

[Nycklemoe on Kushlan, 'Seeking the American Tropics: South Florida's Early Naturalists'](#)

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James A. Kushlan. *Seeking the American Tropics: South Florida's Early Naturalists*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2020. 248 pp. \$26.95 (cloth), [ISBN 978-0-8130-6648-6](#).



Reviewed by Karl Nycklemoe (Stony Brook University) **Published on** H-Environment (January, 2023) **Commissioned by** Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

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Ornithologist and conservationist James Kushlan has written an effective overview of European and Euroamerican cartographic and scientific expeditions in South Florida. From Juan Ponce de León's 1513 expedition to J. K. Small's denunciations of ecological destruction in the 1920s, *Seeking the American Tropics* demonstrates how such expeditions were motivated by contextual historical circumstances. For example, Louis Agassiz's inventory of the Florida reef in the mid-nineteenth century was part of the US Coast Survey to determine potential shipping hazards. However, contemporaries to Agassiz like John Blodgett—whom Kushlan credits as the one “who founded South Florida botany”—collected samples for scientific institutions (p. 59). In short, individual motives shaped natural history in South Florida. Although the work relies almost exclusively on published expedition accounts, biographies, and natural histories, Kushlan provides an exhaustive account of how South Florida was cataloged and came to be known by the colonial powers of Spain, Britain, and the United States.

Seeking the American Tropics can be divided into five parts. Chapters 1 and 2 demonstrate that despite the scarcity of Spanish and British expeditions, by 1821 Floridian coastal geography had been mapped for the purposes of maritime navigation. Chapters 3 and 4 detail how antebellum American natural history in South Florida was defined by securing maritime shipping and wars of Indian Removal against the Seminole people. With Seminole Removal seemingly a forgone conclusion, chapters 5 and 6 cover Euroamerican resource extraction and settlement from the late 1800s to the mid-1920s. In this era, tourists, hunters, and agricultural hopefuls began to swarm into South Florida, just as private wealth now funded natural history expedition and collection.

Chapters 7 through 9 detail how scientists approached South Florida as science fractured into different academic disciplines and natural history came to be regarded as more of an amateur pursuit. The final two chapters are the strongest of the work, and detail how naturalists were not inherently environmental conservationists. “It remains one of the greatest ironies of this history,” Kushlan asserts, “that among the most distinguished of South Florida's early naturalists were advocates for invasive species introductions, drainage, causeways, and land development” (p. 201). Funded by Gilded Age capitalists, these scientists largely advocated for destructive economic development and landscape management. Meanwhile, conservationists like J. K. Small and Mary Munroe were only able to conserve small tracts amidst this destruction.

There are three notable weaknesses to this book. First, it is unfortunate that such a sharp conclusion is preceded by a somewhat meandering, though encyclopedically useful, narrative. Kushlan's writing style tends to be a nesting doll. First, he summarizes one explorer or scientist's biography. Then, he recounts the motivations that led them to South Florida and their discoveries. Once another explorer or scientist appears, Kushlan then turns to that new individual's biography, and so the cycle renews. Because of this, Kushlan's main points, offered in the beginning of each chapter and in his excellent conclusion, tend to get lost amid the details.

Likewise, Kushlan has trouble looking beyond the European and Euroamerican (white) men whose names are attached to expeditions and natural histories. Though Kushlan critically notes the vital role and knowledge of South Florida local residents, Indigenous peoples, and women in science and natural history in the final chapter, this compelling story is largely confined to the final chapter.

Finally, a pedantic critique of mine is that Kushlan references nonhumans in lists rather than addressing them within their lived context. Although Kushlan's overt focus is, admittedly, on human naturalists, the life and physicality of South Floridian wildlife is often left behind in favor of a more intellectual history of explorers, scientists, and their writings.

With these critiques in mind, the book provides a wonderful wealth of information on the discipline of natural history from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century. This book is strongly recommended for historians interested in South Florida and the evolving nature of Western science from European colonization up to the 1920s. In short, Kushlan demonstrates an impressive depth of knowledge on Florida's early naturalists and offers two compelling arguments: 1) natural history expeditions were fueled by a multitude of individual interests, and 2) science was not necessarily correlative to conservationism in South Florida. Occasionally, these points are sometimes lost in the book's attention to detail.

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