The only remaining requirement is submission of the journal, if you haven’ t already done that.
5. **Will we spend the whole trip sunbathing on the beach?** We will certainly be exploring coastal systems, including sandy coastlines. On previous trips, we had two “beach days” each with ~1-2 hours of free time allotted to spending time on the sandy beaches of Key Largo, Sanibel Island, Marco Island, Fort De Soto Park, or a similar location. However, this is only a couple hours out of the whole trip. So, in general, we won’ t be sunbathing and sipping drinks on the beach.
6. **Will I still be able to get a suntan on this trip?** Probably- that is, if you don’ t cover up with a hat, long sleeves and sunscreen. But if you don’ t cover up you will also get more scratches, bug bites and muck on you too. Really, we’ ll be IN Florida. My goal for this trip is for

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every participant to experience the REAL, natural Florida as much as possible. Over the years, I have absolutely fallen in love with this amazing landscape, and I want to share this with you!

7. **What about dangerous animals?** They are all over South Florida. Alligators are the obvious dangerous animals. There are also snakes and biting insects. There are poisonous plants that can put you in the hospital. These are all part of the South Florida environment that we will explore but not encounter *too* closely. Someone will probably be bitten by a fire ant or two. It's inevitable, but not deadly, unless you have allergies to biting insects (which I'll ask about and we'll prepare for ahead of time). If you do have allergies of any kind be sure to bring your medicine and let me know. (I will ask, too.) There are spiders. They are not going to jump out of the trees, but they are around and it's really amazing to "spotlight" for spiders at night. We'll do this at least once. Depending on the weather, we may also have a chance to spotlight for alligators. This is a memorable experience!
8. **Why do I have to be able to swim?** We will likely be paddling canoes or kayaks one or more times, plus going on a snorkeling trip. You should be able to swim to participate in these activities. You don't have to be an excellent swimmer, but being comfortable in the water is important. You will have a life jacket available to wear for these.
9. **What is included in the trip fee?** Here is what is *not* included: anything you buy at the airports: souvenirs, and junk food and soda, and any clothes or equipment you have to purchase (i.e., you need your own sleeping bag, but ENVI has some really warm ones to loan out) and costs of doing laundry. You should bring a couple dollars in *quarters* to do your laundry, perhaps in a group with two or three other people to share a load. We will have a chance to do laundry at least twice during the trip. Everything else is included: transportation to the airport from North Adams, airfare, ground transportation in FL, admission and costs for all activities in FL, snacks, all meals and beverages in FL, etc. Airport food is on your own.
10. **Are there any hidden fees?** Not that I know of. I suggest bringing \$40 in cash for any souvenirs you might want to buy. Most places will take a debit or credit cards, Apple Pay, etc., too. If you like candy bars and soda you should plan to buy those on your own.

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11. **Why is the trip fee what it is?** I realize this cost for going to Florida might seem high. The major costs of this trip are the airfare and minivan rentals. Over six previous trips, these have accounted for 50-63% of the total trip cost. I always do my best to reserve the best rates possible, but there is much outside of my control. This trip is during spring break- when demand for airfare and car rentals are super-high in FL. As soon as everyone submits their deposits, I will buy the airfare to lock in the lowest price possible. Unfortunately, this tends to go up over time. In order to get the best prices possible, I have everyone submit the large deposit in mid-fall semester. That allows me to price out the best airfare options and lock those in. Still, the airfare and baggage fees are a substantial part of our budget.
12. **What will happen if there is a weather delay at the airport?** If our trip is delayed or altered due to weather (e.g., snow delays at airports) or circumstances outside my control, I may have limited ability to change the situation. We will do our best to maintain our schedule.
13. **What travel documents do I need?** For the airport, you need a government-issued form of identification. A state driver's license or state id card or a passport will work. You also **MUST** bring your MCLA college id on our trip. Your college id might be needed for one or more of the activities we do on the trip.
14. **Do I have to meet in North Adams before traveling to Florida?** Yes. We will meet in North Adams the evening before our flight to Florida. We will have a "packing party" where we will pack all our gear to make sure everyone has everything (tents, sleeping bags, cooking gear, etc., etc.). The next day, we will travel as a group to the airport and fly together to Florida.
15. **Where will I sleep before or after our trip?** I confirmed with ResLife (Brendon Goodrich) that MCLA on-campus housing is open throughout spring break in case we leave or return during that interval. For example, if we leave on Saturday morning, the dorms are open on Friday night so you can still stay in your dorm that night.
16. **Why is the payment schedule the way it is?** This trip takes a lot of advance planning and coordination and making payments well in advance of our departure. By the time you have read this I've already started

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to make reservations for this trip. About 7-8 months before our trip I have to make campsite reservations at several state and national parks. These reservations have to be paid upfront. Purchasing the airline tickets is our most expensive item and these need to be paid for in advance. Your deposit goes for this cost. The College (MCLA) requires all money be paid and in the college's Florida trip account before the trip is permitted to depart.

