Humans have significantly impacted south Florida and the Florida Keys

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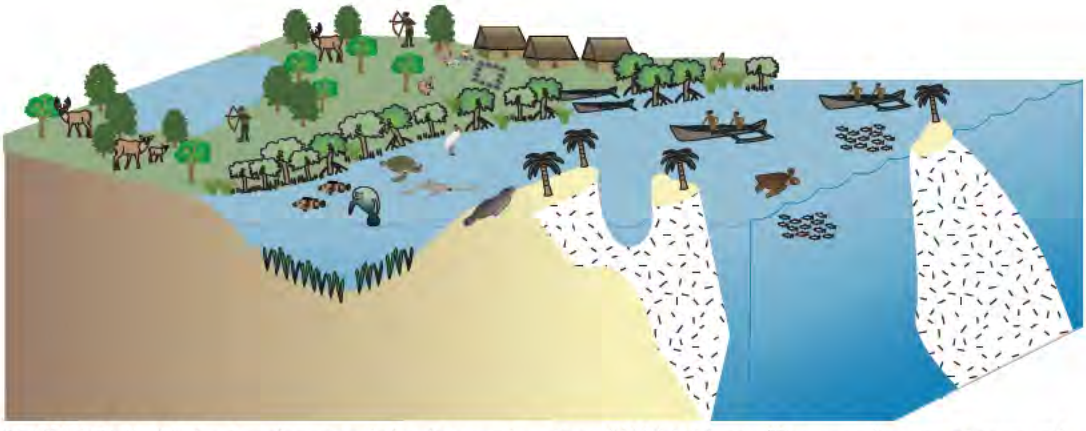
BIRDS			
	Wood stork	*Mycteria americana*	Endangered
MAMMALS			
	Key deer	*Odocoileus virginianus clavium*	Endangered
	Florida panther	*Puma concolor coryi*	Endangered
	Silver rice rat	*Oryzomys palustris natator*	Endangered
	Florida manatee	*Trichechus manatus*	Endangered
	Caribbean monk seal	*Monachus tropicalis*	Extinct
	Key Largo woodrat	*Neotoma floridana smalli*	Endangered
	Lower Keys marsh rabbit	*Sylvilagus palustris hefneri*	Endangered
	Key Largo cotton mouse	*Peromyscus gossypinus*	Endangered
FISH			
	Largetooth sawfish	*Pristis perotteti*	Critically Endangered
	Smalltooth sawfish	*Pristis pectinata*	Critically Endangered
	Sandbar shark	*Carcharhinus plumbeus*	Threatened
	Goliath grouper	*Epinephelus itajara*	Critically Endangered
	Scalloped hammerhead	*Sphyrna lewini*	Endangered
REPTILES			
	American crocodile	*Crocodylus acutus*	Threatened
	Green turtle	*Chelonia mydas*	Endangered
	Kemp's ridley turtle	*Lepidochelys kempii*	Endangered
	Loggerhead turtle	*Caretta caretta*	Threatened
	Leatherback turtle	*Dermochelys coriacea*	Endangered
CORALS			
	Elkhorn coral	*Acorpora palmata*	Threatened
	Staghorn coral	*Acorpora cervicornis*	Threatened

U.S. Endangered Species Act list International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) list

Before the arrival of humans, south Florida waters were a much different place than they are today. The region teemed with life, including large herbivores and predators. The land supported a diverse assemblage of wildlife, including deer, bear, panther, and their prey. The history of south Florida is a story of human attempts to conquer the land, resulting in habitat destruction, habitat fragmentation, overfishing, and pollution. Today, humankind is trying to manage a very different ecosystem than the one that existed in the past. There are few places on Earth that have as many endangered, threatened, and overfished species as south Florida.



By 100 A.D. the Native American population increased to about 1000 inhabitants. They were hunter-gatherers and obtained much of their food from the sea. Because of their small numbers, sustainable harvesting practices, and general respect for the Earth, they had negligible impacts on the environment.

1000 BC – 700 AD
Dates given to many Upper Keys Native American archaeological sites.

1700s – 1800s
White man's guns, disease, rum, and raids by northern Indian tribes wiped out Keys natives. Keys are deserted.

1513 — Ponce de Leon expedition "discovered" the Florida Keys while searching for the Fountain of Youth.

