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Minimizing the inheritance of loss

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Recently I read *The Inheritance of Loss*, a novel portraying political conflict and war in northeast India. Afterwards, it occurred to me that what Audubon of the Western Everglades and other environmental organizations in Southwest Florida are struggling to achieve is to minimize the inheritance of loss of environmental treasures that we have had the opportunity to enjoy but which we fear our offspring will not.

American Indian groups have traditionally believed that the environment is not what we bequeath to the following generations but what they loan to us. Unfortunately, however, in practice it does not seem to work that way.

In Florida since the 1830s, wildlife has been decimated, water has been polluted and vast expanses of wilderness have been whittled down to make way for development. Since the late 1800s, environmentalists have tried to minimize such losses with some successes, but an overall trend toward loss persists.

It should be noted that AWE does not believe that all development is bad. Growing populations need places to live and jobs to sustain them. The goal instead is smart growth, which assures that development takes place where it does the least environmental damage and minimizes loss of the very features which people come to southwest Florida for in the first place — abundant wildlife, beautiful vistas of open space, and ample supplies of drinking and irrigation water. If those assets are short sightedly destroyed, those considering Florida destinations will look elsewhere, and we will succeed in killing the goose that lays the golden eggs.

Minimizing inheritance of loss occurs one battle — often somewhat limited in scope — at a time.

Recently, the Southwest Florida Community Foundation provided a grant to AWE to conduct one of those battles. Since the late 1800s, wetlands have fallen victim to development across southern Florida. Half of the original Everglades has disappeared.

Southwest Florida has lost half of its original wetlands as well as 70 percent of short hydro-period (seasonally wet) wetlands and 80 percent of wet prairies. In the last two decades, Lee and Collier counties have been deprived of over 36,000 acres of wetlands in spite of a national policy dating back to President George Herbert Walker Bush demanding no further wetland losses.

And what difference does that make? Those wetlands are required to recharge the aquifers that provide us with drinking water. Those wetlands provide habitat to the wildlife many of us love. Those wetlands provide vast natural vistas.

Wetland losses stem largely from poor enforcement of flawed regulations by permitting agencies such as Florida Department of Environmental Protection, The Army Corps of Engineers, and Water Management districts.

Hence AWE is working with those agencies to persuade them to modify the criteria that allow the losses. Part of that process involves generation of public support in specific instances where the criteria appear to be

failing. Should AWE and its allies be successful, we can hope for an end to wetland losses first in southwest Florida and ultimately in the state as a whole. Should we fail, the inheritance of loss will continue unabated. †

— For further information on AWE, see www.audubonwe.org or call 643- 7822.

— This summer, the Southwest Florida Community Foundation is spotlighting the nonprofit organizations funded through the 2017 competitive grant cycle. We have asked our 2017 grantees to send us their stories. The foundation is pleased to partner with these change- makers.

— The foundation Lee, Collier, Charlotte, Hendry and Glades counties. It has provided more than \$67 million in grants and scholarships to the communities it serves since inception. For more information, visit www.FloridaCommunity.com or call 274-5900.