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Preserving resources – on and off the clock

Investment manager and Everglades volunteer ranger Ellen Siegel safeguards her clients' financial assets during the work week and nature's assets on the weekends.

BY SHARON HARVEY ROSENBERG

Special to The Miami Herald

At 8 a.m. on weekend mornings, Ellen Siegel pulls into the Homestead entrance of the Florida Everglades at least an hour before most visitors arrive. With the diligence of a type-A investment specialist and the can-do attitude of a former Girl Scout, Siegel plants a 3D sponge map of South Florida and a rare shell along a nature trail. She'll later use these and other props to illustrate her lectures on the beauty of the Everglades and the importance of preserving the environment.

As a professional investment manager and a volunteer park ranger, Siegel is obsessed with preservation. For the environment, she seeks to safeguard water and food supplies for birds, animals and the residents of South Florida. For her investment clients, for whom she manages \$14 million in assets, Siegel seeks to preserve financial resources. In the Everglades and in the office of her Miami-based investment company, resource management is all about "quality, quantity, timing and distribution," she said, emphasizing the fact that limited resources must be protected.

MIAMI BACKGROUND

Siegel grew up in Miami in a family of nature lovers. After a brief stint in the Philadelphia area as a young adult, she returned to her South Florida roots and instantly renewed her interest in the local scenery while on a bird walk through Reynolds Park in Miami-Dade County. By the end of the trek, she was "completely hooked" by the nature trails and the area's flora and fauna.

Siegel's developing interest in preserving the environment coincided with a major shift in her career. In 1979, she left the social services industry to enter the financial planning sector as a life insurance agent. Her early experiences in this line of work left her feeling gratified but burned out. So she found the perfect cure: a one-woman, overnight retreat in Flamingo Park, a portion of the Everglades south of Homestead.

"I needed a retreat, and I needed a retreat without demands," Siegel said.

After her first solo camping experience, Siegel started an annual ritual that has endured for the past 27 years. But of all her adventures, one trip left an indelible mark on her off-the-clock pursuits. On that memorable retreat, Siegel met a park ranger who was dressed in a khaki uniform rather than the standard green-and-gray outfits worn by the other rangers. After making inquiries, she learned that khaki uniforms designated volunteers.

Intrigued, she applied for the Everglades volunteer staff. After 80 hours of training and a few overnight trips, she earned her own khaki uniform.

FULL SCHEDULE

These days the investment manager's volunteer calendar is packed. She typically works at least one weekend day during the peak season, which runs from early winter to late spring. Working on either a Saturday or Sunday, Siegel puts in a full eight hours. During the course of the year, she also runs a 3-day overnight family camping trip for beginners.

"I work with my mind on weekdays and with plants, birds and animals on the weekends," says Siegel, who runs her own Miami-based investment firm called Ellen R. Siegel & Associates.

As a volunteer park guide, Siegel offers a variety of educational programs ranging from 20-minute bench talks about bird life and water levels in the Everglades to overnight adventures for novices. Resource management, appreciation of the Everglades and environmental protection are her favorite themes.

"If we don't protect this environment, we won't have enough water," Siegel preaches.

In addition to her educational and outreach duties on behalf of the Florida Everglades, Siegel provides sweat equity for high-level researchers who come from around the globe to study the Everglades. For instance, a few years ago, Siegel worked with a biologist from Italy who was studying the different microscopic entities that live in the water surrounding the limestone pools in the



PHOTOS BY BARBARA P. FERNANDEZ/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

FULL DAY'S WORK: As a volunteer park ranger at Everglades National Park, Ellen Siegel puts in eight hours of work on the weekends. At top, Siegel explains the dynamics of water distribution to Beverly Vive, a park visitor from New Zealand. In middle, a soft shell turtle is spotted on the trail. Bottom, Siegel offers interesting facts about sawgrass to Vive and Lee Seligman, a visitor from California.

Everglades. As part of that assignment, Siegel pumped water for the scientist to examine.

"I love working with the researchers," she said. "These people are passionate."

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