NEWS RELEASE

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EFFECTS OF HURRICANE ANDREW BEING ASSESSED

National wildlife refuges in South Florida apparently survived Hurricane Andrew with only minor damage, according to James W. Pulliam, Jr., the Service's Southeast Regional Director. Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge at Key Largo, however, remains a concern since the storm center passed nearby. An onsite evaluation of destruction has not been made due to the difficulty of local travel. Preliminary reports indicate only minor tree and roof damage at other refuge sites.

The hurricane wove a path between Arthur R. Marshall Loxahatchee and J. N. "Ding" Darling National Wildlife Refuges to the north and National Key Deer Refuge to the south. By the time it passed directly over Florida panther National Wildlife Refuge near Naples much of its force had dissipated.

Andrew's effects on wildlife resources are still being assessed. Of more than 70 endangered or threatened species native to Florida, four may be directly affected. In addition to loss of individuals, habitat destruction for the American crocodile, Key Largo woodrat, Key Largo cotton mouse, and Schaus swallowtail butterfly, is likely. Several other endangered species, the Cape Sable seaside sparrow, Everglade snail kite, wood stork, and Florida panther, may also suffer detrimental effects.

Total harm will not be known for several months. The Service is in the process of developing proposals to monitor damages from the hurricane on local wildlife species.

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Assessment of Hurricane Andrew's Environmental Impact Has Begun

A cooperative multi-agency effort is underway to assess the environmental impacts of Hurricane Andrew on the south Florida ecosystem. The storm, which crossed Biscayne National Park, Everglades National Park and Big Cypress National Preserve on its way through Florida, had a major impact on the natural resources of the region. The nature and extent of that impact will take weeks or months to identify, but the first steps toward gaining that knowledge are already being taken.

The National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, South Florida Water Management District, Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission and other state and federal agencies have mobilized to begin collecting data that will help scientists measure the effects of the storm and the natural progress toward recovery. Within 48 hours of the storm, park rangers and scientists took overflights to visually survey its effects. Plans are being made to immediately conduct aerial photography which will serve as a record of conditions after the hurricane as well as to provide a baseline from which to measure recovery of vegetation.

Concern has been expressed about the welfare of the region's abundant wildlife, which includes many threatened or endangered species. Wildlife population assessments, including inventories of the birdlife, are being planned as part of the overall monitoring effort. Many of the endangered Florida panthers wear radio tracking collars so scientists can study their habits and movements. Tracking flights by Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission biologists soon after the storm indicated that the collared panthers survived.

One of the first tasks for the National Park Service is to restore the South Florida Research Center facilities located at Everglades National Park. The scientists stationed there will play a key role in assessing impacts of the storm and developing research projects to answer key questions about short and long term ecological effects of major hurricanes such as Andrew.

The Everglades and Big Cypress areas of south Florida are no strangers to hurricanes. Through the centuries, hurricanes have influenced the topography and vegetation of the area, and the ecosystem is well adapted to periodic major disturbances. Indeed, there are strong indications that the long-term welfare of the natural south Florida environment depends on hurricanes to release nutrients, restore water levels and flow patterns, and maintain characteristic vegetation. This process is among those which will be studied by scientists in the months and years to come.