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CLYDE BUTCHER
REFLECTS ON LIFE'S LANDSCAPE

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Clyde Butcher

SURVEYING LIFE'S EMOTIONAL LANDSCAPE

Clyde Butcher lifted his head, and the straw hat with the yellowed brim tipped upward. His kind face, accented by lines that spoke of experience and wisdom, moved into the light. Wisps of gray hair curled in disarray like an unkempt garden.

"I have lots of these," he said pointing to his hat, "from new to intermediate to ragged. Originally, they were only to protect me from the sun. It sure can be hot in the Everglades."

Green eyes peered through large vintage glasses and a grin peeked through the cloud of silver mustache and beard. Along with the straw hat, he wore a light green fishing shirt and khaki pants: the iconic look of this internationally famous photographer and environmentalist. Certainly, his style is not pristine. It's perfectly chaotic, and he wears it well.

"I fell in love with photography when I was 8 years old," he said. "I had a Brownie Hawkeye camera and I began to take photos of anything I could shoot. My mother and father were both artistic and encouraged my interest in photography. When I was 9, I upgraded my camera to a Yashica twin lens. I knew then that I wanted bigger and better equipment."

As Butcher's father followed his employment path to Ohio and then California, Butcher was exposed to various landscapes. He was not enthralled with the rows of box-like houses, stagnant buildings and rusting alloy of school buses and cars.

STORY BY CARYN HACKER-BUECHEL

© CLYDE BUTCHER

"My parents took the time to take me to five national parks on the West Coast of America over a summer," he said. "The Grand Canyon and the Redwood National Parks opened my young mind to the immensity of the world. It is there that I first found beauty in nature. It changed my life. I began to realize that movement and light had tremendous effects on a landscape, an object and ultimately, on a photograph. I never thought, however, that I would make photography my career."

After graduating high school in Beaumont, California, his mother encouraged him to attend college. He followed her advice, and, "It's good that I did," he notes.

"Although I was scraping by financially, living out of my car at the time, I met my wife, Niki, on a blind date while attending California Polytechnic State University. Niki is an artist in her own right.

"Fifty-six years later, we continue to be a great team. She is always standing next to me on all of my shoots. I understand the science behind my photographs and balance that against their beauty. However, Niki is strictly emotional. With a bit of her input, we create photos that appeal to both men and women," he said.

The experiences of Butcher's early years and his exposure to photography and environmental issues — along with a sprinkling of political awareness — carved the road to Butcher's destiny. He saw the dangers created by the maltreatment of people, property and planet Earth.

At one point, he and Niki lived on a boat he built. Without electricity and modern accoutrements, Butcher focused on the colors of the local landscape, as photography became the voice that Butcher would use to communicate what was personally important: love of family, emotion and the environment.

"Most people photograph objects; I'm trying to photograph feelings," he said. "I only photograph something if it feels good to me. Then I make my pictures so large that you can't see them, not without scanning the entire image with your eyes to see the detail. If I can pull people into the print and make them feel comfortable, as if they are in the landscape, then I am happy."

"Conservation 5" at Everglades National Park, Fla. - by Clyde Butcher © 2004

It was standard practice for Butcher to move slowly through chest-deep waters of a swamp as his canoe held the large format view camera until his internal lens focused upon a pristine scene. That shot would often be created into mural-sized photos with increased detail and then printed onto fiber-based silver gelatin paper using photography trays he built by hand.

Butcher's iconoclastic photographs hang prestigiously in museums, hotels and offices throughout the world. The Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art, along with the district headquarters of Tropicana in Bradenton, The Ritz-Carlton Naples, the Naples Beach Hotel, the Federal Interior Department in Washington, D.C., the offices of senators Lindsay Graham and Marco Rubio, the National Gallery in Prague, Czech Republic and various U.S. embassies are among others around the world who have chosen Butcher's photos to represent Florida and its ecosystem, the Florida Everglades. They serve to beautifully testify to the importance of environmental conservation, a cause for which Butcher has received numerous recognitions and awards.

"The Everglades is a living organism that we must care for. It's our responsibility. Its health is a reflection of our global well-being," he said.

"Gaskin Bay 7" at Everglades National Park, Fla. - by Clyde Butcher © 1998

Clyde Butcher uses a photographic enlarger to create black-and-white prints "that someone must stop and study — as only then will they feel what I felt capturing it," he said.

CREDIT: CHARLIE MCDONALD

Butcher has photographed beauty in many places, from California to Oregon, Wyoming, Ohio, Hawaii, Cuba, the Czech Republic, Spain and Florida. His soul has always been drawn to boats and to natural waters.

"Niki thinks I was a mariner in another life," he said with a grin. "I feel relaxed and peaceful standing without waders in the clear swamp water. We have to do everything we can to save our planet. Earth is the most beautiful place in our universe, and the Everglades is our heaven."

Butcher altered his photographic style in 1986 following the tragic death of his 17-year-old son.