17. **What happens if the trip runs over budget?** I try to budget very conservatively so this will not happen. In six previous class trips we have come under budget (by 11%-24%) each time and students have received a refund. I have used these prior costs to try to more accurately budget this current trip. Plane tickets, gasoline and food prices and even the van rental rates all can fluctuate between now and when the prices are "locked-in," so please expect to pay the full amount by the deadlines posted above.
18. **How many people can go on the trip?** There are spaces for 8-9 students. This group size is based on fitting our gear and ourselves into the van or vans we rent. I am also interested in maximizing each individual's experience on the trip. Group size also influences per person costs because of the shared costs of the van rental(s), gasoline, and campsites.
19. **Will I have any free time to explore on my own?** Most days will be scheduled from ~8 am to ~8 pm. I am really trying to build in as much amazing experiential activity as possible each day. At each site there will be some free time in small chunks of time (15-45 minutes). There will be one or two larger blocks (2-3 hours) of free time at a couple points during the trip. I will always give optional activities during this "free time," or you might choose to do some other activity like hiking, taking a nap, photography, or catching up on journaling. You will NOT have time to go a club, resort, or to see your grandmother in Naples. Please do not ask to use the rental vans during these times. I promise, you will not have time to get bored during this trip!
20. **Will I have time to go shopping?** We'll go to the grocery store to buy food and some supplies. There will be a couple gift shops at visitor centers at places like state and national parks and refuges. You will have some incidental opportunities to buy trinkets along the way, but we will not be seeking out these opportunities.

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21. **What will we eat?** We will take turns cooking dinner at our campsites. We' ll have a hearty dinner each night. We will eat dinner as a group. Breakfast and lunch will be on-your-own, meaning you can prepare whatever you want from the cache of food in the coolers and vans. We' ll keep a supply of bread, wraps, cheeses, crackers, corn chips, salsa, oatmeal, granola bars, cereal, eggs, pb&j, fruits and veggies, juices, and whatever else you want. No raw meat will be permitted in the coolers. Already cooked meats (i.e., deli meats) can be carefully wrapped and stored in the coolers and be used for breakfast or lunch. Dinners will be vegetarian as we will all be sharing the same dinner. Don' t worry omnivores, we' ll still eat very well!
22. **Will I really see or do anything new in Florida? After all I' ve been to Disney and Miami Beach.** Well, if you' ve only been to Disney and Miami Beach you haven' t seen the parts of Florida that we' ll visit on this trip. Mickey Mouse is cool, but that' s not really Florida. On this trip we' ll be investigating the unique ecological, geological and human history components that make Florida what it is.
23. **Can I use financial aid for the additional course fee?** Yes, I think so. Please see the financial aid office to find out these details. I' m not sure exactly how that works, but definitely ask them ASAP.
24. **I' ve never been camping before. Can I still do this?** Sure, as long as you are flexible and willing to learn. You will quickly learn how to set up a tent and cook over a camp stove. Each pair will take turns cooking dinner for the group on one night. You' ll learn how to do this as well. I keep this camping pretty low-key. We are not backpacking, but "car camping," meaning we will have access to the items store in the vehicles.
25. **Do I have to sleep in a tent?** Of course not! You are welcome to sleep under the stars, but hotels or campers are not an option. On one trip one person chose to sleep in the car. I do not recommend this as it gets very steamy and your classmates may be coming and going to get their supplies.
26. **This is an upper level course. Do I need to be a junior or senior?** Not necessarily. You will be permitted to take this course

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with my permission. *In general, I am looking for individuals with a thirst for knowledge and an adventurous spirit.* Some environmental background (i.e., ENVI 150/152 or self-taught knowledge) is helpful. If you have not previously taken a course with me or I do not know you otherwise, I will conduct an informal “interview” with you to get a sense of whether you would be a good fit for this group. The cohesion of this group is critical to a successful trip. There is no room for bad attitude or those who are not flexible and willing to go with the group.

