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Proposed South Dade theme park might eliminate free parking at Zoo Miami.

Proposed Miami Wilds theme park would devastate wildlife and gouge zoo visitors

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Zoo Miami is one of Miami-Dade County's most beloved public facilities. It combines wholesome family fun with learning about wildlife and why many species require our protection for their survival.

However, Miami-Dade County is about to make it more expensive to visit the zoo. The county entered into a lease agreement with politically connected developers who plan to build Miami Wilds, a proposed 27.5-acre theme park that will also include a retail complex and hotel, plus more than 40 acres of parking. The financial plan submitted by the park's developers reveals they would charge both theme park *and* zoo visitors at least \$9 to park. So, no more free parking for Miami-Dade County residents who visit the zoo. For families struggling to make ends meet, the proposed parking fee is significant; it may even put going to the zoo off limits. The average zoo admission is already nearly \$84 for a family of four

(\$22.95 for adults, \$18.95 for children 3-12 years old).

If the parking fee were to be put toward conservation research and caring for the zoo's resident animals, it might be an easier pill to swallow. However, the Miami Wilds developer allegedly is going to profit directly from each family that visits Zoo Miami.

The Miami Wilds theme park concept flies in the face of what Zoo Miami stands for: habitat preservation. The zoo's informative signage explains that some of the animals it houses are teetering on the brink of extinction because of human-caused habitat loss. Zoo Miami itself is located on pine rockland, South Florida's rarest habitat. Pine rocklands are a critically imperiled habitat unique to South Florida and the Bahamas. In Miami-Dade alone, a pine rockland forest once spanned more than 186,000 acres. Less than 2% of that forest now remains outside of Everglades National Park.

The fragmentation of the county's once mighty pine rocklands is due, in large part, to the rapid development of South Florida that took place throughout much of the 20th century. The remnants of publicly owned pine rocklands that border

Zoo Miami are home to multiple species of endangered animals, insects and plants that practically have nowhere else to live. Federal scientists have determined that the area around Zoo Miami is "critical habitat" for many diverse species. This means these species need this critical habitat to avoid extinction.

Instead of protecting this rare and critical habitat, the county is allowing the developer to build the Miami Wilds theme park smack dab in the middle of it — specifically, on the crucial open space that serves as Zoo Miami's parking area and on adjacent natural areas.

This would be a devastating loss. The Zoo Miami parking lot is the precise place on Earth where the Florida bonneted bat — the most endangered bat in the United States — forages. Indeed, the bat has been documented as heavily using the site and its easily navigable, wide-open airspace as a key foraging area.

The theme park footprint also encompasses critical habitat relied upon by two endangered butterflies (Bartram's scrub-hairstreak and Florida leafwing) and by the endangered Miami tiger beetle.

Rare plants that rely on the site to survive include

the Florida brickell-bush and Carter's small-flowered flax.

By allowing the development of these precious patches of undeveloped pine rockland, the county is complicit in creating a giant concrete barrier that will block animals from naturally moving between some of the last remaining pieces of their habitat, potentially leading to a dire outcome: extinction.

Miami-Dade County should know better. It must live up to the preservation ideals of Zoo Miami instead of catering to politically connected developers. Private developers should construct their theme park project on private land like anyone else. Building a for-profit theme park on land owned by the public and used by the public to take their children to the zoo is unacceptable. Not to mention bulldozing the critical habitat the land supports.

Should this theme park development proceed, these rare indigenous animals will likely need their own Zoo Miami exhibit with a sign that explains our county government allowed their natural habitat to be destroyed.

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