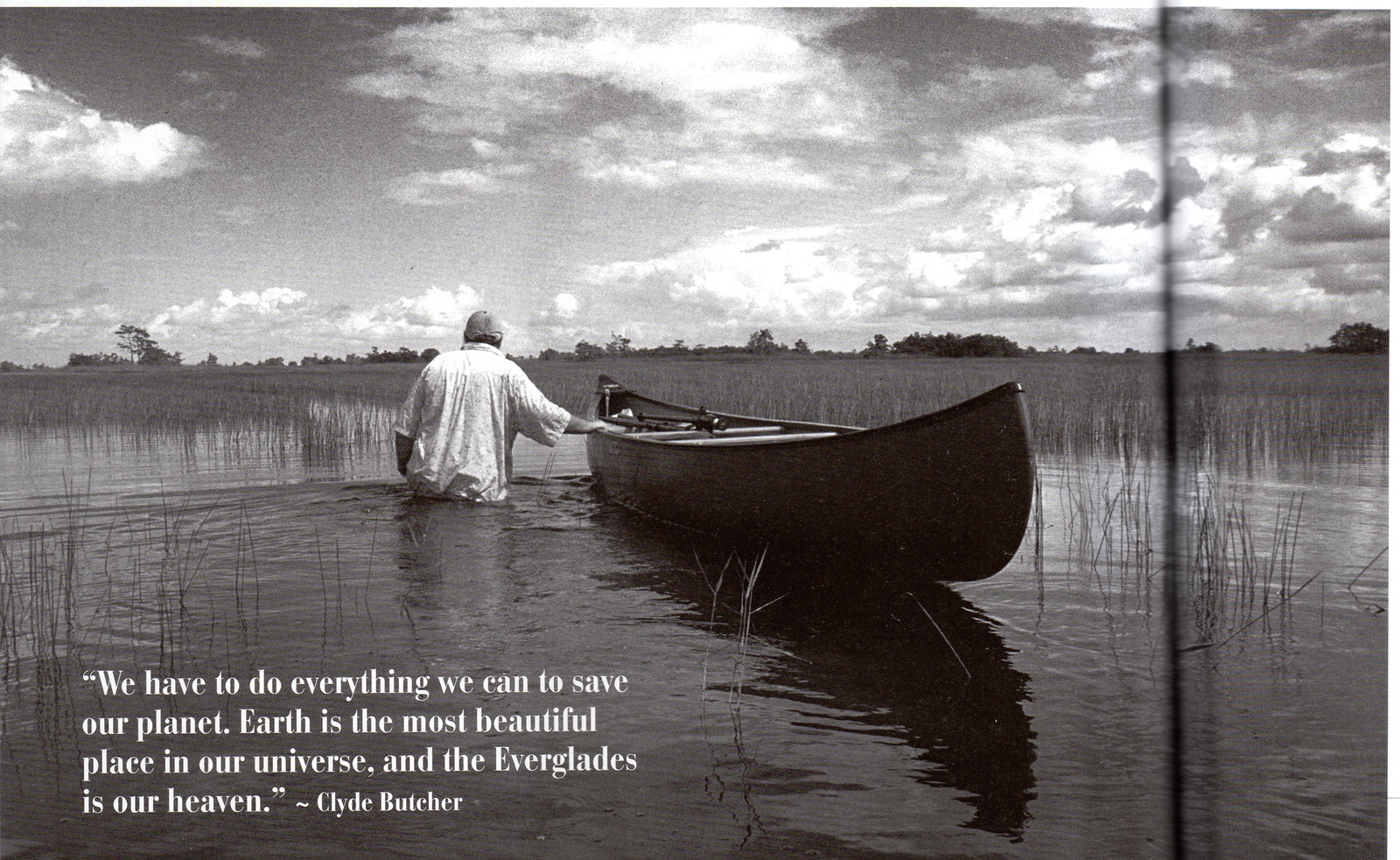
"When Ted was killed by a drunk driver, I looked for solace in nature. I went from taking color photos, which were financially successful, to huge black-and-white pictures in the Florida Everglades. It was and still is a form of personal therapy. A spiritual experience. Without that energy, my photos would feel empty. In them, light becomes the subject matter, and contrast between good blacks, great whites and all the shades of gray combine to create a print that someone must stop to study — as only then will they feel what I felt capturing it.

"I love the visual chaos that is nature and the swamp. When I take a photo, I search until I find relaxation in a setting. I take that chaos and I make order out of it," he said. "That is what I do. Even though I graduated from college as an architect, I'm not fond of buildings. They're bad for the environment, taking up too much land and energy. I'd rather be surrounded in natural clutter, not in the straight lines of trees that were planted deliberately."

It's the process of locating beauty in the accidental chaos that is magical for Butcher. He and Niki choose to live in a modular home with solar panels and an electric car in a mobile home park. They are situated on a bay where their backyard is filled with shades of blue from the water, ribbons of gold from each sunset and rich greens from the mangroves. They surround themselves in the love and talents of family, as daughter Jackie, son-in-law Neal Obendorf and granddaughter Kayla, work with Butcher and Niki at their galleries. Butcher hopes that grandson Robert will join them, as well.

Clyde Butcher continues to search for contentment in the one shot where the air hangs still and the light glows perfection, so he can capture the beauty of the living swamp and share his Florida Everglades with the world. ✪

Clyde Butcher wades through the swamp at Fortymile Bend, Florida - photo by Niki Butcher, 2003



Niki and Clyde Butcher (front) are surrounded by loving family: (back) grandchildren Robbie and Kayla, daughter Jacki and son-in-law Neal.

Natural Connection

The South Florida National Parks Trust was founded in 2002 to improve the quality of life in South Florida by supporting the national parks that define our landscape and enrich our culture. These parks are Everglades National Park, Dry Tortugas National Park, Biscayne National Park and Cypress National Preserve.

That said, this not-for-profit is a natural fit for Clyde Butcher's heart and his life's work.

The Trust is working to ensure that more people — especially children — have an opportunity to experience these remarkable places and learn about the resources the parks protect.

Visit SouthFloridaParks.org for more information.