

# The Great Outdoors: O'Leno State Park

At O'Leno State Park in Florida, park rangers use different types of critical thinking to do their jobs. In this natural environment, they must be the eyes and ears to take care of the park and visitors. When they write reports, their perceptions shape what should happen next. This handout shows the interpretive skills that become writing skills. Rangers need to be able to tell factual accounts with description, meaning, and characters. They must maintain park organization, which starts with paying attention to basic differences and keeping track. If something is unclear, they must find out how to make it understandable, starting with definitions, breaking it down, and showing connections. Finally, if an offense has occurred, they must take an uncertain cause-effect connection and add relevant evidence to form an argument. All of these forms of thinking emerge from what a person naturally does in a rich wilderness environment: noticing details, seeing comparisons, finding tracks and signs, and putting them together into understanding.



## Description

Florida's O'Leno State Park is a wonderful place to visit. It has some sixty-five campsites, eighteen cabins, and a pavilion for group meetings. A long, winding nature trail appropriate for bike-riders and hikers alike gives great views of the best park attractions, sand hills, wildlife, and native plants. Covered by hardwood trees and hammocks, the park has one primary feature, the Santa Fe River, which curiously disappears in a large, slowly swirling, tree-lined pool. After appearing in scattered ponds, the river rises three miles downstream in a swampy area, then continues on to meet the Suwannee River and the ocean. Along the river, canoeists can see cypress trees with walls of foliage mirrored in its waters. Sudden sinkholes open in the swamplands rich with ferns. Farther down the river, an expanse of longleaf pine stretch across rolling hills. Campsites are remote and primitive, with plenty of privacy.



## Symbolism (fictional)



The attractions of O'Leno state park have a deeper meaning, according to the Tsagoki Indians, original inhabitants of this area. At the largest bend of the river is a traditional long house. Called "Soli natu," meaning "strength of sky" this site was the meeting place of tribal councils. The forest trail was walked by braves on vision quests, approaching manhood through fasting and physical trials, in order to find their spirit animal. An encounter with eagles was preferred, but woe to the seeker who found a crow. The ancient trees were considered a manifestation of the Sky god's will, bringing light and warmth to his people through fire. Only fallen or dead branches were taken, unless a canoe was to be made, which required a special ritual of inner purification to accompany the burning and chipping of wood. But most significant of all was the river itself, known as "Mat Lakontu" or "waters of fate." An Indian maiden seeking a husband would dye sticks different colors, each one representing a village youth, releasing them into the swirling pool. Her kinswomen would wait with her downstream to see the will of destiny.

## Narration

Charles woke up suddenly, his skin crawling in the musty chill of the night, and he grasped the edge of his sleeping bag. Across the forest floated two muffled hoots from an owl, the only sound in an oppressive stillness. The 80-foot canopy of trees above him blocked all light from the crescent moon and stars, making this the darkest night he had ever seen. Charles took the cool, heavy flashlight from beside his bunk, pushed the button, and waited for the familiar glow that usually accompanied the click, but the batteries were dead. He unzipped the bag and swung his legs out, leaving his wife Wanda in bed as he walked over to the light switch by the camper's screen-door. As he approached it, something disturbed the pile of leaves just outside the window, only a few feet away. A woodsy, dank smell filled his nostrils as he dropped to a crouching, wary stance. The textured metal ridges of his light dug into his hand and reminded him that he had a weapon. The animal moved again with a heavy, deep-crackling sound, displacing too many leaves to be simply a rodent or snake. Charles inhaled sharply, cocked his arm back and whispered "one, two, three," kicking open the door and letting fly with a rush of force, tumbling steel cracking against fur and bone between a pair of slitted, luminescent eyes...



## Comparison



To help you make the decision to visit O'Leno Park, let's see how it compares to a place you're familiar with and most likely have visited on many occasions, a park in a typical city. Both are outdoors areas set apart for enjoyment and a feeling of natural contentment in a hectic world. They have picnic tables, a pavilion, and restroom facilities – all you'd need for a family or corporate get-together over sandwiches, side dishes, and sodas. There's also plenty of

parking and easy access from main roads. O'Leno has the jogging path and bike trail you're used to. Volunteers and a few employees help to keep these parks clean for the public, but it's important to leave the place neater than you found it. In your city park, all of the trees and flowers are there for you to enjoy, but not to take. Similarly, in O'Leno, only small amounts of dead plant material can be removed, except by authorized botanists. Tread softly through our natural world, and it will be there for generations to come. So if you like your city park, driving the extra distance to come to O'Leno State Park will give you everything you've come to expect.

