

National Wild and Scenic River 2000

In July 1996, FOWR co-founder and board member Fred Harden gave testimony to the Congressional subcommittee considering protecting the Wekiva as a Wild & Scenic River. More than just an argument to save a river, his speech is also a moving narrative of how all of us can effect change. The legislation was initiated by Republican Congressman Bill McCollum and finally reached passage in the year 2000. At present, the Wekiva River is one of only three such rivers east of the Mississippi.

To Know the River is to Love It A Primer of Facts and Affection

I am Fred Harden, here representing the Friends of the Wekiva River, Inc. and the citizens of Central Florida who support designation of the Wekiva River as a National Wild and Scenic River.

Let me take you on a visit to the Wekiva River in your mind's eye. You start about 30 minutes away from downtown Orlando, a metropolitan area of over one million people. After negotiating the traffic on I-4, you will board your canoe, floating, on translucent waters.

You begin your journey at the river's headwaters, Wekiwa -Springs, which is also a state park. We had to make special arrangements for you because, on summer weekends, the park fills quickly to capacity. You notice as you walk to your canoe, the variety of languages that are being spoken. International visitors are here, taking a breather from the heat and hurry of the theme parks.

The park ranger tells you that the river appears much as it did when Florida's native Americans first canoed it, over 9000 years ago. Alligators, descendants of the dinosaurs, still swim here, but only the bones of their distant cousins, the mastodons, are found in the riverbed today. Prehistoric shark's teeth abound. Silent signs of the past are found here and there along your journey -- old dock pilings from logging days, Indian middens that speak of those who lived off the bounty of this land.

The river is approximately 20 miles long, flowing north to the St. John's River. Along the way, it is fed by three main tributaries and hundreds of springs of various sizes, some flowing into tiny streams, others within the river itself. The water will be tannin colored further downstream, a natural occurrence due to the hardwood swamps that help feed the river.

You launch amidst the splashing of children and the laughter of picnickers in the park. As you leave the main spring, you glide into the lily pads and spot herons and egrets searching for a

mid-morning snack. Overhead, a hawk watches with wary eye. From the moist forest, a Carolina wren calls.

As you continue downstream, you pass forested islands. In places the river narrows and provides a canopy of welcome shade. There are few manmade intrusions here. An otter, curious and quick, allows us the privilege of seeing him. An osprey dives into the silent waters and leaves with a small bream clutched tightly in its talons.

Halfway down the river, you encounter more canoes. A guide in one of them tells the group that this river is one of the most, if not the most, popular rivers in Florida for canoeing. His group is from the Phillips Corporation in the Netherlands. They wanted to see some of the real Florida, as advertised by the Seminole County Chamber. 'Ecotourism' is coming of age in Florida.

Farther downstream, you meet a group from Rollins College. It is an environmental science class studying the riverine habitat. Students from the University of Central Florida and numerous high schools also use the river for learning. Suddenly, the silence is shattered! A pileated woodpecker ripsaws a dead cypress in search of a food.

Overhead, a swallow-tailed kite performs its graceful aerial ballet. Off the bow, a mullet jumps, creating sun diamonds of spray. Along the bank, in a sandy flat, black bear tracks are seen. Small wild orchids bloom on the tree branches and swamp lilies flower at the water's edge. Limpkins and wood storks feed in the shallows. A barred owl calls from the depths of this ancient forest.

As you end your journey, you meet a group from the Friends of the Wekiva River. They tell you this river system is zealously guarded by many citizens of Central Florida. The Friends' efforts to provide protection for the Wekiva began in earnest in 1981, with a core of about nine members. Through their efforts, others became involved. Local and state government agencies, the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD), bi-partisan elected officials, including one Republican and one Democratic governor, joined grassroots citizens and newspapers to begin protecting the river.

State land purchases, with the urging and overwhelming support of the citizens, went from 20,000 acres in 1985 to approximately 50,000 in 1995. Within the river basin, exist a state park, a state preserve, a state reserve, a state forest, a county park and numerous buffer lands.