27. **How does the registration work for this course?** Because of the requirements for planning this trip I need to confirm your participation before you can register. You will need to:
- sign up with me.
 - submit payments to the Bursar (\$775 deposit); The Bursar will only accept payments from students who have been approved to participate.
 - Register for the class during fall registration later this semester.
28. **Will there be access to toilets and showers?** Yes. We will have some day trips into more remote areas without facilities. However, most nights we will camp at a developed campground at state or national parks. There you will have access to showers, running water and flush toilets. We may have one or two nights without running water directly at the campsite.
29. **Can I bring my electronics?** Sure, but it is up to you to secure them. A hot car is often not a good mix for electronics. I do not recommend you bring laptops, although people have done it in the past. A tablet would probably be ok. Phones, no problem. Most of the developed camp sites (state parks) will have outlets for charging. You will also be able to charge electronics while we are driving around.
30. **Can I use my phone?** Sure, no problem. Just keep it to appropriate times like your individual time after dinner. Some of the sites we will visit may not have cell service, depending on your service provider. AT&T seems to have the most reliable service throughout the areas we visit. Verizon and Sprint might not work in some places.

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Please don't expect to have copious amounts of time for personal conversations (e.g., daily 60 min phone class with a BFF back home). If you use your phone for music, please plan to have ear buds or airpods so you aren't sharing your music. Also, please keep those to your private times, as well.

31. **How physically demanding is this course?** Florida is quite flat so we are not climbing mountains, but you should be able to be active for the duration of a day, hiking, paddling, etc. You will certainly need some stamina and *be able to remain active for long days*. We can chat further if this is something you might be concerned about. For northerners, going to FL in March can be HOT! We will be attentive to staying hydrated and seeking shade. Stamina is crucial though so you can fully enjoy everything we do each day.

32. **Is there other financial assistance?** MCLA offers small [travel course scholarships](#) for students who meet the eligibility guidelines. The applications are due in the fall.

33. **Can I smoke (anything) and drink alcohol on this trip?** I don't even know what MCLA's policy is on this, but it doesn't matter. However, MY policy for this trip is NO and NO – please no smoking anything and no drinking alcohol. Your age doesn't matter for this policy. On past trips, I have received comments from other students about classmates that created uncomfortable situations, so I have concluded that this is the best policy for the goals of our trip. Thanks for your understanding and cooperation.

34. **If I'm interested, what is my next step?** Send me an email to tell me this. I will want to chat with you to make sure this is a good fit for you and then we can talk about next steps.

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Sample Itinerary from a previous trip. The 2027 trip will be a different.

date	location	Site Visit Themes
7-Jan	depart Albany to Tampa Bay	
	Orange picking ar hydroponic farm	
	night: Alafia River State Park	phosphate mining, reclamation
8-Jan	Lithia Springs	water use in FL, springs, ground water extraction
	Paynes Creek SP	Crackers, cattle, Peace River, Seminoles, pioneers
	night: Alafia River State Park	phosphate mining, reclamation
9-Jan	Lake Wales Ridge	oranges, development
	TNC Tiger Creek- hike in scrub on ridge	scrub conservation, geology
	Highlands Hammock State Park	rare species, Land Conservation, TNC
	night: Kissimmee Prairie Preserve	
10-Jan	Kissimmee Prairie Preserve	hikes, cattle industry, Kissimmee River, rare birds, fire
	night: Kissimmee Prairie Preserve	burrowing owls, hammocks
11-Jan	Lake Ochechobee	water management, US Army Corp, agriculture
	Everglades Ag. Area	sugar, restoration, Redlands Agricultural area
	night: Everglades National Park	
12-Jan	Everglades, canoe in mangroves, visitor centers	ecology, wildlife, habitats, Florida Bay estuaries
	night: Everglades National Park	Fl. Panther
13-Jan	Pennecamp State Park	Coastal ecology, Florida Keys, reefs, snorkling
	Windley Key State park	geology, Overseas Railroad, tourism
	night: Everglades National Park	
14-Jan	Big Cypress National Preserve swamp walk	conservation, wildlife, ecology, Audubon, alligators
		orchids, water in Everglades
	night: Koreshan State Historic Site	
15-Jan	Ding Darling National Wildlife Refuge	NWR system, Calusa Indians, birds, wildlife
	Bowman's Beach	dunes, coastal ecology, land conservation
	Manatee Park	manatees, county-level conservation
	night: Little Manatee River State Park	
16-Jan	fly home to Albany	

