

Eelgrass Roots: A Retrospective



**Anchored for Storms near Blackwater Springs
(my hiking buddy Bill Belleville)**

At the outset of this book, in our imaginary flight down the St. Johns to Wekiva, we found not one source or headwater, but three rich sub-basins, each with clusters of springs and other surface water drainages. In the same fashion, in the history of Wekiva's protection, working backwards from 1988, it would be wrong to find one source of this great achievement. However, for the sake of simplicity, I will pretend for a moment that they acted alone and ask the important question: how did the FOWR accomplish so much in six years. What does it take for a grass-roots group of nineteen to crack into the political and economic fabric of local and state life?

In this chapter we have had hints of the success involved in the Apricot project, the designation of Wekiva as an Outstanding Florida Waterway, the establishment of regional planning and buffer rules, an additional 6000 acres of land acquisition in the basin, including a major development called The Plantation that was forestalled and then purchased by Seminole county

after four years of battling, and finally the Governor's trip down the river as prelude to the establishment of the law.

We have also seen in the historical materials leading up to this decade, how the FOWR had optimum conditions for grass roots success: the right political system of comprehensive planning, an inventory of the native habitats, and a state budget to acquire, preserve, and restore the most vital parcels. Furthermore, they had the right cause, the river. As John Nolen's magnificent city plans reveal, the river should always be a cause for community.¹ Furthermore, the FOWR quite readily were able to organize and network with a group of other environmental groups to focus on the Wekiva. But most of all, they had the right mix of activists and professionals.

Most of the nineteen charter members of FOWR were friends and acquaintances from work with the Orange Audubon Society. About half of them were husband and wife teams. When it became clear that the source of the nutrient pollution was the city's effluent discharge, a new group was formed to speak specifically for the river. All over America this phenomenon has been growing faster than hydrilla. For twenty-five years, wherever you find natural bodies, endangered species, or threatened ecosystems, new advocacy groups have been showing up in government chambers to speak as their Friends. Since 1988, several of our charter members, still living in Florida, have become leaders of new advocacy groups like the Friends of Lake Apopka, the Friends of the Econlockhatchie River, the Native Plant Society, and the Nature Conservancy.

The extraordinary success of FOWR, however, has mostly to do with their professional character. Not every nineteen citizens starting a grassroots organization, whether to initiate or stop something, is going to succeed like this. When I give my powerpoint presentation about the Friends, I call this feature the eelgrass ethic:

- focus on the truth,
- make no enemies,
- build support by small steps, and
- take advantage of the momentum inherent in your strategy.

All the passion in the world to save the manatee is not going to stop the speeding boats if you can't prove that it is the speed that kills them or that the manatee population in this location where you seek a no-wake rule is actually declining. In Wekiva, we don't mind if science trumps the particular protection measure we are advocating. The river as a resource is far more complicated than a single species, so you need an array of experts and actual scientific studies carried out over sufficient time. A grass-roots river initiative amounts, really, to the practical application of all the sciences taught at our universities. If the truth has not already been found in scientific publications, then FOWR seeks new studies.

¹ Cornell University houses the best collection of his plans for cities like Boston, Roanoke, LaCrosse, and St. Petersburg.

Now the “We” in Wekiva is getting quite large and in as much as it is scientific rather than a bunch of backyard grouchers at public meetings, to that extent does the advocacy group have a chance, not only to improve their local community, but to indicate by example how the science works across the state or the nation. Passion that gets over into anger and protest before it has brought critical thinking to the meetings will not succeed. Neither will mere schmoozing work in policy chambers without the baseline information and the relevant studies.

When I first became an active board member of the Friends, I carried a good deal of anger toward developers and politicians, their lawyers and staff, into the public meetings. It was amazing to me how calm and courteous our FOWR presenters always were. Pat Harden was the one who cleared my mind of such useless baggage: “We always have to imagine that tomorrow we will be back again to ask these same folks for something else or to show them some other truth.” We can count on the self-interest of the opposition and they have to count on our selflessness and honesty. The greatest achievements of this democratic system require this friendly accommodation between opposing forces, a legacy of Whitman’s sense of equality.

The next point of character at stake has to do with strategy. Working by a great number of small steps, the FOWR set themselves up not for one issue, but for all issues affecting the river. From the outset in the charter, they were both a NIMBY anti-pollution group, and a NIABY (Not in Anyone’s Back Yard). Every week new ad-hoc citizens groups show up at planning and zoning or county commission meetings to voice their disapproval or approval of some issue close to their home or heart and then when the vote is in, they go home satisfied or angry.

The FOWR are more like those who become advocates and supporters for the victims of disease or a specific social ill because they or someone they love contracts the disease or has the problem. Their concern moves quickly from the one case to the whole population of such cases and beyond that to study and prevention. The river community works the same: in for one issue, out for all the plants and animals, children and adults, today and tomorrow. The small steps are largely made up of thousands of phone calls, letters, and office visits. The correspondence alone of these six years fills the better part of a file drawer in the FOWR archives.²

Attending board meetings on a regular basis, you get a sense sometimes that nothing is happening and at other times that everything is happening at once. This addresses the final element of grassroots success: timing is the essence of good strategy. Once the legislative session begins in the state capital, for instance, all energies have to be ready for release. Our technical experts are always trying to measure which meeting and which part of that meeting will be crucial to decide the issue, to offer the appropriate recommendations.

² It took us two years to prepare the FOWR papers from 1980-96 for deposition in the Special Florida Collection of the Olin Library Archives at Rollins College. Reading through the hundreds of folders and the 125 published studies the FOWR has been using to make its various cases has helped me get a feeling for this chapter.

Building the River Community, Step 3



At the end of our third run, the year is 1988 as we spiral suddenly to an important summit of Florida history, The Wekiva River Protection Act. It would be difficult to underestimate the importance of this event for the establishment of an enduring sense of regional identity. Love for the river has finally materialized into law. What next?

Your assignment, should you choose to accept it, is to build your own river community. “But,” you may say, “our river is already spoiled by urbanization and manufacture that comes right up to its banks and pours %&*(*%# directly into it.” The river still runs, doesn’t it? The foul, fishless river or canal of today can flow down to the sea tomorrow, a new and livable ecosystem.

Join the friends of your river or start one up. Focus first on the restoration of the aquatic organisms, until the full life of the river is

restored and people can safely fish and eat. Then figure out how to make a safe place to swim in it; canoe, boat, and kayak it. Tend to the basin and the runoff, neighborhood by neighborhood. Look for ways to reclaim riverfront property, and then establish buffers for future building and use. Return the trees and shrubs that are natural to the region. If we build better habitats, the rare and endangered will come back.

In the next millennium, as sprawl is reversed and cities rebuild, get your city council to hire a John Nolen or Frederic Olmsted to link natural areas with bike trails and light rail, teaching the city to take advantage of its prospects and parks. The new urbanism has completely redesigned the kinds of roads and human traffic ways—walking, skating, biking, and so forth—so as to accommodate the natural differences between urban, suburban, and rural qualities of community life.

We have two sections of the river yet to explore and they reveal by their wealth of natural history and wildlife, just exactly what we have to gain if we build our river community by this grand strategy in small steps.