

## THE CORRIDOR OF DEATH<sup>1</sup>

Sometimes you have to get lost to find yourself. In this case, getting lost on the Corridor of Death helped our canoe trip to see even the subtle impacts which management can have on the experience. On the navigational charts for the Everglades, there is a footnote next to the Nightmare. It is close to the mouth of the Broad River. Close inspection of the chart reveals that there is an inlet to the left of the note and on the top side of the note, there could be a short connection of the inlet with the Nightmare. However, the inlet is totally obscured by the note. Or perhaps I should suggest that our adventure down the Corridor of Death attests to the fact that the inlet is connected to the Nightmare.

Apparently, when the map makers placed the note on the chart, they covered most of the inlet and canal on the chart. The canal is a natural channel that permits the inland areas to fill and drain with tidal changes. It is obvious to me now that the inlet and canal are connected. Many lessons were learned from our trek down the Corridor of Death. For me, one of the main lessons learned from our adventure was that even the subtle management practice of trimming and pruning the limbs on the Nightmare canoe trail can profoundly impact the experience. It was the difference between being lost and found. It told us when we were lost and when we were no longer on the established trail. In the end, it also told us when we were found. Today, I use this simple management practice to successfully negotiate our way through the Nightmare.

We were in the Everglades heading out of Graveyard Creek on the Gulf side. We were heading northward toward Broad River. There was a slight tail wind so we gunwaled the canoes together and set sail. The sail is nothing more than a tarp held upright with two paddles. Similar to a spinnaker it only works when the wind is directly behind you. Our wind was directly behind us. It was not particularly a strong wind but it steadily moved us along none-the-less. It was easier than paddling. So we relaxed in the canoes soaking up the rays of the sun and lazily moved up the coast toward the Broad River.

As might be expected on this adventure, this leg of the trip didn't involve much adventure. It was fairly straightforward. The coastline was fairly uniform and there were few distinguishing landmarks along the way. In fact, the lack of distinguishing features seemed to obscure the landscape and where we were. The Broad River was the first large inlet and other things being equal, it should have been easily recognized. Also, I had been this way before so I was aware of the basic configuration of the inlet and Highland Beach was easily recognizable on the far shore of the inlet. So we lazily sailed northward toward the Broad River, not paying much attention to the changing landscape around us.

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Our lazy sail up the coast was setting us up for the classic scenario where we would take a wrong turn. It was only a matter of time before our lack of attention to detail would catch up with us and we would take a wrong turn. And, a wrong turn is eventually what we did make.

As we sailed, I took a quick look of the landscape and announced to the group that I thought that we were coming up on the Broad River entrance. The students lowered the sail, we pulled out the chart, and we attempted to orient ourselves in terms of the chart and where we thought that we were. I was sure that we were coming up on the Broad River. I could see Highland Beach on the far shore about three miles away. Through my binoculars, I could see day markers which marked the entrance to Broad River. Broad River was the first inlet large enough to warrant day markers for navigation. Actually, we were where we thought we were. Unfortunately, we misread the right channel around an island.

To our right was a channel which we thought was our route. On the chart, it provided us with a straight shot around the large island and took us directly into the Broad River. I was reasonably sure that it was correct. However, I was not absolutely sure, so I paddled ahead to check for other channels. I didn't find any. I still wasn't sure if it was the correct channel to take. It didn't look quite right. But then again, I may have wanted it to be correct. Also, the label on the map obscured the channel.

We took the channel. The tide was going in and we moved quickly along the channel. Quickly, it turned into a canal. We hadn't gone too far before I knew that we had taken a wrong turn and this was not the correct route. Call it a form of denial or perhaps a chance for a real adventure. Perhaps it was the simple notion that we should go forward and if we turned around, it was paramount to admitting defeat and failure. Culturally, we don't like to admit defeat and go backwards. We like to reach the summit and our goal. Maybe it was that I didn't want to admit our mistake or maybe I was seeking a real adventure. We had take the wrong course and I knew that we had. Also, the tide was quickly moving us further inward and with each stroke that we took, we had an incentive not to turn around. It was easy to go with the tide. My main reason for continuing was the sense for an adventure, and intuitively, I knew the channel should intersect the Nightmare.

We hadn't gone too far before I announced that I believed that we had taken a wrong turn. The group didn't particularly want to turn around either because they knew how difficult it would be to paddle against the tidal current. As a group, the leaders laid out the parameters of this adventure. Based on my experience, the canal was large and moving large amounts of water. The flow didn't show any signs of diminishing. The canal was draining a large area. Intuitively, I knew it went somewhere. I hypothesized that it was feeding the Nightmare, a portion of the Wilderness Waterway that cut across the tidal canals in which we were now located.

Also, I looked for telltale signs of human management. There were no signs. There were no trail signs, fishing lines caught in the tree limbs, or pruned mangrove branches. We were in uncharted territory or at least it was an unmanaged area. It was an adventure for both the students and the instructors.

The portion of the Wilderness Waterway that we were trying to intersect was very much an undeveloped stretch of waterway. It was managed at a very low level. Management and maintenance were pretty much limited to pruning branches and tree limbs to make the water trail passable for canoes during high tide. As the note on the chart indicated, it was impassable at low water. I can attest to this fact since on one of our trips we had attempted to negotiate the Nightmare at low water. The downed trees and the mangrove roots extending across the canal made the passage virtually impossible. And believe it or not there are actually two to three foot waterfalls in the Everglades formed by the water flowing into the canals at low tide. At high tide negotiating a passage through the Nightmare was one of maneuvering between mangrove roots and low hanging branches. However, many of the branches were pruned to make the passage more negotiable. To the untrained eye, this management technique is invisible, but to the trained eye, this seemingly insignificant management technique can be significant.