## Contrast

But O'Leno is also better than what you might anticipate, offering a variety of special features. Let's focus on two state parks and recreation facilities that are total opposites in order to highlight what O'Leno has to offer. Ancient forests and a warm water river are the main attractions at O'Leno State Park. In contrast, Lloyd Beach State Recreation Area near Fort Lauderdale has the broad, white-sanded Florida beaches and the restless Atlantic Ocean. Whereas O'Leno features so much quiet that you can practically hear the leaves whispering, Lloyd Beach is a place of boisterous activity. Hikers can walk a few yards off the trail at O'Leno and move beyond every sign of human civilization, lost in the wilderness. When walking at Lloyd Beach, however, you have to be careful to step over sand castles and tanning beach-goers. At night, O'Leno wraps itself in the quiet sounds of owls, while Lloyd Beach is busy with fishermen until well past midnight. If strolling down the boardwalk or diving into the busy bustle of an urban beach environment is appealing to you, Lloyd Beach is the place to go. But O'Leno is the park to visit if you want the perfect retreat for getting in touch with your inner self.





## Classification

Over 200 state parks in Florida are classified according to the type of camping and lodging that they offer. Many other aspects of a park, such as level of comfort, food availability, facilities, and price, relate to this general category. For instance, the most prestigious park, Edward Ball is the only state park in Florida with lodges, and visitors enjoy a taste of refinement. Because of the price and status, soft beds, catered breakfasts, and Jacuzzi tubs are standard. "Rustic" cabin camping is available throughout the state, with better offerings in close proximity to cities. Cabins tend to be well-maintained and easy to access, often featuring ovens and microwaves, and sometimes multiple bedrooms. Most state parks allow RV or travel trailer camping with facilities including water and electrical hookups. Recreation rooms and sporting equipment rental are standard at these campsites. Finally, there is tent camping, which ranges from full facility campgrounds including showers and pools to primitive sites with zero amenities. Accommodations can also be made for pets, large groups, or a youth-only group. Regardless of your vacation needs and your budget constraints, Florida state parks have something to offer.

## Definition



O'Leno State Park is a large, natural area managed by the fish and wildlife department for wilderness preservation and recreation. Eighty-six percent of its land consists of original Florida terrain filled with a wide variety of wild animals and birds. Plant communities are exceptionally diverse. This makes the experience of O'Leno deeply immersive for hikers, travelers, canoeists, and even casual visitors. Fishing is permitted, but "consumptive" uses, such as rock collecting, woodcutting, animal hunting, and plant harvesting are prohibited, in order to maintain the unique natural characteristics of this landscape and to diminish artificial shaping of the ecosystem.

## Division

Five distinct primary ecosystems comprise O'Leno State Park. From wettest to driest conditions, these ecosystems are 1) the Santa Fe River, 2) swamp, 3) fen, 4) temperate mixed forest, and 5) human-impact grassland. The river system consists of fresh water draining very slowly from a slight elevation towards the sea. The underlying geology consists of basaltic limestone caves, which enables the river's unusual behavior of "sinking" and then "rising." The swamp alongside the river has permanent shallow water with large aquatic plants.



Enough water flows to inhibit peat accumulation from dead plant material. Further away from the river is a narrow band of fens, full of peat but still perpetually moist with mineral-rich groundwater. At slightly higher elevation, the soil becomes firmer, giving place for taller needle-leaf and broadleaf trees, which allows for a large diversity of animal species. The final ecosystem is not natural, but with twelve percent of public ground being artificially maintained as grassy areas, it is significant. These areas are kept from becoming 'wetlands' through dikes, ditches, and other structures, but they do not meet the criteria for a "grassland" environment.

## Analysis



In the O'Leno State Park biome, the various ecosystems work in a natural symbiosis, supporting each other through resource sharing, animal migration, and borderline interactions. The river brings its primary resource of water to the swamp, and enables fish spawning into the habitat. On the border of swamp and river, algae clean the water through exothermic reactions.