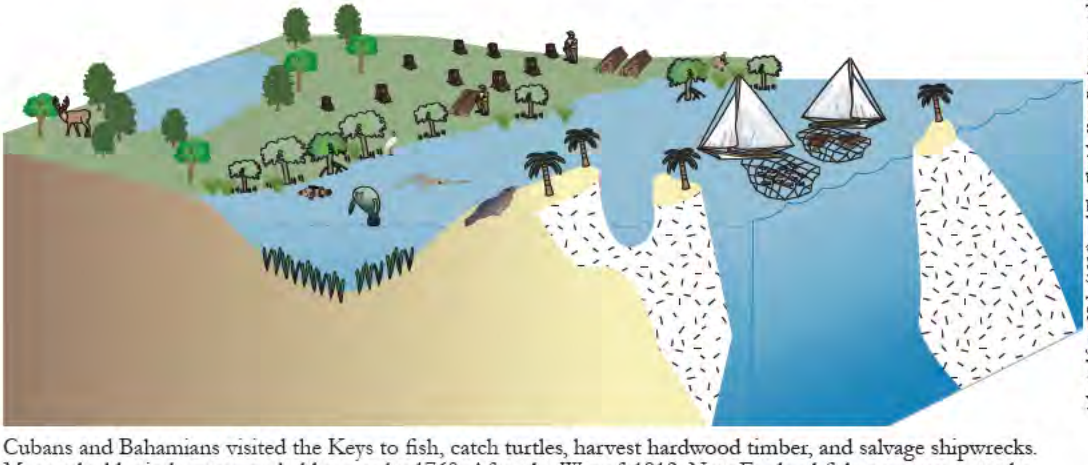
1821 — Florida became a U.S. territory.

1825 — Cape Florida lighthouse built on Key Biscayne to warn ships of dangerous coral reefs. The lighthouse was burned by the Seminoles in 1836.

1836 – 1842 — Second Seminole War occurred over demand by U.S. government that Indians relocate to western reservations. Indian war parties raided Key Largo and Indian Key. Population of settlers in Miami area was decimated.

1845 — Florida became a U.S. state.

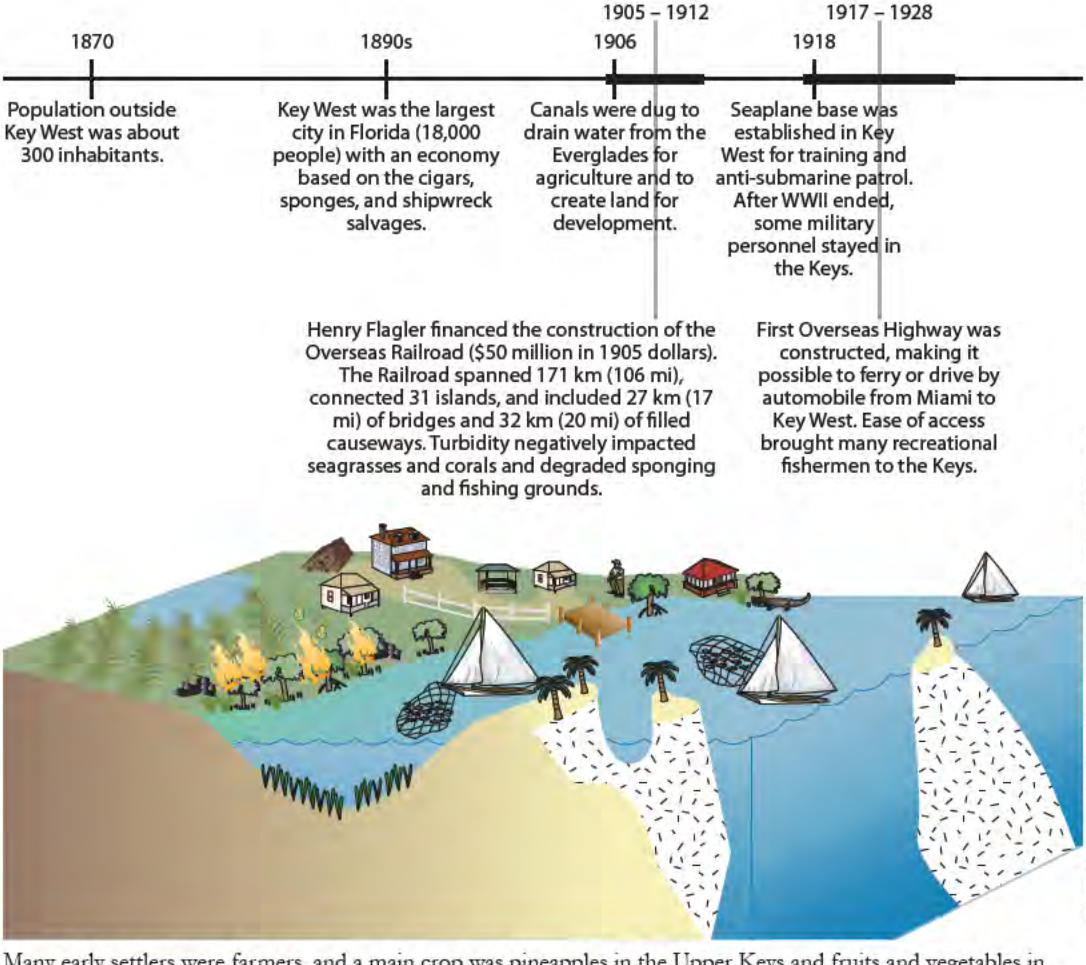
1850 — First census: 32 settlers lived among Summerland, Sugarloaf, and Boca Chica Keys; 40 settlers lived on Key Vaca.



