





U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke, left, discusses the damage from Hurricane Irma in Everglades National Park with Park Superintendent Pedro Ramos, center, and Sen. Marco Rubio. (Li Cohen)

EVERGLADES NATIONAL PARK — Similar to the rest of South Florida, Everglades National Park didn't escape Hurricane Irma's wrath in September. To better understand the extent of the damage and prepare a relief plan, U.S. Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke and Sen. Marco Rubio visited the area Oct. 7.

The Flamingo Marina and Visitor Center, for example, took a hard hit from the storm. Flooding, debris and some structural damage devastated the building, approximately 40 miles in from the park entrance. Sand and water completely covered parts of the floor.

The campgrounds near this area also saw damage, as flooding destroyed trees and created conditions unsafe for visitors. Though the Flamingo portion of the park is open, there are still no visitor services available. Other areas of the National Park are fully accessible.

Led by Everglades Park Superintendent Pedro Ramos, Zinke and Rubio walked through National Park campgrounds, the Flamingo Marina and Visitor Center and other sections of the park to the rebuilding process with park officials, which Rubio said will make the park even better than before.

"This is an enormous part of our identity as a state and an incredible part of our economy," Rubio said of the park, where he recounted spending memorable experiences with his family. "This is a key part of what we wanted to see here today and to be able to go back and work with our colleagues, both in the administration and in Congress, to make sure we rebuild and bring back the facilities like this in the Everglades stronger than ever."

Zinke estimates repairing the Everglades will take millions of dollars. Though costly, he said that repairing communities and parks is crucial, not only for stewardship and protection, but also for the global community.

"I look at what I can do as a secretary to accelerate cleaning up and getting the Everglades back in line," he said. "It's nice to see us all working together for a higher purpose. I wish Congress would take our cue."

To Zinke, a former Navy SEAL, the government should always fund the military and public lands. He explained that the process in securing contracts between the federal government and national parks

must be accelerated, as does getting bureaucracy out of that process. He plans to take what he saw along the tour back to Washington and work on lengthening the terms of the Everglades National Parks contracts and complete tasks provided by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

“The parks system is not a Democrat or Republican issue; it’s an American issue,” he said.

U.S. Rep. Brian Mast, a Republican from Florida’s 18th congressional district, joined Zinke and Rubio on the tour. Mast stated that the Department of the Interior is consistently responsive to issues that arise. He commended Zinke and Rubio for their efforts to help rebuild the Everglades.

“It’s been a major effort from the federal level to the state level to the local level,” Mast said. “Everybody’s coming on board to get the job done.”

The visit to the Everglades was part of Zinke’s three-day tour of South Florida areas, including the Herbert Hoover Dike at Lake Okeechobee and Big Cypress National Preserve. At the preserve, Zinke discussed recovery efforts with park officials, cleared debris along the trails and helped reopen some access to the public. Many parts of the preserve remain closed due to debris and damage.

As of late October, Everglades National Park remained partially closed as officials repair damages. The Department of the Interior oversees all national park services and will post updates on Everglades closures at [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov).

Please follow and like us:



Originally Printed by The Seminole Tribune