Due to the combined efforts of dedicated Floridians, strengthened growth management rules set by the Florida Department of Community Affairs, minimum flows and levels, recharge protection, riparian habitat protection and stronger stormwater rules passed by the SJRWMD were instituted. These measures provide protection and management guidance for the river and its associated resources, as well as hunting, hiking, fishing, horseback riding and educational

opportunities. By adding the Federal Wild and Scenic status to these state measures, you will assure that the river will remain a treasure for future generations.

Due to the combined efforts of the above groups and the land purchases, the Wekiva River now has more protection at the state level than any other river in Florida. Among its state designations are Outstanding Florida Waters, Aquatic Preserve (first such freshwater river in our state), State Canoe Trail, State Wild and Scenic River (also a first). All that is lacking is the recognition of the Federal government that this river is indeed a valuable resource.

The Wekiva adds to the economy and the quality of life in an urban area. It is an educational, recreational, and natural resource available to over one million inhabitants of Central Florida and over 25 million domestic and international visitors.

Later this week, the founder of the FOWR, will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Col. Russell F. Fisher retired from the Air Force in 1970 after flying bombers in WWII and serving in Korea, Japan, and the Pentagon. Rather than "letting George do it," when he saw urbanization, waste water and storm water pollution, and indifference threatening to turn the river into an urban dump, he took action. In 1981, at the age of 64, Col. Fisher mobilized a group of interested citizens and the story I have given you began. He passed away this July fourth: on July fifth, members of the FOWR received, in the mail, information on the Wekiva River he had sent July third.

Congressional leaders have been calling for citizens to be involved, to tackle their concerns at a local level, to handle problems at home. This is a prototype of citizen involvement, of citizens calling on decision makers to help them protect a river system. This river provides an increasingly populous urban area with quality of life: economic, recreational, educational and natural resources. What better way to reinforce those who have made a difference at the local level solving problems by grassroots involvement than to designate this oasis of green a National Wild and Scenic River?

On behalf of the many citizens who love and care for this river and in memory of a fine American, Col. Russ Fisher, I respectfully urge you to grant this designation. We also thank Rep. Bill McCollum for introducing this legislation.



Old Cypress Log along Blackwater Creek

Pat and Fred Harden have both served as charter members and past presidents of the FOWR, living along the Lower Wekiva on a five acre plot with its own spring. For many years they used to hold a large party there called The Flamingo Fling. Everyone had to wear something salmon-pink, to stand out like the long-necked bird of south Florida. They would invite all the Friends and include all the local politicians (who wouldn't miss it for a TV op) regardless of their voting pattern.

In the 1990's, Pat was appointed to the board of the Saint Johns River Water Management District, where she served for eight years, including several as chair. During this time she had to resign from FOWR to avoid any conflict of interest. I remember the day she took a few of us new FOWR board members up to the district offices in Palatka to see how the system works. They have hundreds of scientists and public relations people to carry on the research, education, and permitting functions of their monitoring and protection of the waters of the St. Johns River basin and the public water supply. This is where the state watches closely the relationship between growth, water supply, and water quality. They also have independent land acquisition programs that dovetail in Wekiva with the state's Natural Lands Acquisition group of the Department of Environmental Protection. Pat's experience on the WMD board has been invaluable in the recent issues raised by the proposed Wekiva Parkway that will have such a critical impact in the last run of the river, Blackwater Creek and Seminole Springs.

Building the River Community, Step 4

At the end of the fourth run, we have reached the turn of the century. Many more acres have been acquired for posterity and Wekiva has received national protection as a Wild and Scenic River. This award may seem a little like winning a beauty pageant, entirely superfluous to actual health. However, funding from the federal government is now available, enough to pay studies, for example, the effects of nitrate buildup in the spring flows on the populations of apple snails and limpkins.

Of course, ecology and democracy begin at home. In the business of making community work, it is necessary to have fun and spiritual renewal in our yards and neighborhoods as well as in the wild. The forces of technology are working against the simple experience of our natural communities and our neighborhoods, but celebration is always readily. Maybe the whole basin should revive the Flamingo Fling.