Adapted from Viele (1996) and The Florida Keys Environmental Story (1997)

Cubans and Bahamians visited the Keys to fish, catch turtles, harvest hardwood timber, and salvage shipwrecks. Most valuable timber was probably gone by 1760. After the War of 1812, New England fishermen came to the Keys in the winter to fish. They were among the first settlers of Key West.

Heat, rattlesnakes, mosquitoes, no-see-ums, alligators, panthers, and scarcity of freshwater made life difficult in the Keys. Before the first highway, all inter-Keys communcation and communication with the mainland was by boat.



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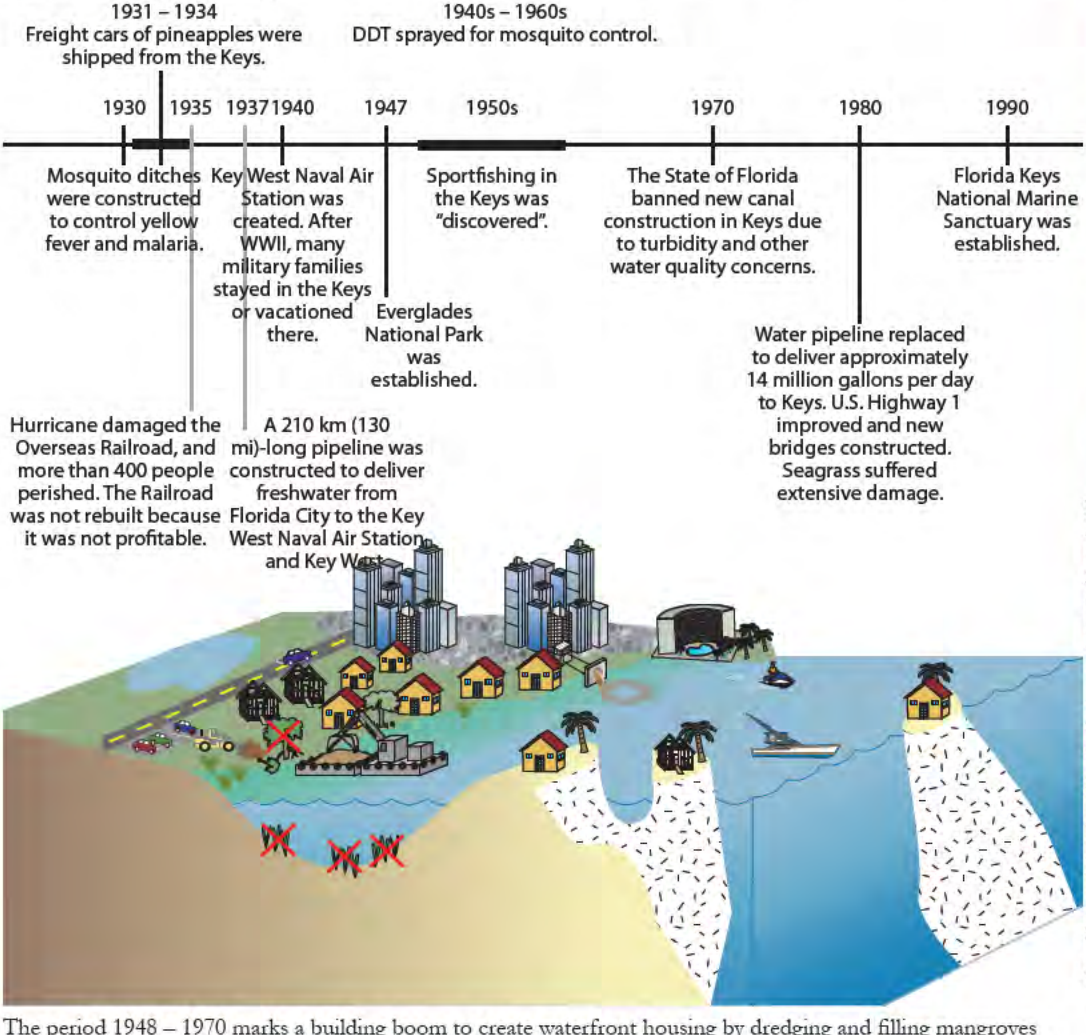
Many early settlers were farmers, and a main crop was pineapples in the Upper Keys and fruits and vegetables in the Lower Keys. Many made a living fishing, gathering sponges, or making charcoal for Key West stoves. Rampant habitat loss and fragmentation to "conquer" the Keys begins. Hardwood hammocks were cleared for farming.

By 1930, fishing camps were popular in the Keys. Big Pine Shark Camp commercially harvested up to 100 large sharks and sawfish per day. The long-lived and slow-reproducing fish were virtually eliminated from the Keys and have not recovered to this day.



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The period 1948 – 1970 marks a building boom to create waterfront housing by dredging and filling mangroves and seagrasses. Approximately one half of the mangroves in the Keys were destroyed. Turbidity was chronic and smothered seagrasses and corals. Sewage and stormwater controls were primitive or nonexistent.