The swamp collection of plant matter migrates slowly inland and the rich basaltic minerals in the water enable the fen to generate peat, an incredibly rich soil type. Snakes from the swamp lay eggs in the peat, and the heat of decomposition provides a wonderful place for hatching. As mentioned, the fen gives way to mixed forest, in

which the nutrients of the peat are drawn into the tree roots. Leaf fall from the trees contributes to firmer soil where worms and other insects break down the woody plants. Fen dwellers such as white thrushes cross into the woods to forage. Further up the hill, the human impact of concrete and glass begins, utilizing the rich forest soil for artificial lawn growth. Human guests mimic birdsongs, chirp at the squirrels, and wonder aloud at the diversity of life. They only partially understand the vast system of interactions that enable the upstream water and nutrients to impact not only their physical world, but also their own sense of symbiosis. In the end, this is the purpose of O'Leno Park – to help the humans have an idea of harmony with their natural surroundings and feel the need to interact more kindly on the borders of their environments with animals, plants, and their fellow man. The lessons of this biome are both practical and profound.

## Cause and Effect

You might just wonder where O'Leno Park came from, the reasons for its creation. You must first understand the rise and fall of a town called "Leno." In 1824, wealthy plantation owner John Bellamy built the first federally funded Florida road through this area, which carried hundreds of travelers and settlers from Pensacola to St. Augustine. A couple of decades later, one of the way stations along this road grew into a small settlement. But immediately the lowlifes and varmints of frontier America, prostitutes, con men, and gunslingers began infesting the settlement, turning it into a small town. River



men called this town "Keno," after a card game they played in its raucous gambling district. By 1870, Keno had a general store, a hotel, clinic, blacksmith, and public stable, all signs of a stable and prospering community. But in 1876, the government denied Keno a post office due to "moral corruption." Town fathers changed the name to Leno, but this convinced no one, and Keno was still a sinner's paradise. Over the next dozen years, nearby Mikesville grew in size, bringing religion and education to the area. All of the 'decent' Leno townspeople left for greener pastures. In 1894, the railroad from Lake City bypassed the town and the river could not sustain its economy. Leno became farmland by 1900. However, in the 1930's the CCC revitalized this area as a haven, creating O'Leno, the oldest state park in Florida.

## Process



O'Leno State Park has an unusual river, the Santa Fe, which completely disappears into a large sinkhole and flows underground through caves, reappearing three miles downstream. The river's unusual course shift follows a fascinating process. In its initial state, the Santa Fe River is slow-flowing, meandering with the landscape of occasional, slight hills and valleys. Towards the southern end of

the park, the river hits a large sinkhole. Because it is moving so slowly, the water does not continue aboveground, rather it courses into underground caves consisting of basaltic granite. The water flows through an underground channel worn down over time into this rock. Because the underground caves have a fixed volume, with only a minimal number of side passages, the water does not seep into the ground and dissipate. Three miles downstream, in a swampy lake, the river water rises up from the caves and spreads across the surface of the marsh. From sinkhole entrance to exit, it takes water approximately three hours to move through the caverns. These unique characteristics make the Santa Fe an interesting anomaly.

## Argument

Because O'Leno State Park is a study in creation and dissolution, ebb and flow, border interactions and symbiosis it is the perfect place for people to come that are going through difficult life struggles. Aside from its extensive trail system and canoeing, the sand-hill hiking and other outdoor sports can help anyone have an exhilarating active lifestyle in the natural world. Studies show that physical activity helps to regulate stress and generates endorphins, the body's own feel-good hormone. Often those who have experienced loss will write a name or trouble on



a piece of biodegradable paper and watch it sink into the pool. Others will go to the center of old Keno town and slide a token of remembrance through the floorboards of the casino, willing it to fade into the past. On certain points along the trail, some visitors find their own spirit animal, look out over the distant hills and contemplate their place in creation. For this reason, AA and other addiction recovery programs use O'Leno as a locus of platitude in the difficult transition back into life. For anyone who can appreciate the beauty and history of this wonderful place, O'Leno State Park is a one-of-a-kind vacation spot not to be missed.