



Professor William J. Mitsch, Chair of the USNRC, was invited to present the keynote address at a wetland conference in Cuba in early November 2015. Below are his reflections on the trip in three installments. There were frequent discussions on Ramsar sites in the U.S. and Cuba and the conference itself was held adjacent to Zapata Swamp, a Cuban Ramsar site.

Thursday November 5, 2015

1. Back from a whirlwind 4-day visit to Cuba

I am back already from a whirlwind 4-day visit to Cuba.

From my first trip to Cuba, I enjoyed the culture, the people, the nature, the architecture, and the hospitality, albeit in a country that is still strapped for cash to do anything these days. The Cubans are both optimistic that the US people will be coming to Cuba in droves but fear that they will overwhelm their infrastructure (or lack thereof). They are proud of their revolutionary days in the late 1950s and early 1960s but in an exceedingly intellectual way (Castro and Che Guevara were both trained by the Jesuits!).

Many of us formed our opinions of Cuba when we were just little kids--not knowing what to make of all the news we heard (or only heard in bits and pieces) from Huntley and Brinkley on NBC: the Cuban revolution, the Bay of Pigs Invasion, the Cuban Missile Crisis and that Argentinian enigma Che Guevara (pictured here on a government building in Havana). He is essentially their George Washington (or Lafayette?) and his remains are now buried in Cuba.

It would be quite smart if both we in the USA and the Cubans let go of some of our perceptions and even anger from long ago. If we treat Cuba as an equal and not a colony, a wonderful new and long-lasting friendship may eventually happen. I am hoping to see that in my lifetime.



Feature of Che Guevara on building in the center of Havana Cuba

Question: What level of freedom do people have to chart their own course, freedom to speak and believe what they wish?

Answer: Probably more than we perceive, but less than they want. A vibrant economy could change all of that in addition to a more democratic choice of their leadership. Castro, in some ways, became a reincarnation of Batista but from a completely different political direction. I saw several discussions related to natural resource management where opinions were freely given without the participants looking around to see if the Party was there too. But I saw happy people (I was in private homes as well as at conferences) and that has to count for something too. Even with all of their diverse cultures, I view Cuba as an economically poor but culturally rich Spain/Soviet Union combination. Get rid of the totalitarian USSR-type control, and it could be a wonderful "European" country for us to visit that is sure a lot closer than Europe itself. Those are my thoughts for what it could be.

Friday November 6, 2015

2. My Cuba Visit--- International Wetland Symposium, Peninsula de Zapata, and Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs)

The most fascinating parts of my trip to Cuba were the two days I spent at Playa Giron on Cuba's southern shoreline, about 120 miles southeast of Havana in the state of Matanzas.

To get to the meeting site we had to drive across/around Zapata Swamp, a gigantic freshwater wetland that can only be described as an ecological equivalent of the Florida Everglades, down to the detail of the dominant sedge--we call it sawgrass in Florida. Hope to return some day to compare this wetland to the Glades.



Zapata Swamp as seen from the highway along the Bahia de Cochinos (Bay of Pigs)

I presented the opening keynote lecture to a very receptive audience of 60 or so scientists and natural resource managers etc. at the "X Simposio Internacional Humedales 2015" (10th International Symposium on Wetlands 2015). I had great assistance in translations from a graduate student from Miami, which made the presentation seamless. Likewise I had translation help when I was interviewed by the state TV station from Matanzas (heaven knows where that was shown!) on wetlands, my impression of the Cuban wetland meeting, etc.



Photos of Prof. Bill Mitsch participating at Cuban Wetland Symposium, Playa Giron, Matanzas province, Cuba

The most interesting aspect of this visit to southern Cuba was the fact that I found myself at ground zero of what history refers to as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, a failed attempt by Cuban expatriates, partially supported by the CIA, to take back Cuba from Casto in April 1961, just after JFK became president. The hotel was on the Bay of Pigs

and in fact at one of the three landing sites for the ill-fated boat invasion! Next door to my resort was Museo Giron, which is dedicated to give infinite details, from Cuba's propaganda, of one of the more embarrassing international political events in US history. The photos I am showing here are from that museum.





Photos from Museo Giron, Playa Giron, Cuba, that describes, with plenty of Cuban propaganda, the failed invasion of Cuba in April 1961 by 1400 Cuban expatriates. That later became known as the Bay of Pigs Invasion, based on the name of the coastal area where it occurred in south central Cuba.

What added "the rest of the story" for me was that I went to the museum with a US landscape consultant from Florida of Cuban descent who claimed his grandfather led the invasion! Wow, did I get both sides of the story on this tragic event! He did say that his grandfather was treated well as a prisoner after the invasion by Castro because he had served with distinction in the Cuban army in WWII.

I also came to the conclusion by where Castro's entire army was encamped prior to the invasion that they had to have been tipped off on the invasion plan. The invaders landed in a trap that had only one road out of Zapata Swamp!

So what a two-day experience of international wetlands, scientific exchange and American history for me!

Thursday November 5, 2015

3. Havana and the American cars!

Havana Cuba, during my short stay there, has a beautiful appearance from on high, with a blue seashore and both modern and colonial architecture all over the city.



Photo from the 33rd floor of a skyscraper of Havana Cuba and its coastline. Florida is a direct flight or boat ride north from this coastline.

But down on the street, the old American cars fascinated me. They are still there, I was told, because the Cubans know how to fix them. I can relate to that from my youth being occasionally under the hood. But they and I agree, there is no point on opening the hood of newer cars. They are impossible to fix in the back alley or yard.







Photos of old American cars in Havana Cuba

So I ask you all: what is more sustainable? a 1959 Lincoln Continental in Cuba or a new Audi with all its bells and whistles in urban America. The pictures here are my statement for thinking out of the environmental/sustainable box we are stuck in and considering what the Cubans have done to keep these same American cars running for more than 50 years.

Plus they all look like they are having a great time driving them around.

I do have to admit my twinge of concern however being driven to the Havana airport early this morning in the front seat of an old (1966) jalopy without seat belts! Yikes! But the car itself ran perfectly.

And so did my first visit to Cuba, without a seat belt!