I had hypothesized to the students that the canal that we were on would eventually lead us into the Wilderness Waterway and the section of it called the Nightmare. We would give it another 45 minutes and if we didn't reach the Wilderness Waterway we would turn around and paddle back from where we had come. In addition to providing myself a cushion in terms of time, we would begin to catch the tide going out. Also, we would make it back to the entrance of the inlet with enough daylight to still make it to camp. It seemed like a reasonable decision paradigm. Also, it was an important lesson for the students regarding the management of our situation. More importantly, we didn't want to endlessly push on, obsessively, deeper into the endless mangroves where we would become totally lost.

We hadn't gone too far before we came upon a downed tree that impeded our progress. The tree extended across the channel and necessitated us dragging our canoes up and over the obstruction. The students thought that we had reached the end of the channel. I noted that the flow of water in the channel was still significant. Based on my experience, it was obvious to me that the size of the canal and the amount of water traveling through the canal suggested that it was draining a fairly large area. The canal was going somewhere. Also, I realized that my previous experience provided me with what was a subtle level of understanding. We got out of the canoes, stood on the trunk and limbs of the tree, dragged the canoes through and over the downed tree, and continued our trek down the canal.

At some point, one creative student dubbed our trek down the canal as the Corridor of Death. The name stuck with the group. So, we were paddling down the Corridor of Death, heading toward the Nightmare – hopefully. The statement had a poetic ring to it. The passage became

tighter but not impassible. We moved on, not sure of our destination or our outcome. There was a sense of unknown. The students could hear this in my voice when I talked. They could sense it from the inflection of my voice. There was uncertainty in my voice and in my responses and it was projected to them by me. They knew it from our behavior and the rules that we established. The outcome of this adventure was not certain. I didn't know for sure where we were. It was obvious to me and it was known to the students also.

It is easy to take the adventure out of the trip. It is the unknown, the unfamiliar and the chance of not succeeding. I had been in the Everglades before. I had traveled down these canals before. I had a sense of the tidal flows in them. I had a sense that this canal went somewhere. Up until this point, the group was secure in this knowledge.

All of a sudden, the group wasn't so sure where we were. We were heading down a canal where we were not sure where we were or where it would end. We could become hopelessly entangled in the mangroves and unable to move the canoes forward or even backwards. We could easily become lost in the endless mangroves of the Everglades where everything looked the same. The hurriedness and uncertainty in the voices of the leaders, the downed trees in the channel that we had to pull the canoes through, and the setting of rules for how long we would travel before turning around all lead to an increased perception on the part of the students and an increased uncertainty in the outcome regarding where we were going. All of a sudden, the trip was no longer a perceived adventure where I confidently knew the outcome, it was a real adventure where the outcome was uncertain.

Eventually, the canal seemed to come to an end. There were low hanging mangrove limbs drooping flush with the water that blocked our passage. For a moment, I was perplexed. Intuitively, I had followed the canal because of the relatively large volume of water traveling down the canal. Although it seemed like the end of the trail, a second glance revealed otherwise. The large volume of water was still moving underneath the tree limbs. I lifted the branches and slid my canoe underneath the branches. The students followed. On the other side of the branches, we came to what seemed like a dead end. There was a small pool of water and seemingly no where to go. The students were baffled and confused. I looked for clues. Had we gone all this way for naught? After a few moments, I smiled and announced confidently to the students that we were on the Nightmare trail. The students looked at me as if I were crazy and they were stunned by the confidence expressed in my voice. Again, I announced with confidence that we were on the Nightmare. After a brief pause, I let the students in on my secret. I pointed to a limb on one of the nearby mangroves. It had been cut with a saw. I spotted another pruned branch and then another. Intuitively, the students seemed to understand my point that the trail was managed and that the cut limbs were evidence of this management, if ever so subtly.

The trip down the Corridor of Death was several years ago. Now, when we paddle down the Nightmare it usually results in a story about the Corridor of Death. I chuckle to myself silently

when I finally reveal to the students the management practice which led to my navigation success. Every time we would come to a fork in the water trail, I would confidently indicate which way we should go. Eventually, the students would look at me in wonderment and ask me how I knew with such confidence that this was the correct route. To them, it was not obvious. But then they don't know the secret either. At some point, I would point to the trimmed limbs of the mangroves. Their telltale signs indicated management and the trail. It was subtle, but to those who knew what to look for, it was a trail sign on which way to go. This of course led to the story about our trip down the Corridor of Death, and the cut tree limbs. Also, it resulted in the students using this knowledge to make the correct decision at the next fork in the trail. The mantra became "It's managed." They quickly point to the correct route, and off we go down the trail. They too understood my little secret of navigation. Even more importantly, they caught a glimpse of the impact which even subtle trail management can have on the experience.

Sometimes you have to get lost to find yourself. A lot of lessons were learned from our trip down the Corridor of Death. One important lesson was that our getting lost reinforced the understanding that even subtle management practices can have a significant impact on the user's experience. For those in the know, it can easily help them to navigate the Nightmare without getting lost.