Where the Bears and the Timucuan Roam

Eight years ago Jim and Sandy, two of our best friends, left the college and Florida for southwestern Virginia, promising that the move would not change our friendship. Indeed, the constellations of our friendships in both places are now quite different, but through frequent calls, letters, and visits our friendship has remained the same. This week they came to visit us on spring break, so Jim and I, as usual, spent several days of hiking and exploring.

3/16/00

It's Monday the thirteenth of March, as we pack our water, food, and maps to set off for the Seminole Forest, just twenty minutes' drive away. Our plan is to locate the little known Shark's Tooth spring which my son Sean and I found last fall, just off the Florida trail. Reports of another spring in the area add seasoning to our quest. What other springlets are flowing out of the limestone ridges of Sulphur Island and feeding into the shallow bed of Sulphur Run?

At the car we spray our ankles, pants, and boots to forestall the redbugs and ticks because we will most certainly be going off the trails. The weather is perfect, clear with a high in the low seventies. The world is new green and the excitement of bird song has almost all the critters primed for reproduction. Hope is a thing with hormones and this is its highpoint.

At the north gated entrance to the Forest off route 44, near Cassia, we pay our $2 in the metal cylinder. Jim checks out the hunting schedule--which I should have done before we set out--and luckily we have arrived five days before the last scheduled hunt of the season. We are hunters, too, but only with our feet, our inner and outer senses, and an ordinary camera. And you, dear reader, what are you tracking among these words? Perhaps we have more surprises in store than we can imagine.

The ground is soft as we set out down the trail through an upland, a former pasture of longleaf pines and grasses. We had a good rain two days ago, but the season and the year have been unusually dry so that the ground beneath the canopy we now enter is crackling with leaves and needles. Even though these areas are managed thoroughly by a team of ranger fire-dragons, leaving black scars on the lower trunks of many trees throughout the 20,000 acres here, the amount of light tinder from even one year's fall is extraordinary. It smells delicious and softens every step along the path, crumpled by human and other animal feet to a slightly finer carpet. If you go by the evidence of the trail register, not many humans are commuting to this forest. Indeed, on many days, no one clocks in.

It was a year ago when I first introduced Jim to the Seminole Forest and now we spend most of our time recalling that hike, as once again we are moving east along the pasture, then through the slash pine and palmettos. We investigate a variety of dry sinkholes and lakes, find ourselves at Lake Jordan watching a sandhill crane cruise across to the other side and disappear entirely in the tall brown grass and cypress knees. A red-tailed hawk circles down over the

western shore. Panning a dock on the north side with my binoculars, I spy a kestrel spying us. The old dock on this side is years beyond use and sits 4-5 feet above the current water level.

You can read the level of water supply in Florida, just about anywhere along this walk; or you can get it off the web sites of the U. S. Geological Survey and the Saint Johns River Water Management District. These agencies have a number of river and spring gauges, operating full-time by solar energy and flashing up immediate short-term and long-term data into cyberspace. They provide excellent charts revealing the pattern of decline over the past fifty years, fifty days, or fifty hours. When you look at this data, you can easily recognize the major hurricanes and rainy seasons since they appear as gigantic spikes of surface water increase with corresponding loading of the aquifer and spring pressure. Just as easily as the financial newscasters can read the upward trends in the flow of capital and profit during the last fifty years, we can say with relative certainty that since 1950 this forest and river basin has lost something close to 30% of its water capacity, in spite of the large volumes of rain-exchange we have had.

Jim, contemplating the run out of Helene Spring

Of course, for every drop that is invested from the skies, a drop and more has been sold off by the transpiration and perspiration of earthkind (forget for a moment all the other forms of sprinklers and valves in our manufactured plumbing systems). It all takes place every second in the pits of the water stock exchange called the cell. No one knows for sure whether this current bear market in our Florida water economy will throw us forest folk into a depression. However, it is amply clear that the inverse correlation between human population growth and water use is a big factor, in spite of all the Greenspans who have tried to regulate the development of wetlands, the conservation of water, and the density of population in Florida.

The music of the wind and the birds in the trees reminds us that despite the current drought and fire danger, all of which nature in Florida has seen before in greater extremes, this new season will be just as blessed as the last. I take a deep breath and wonder how they calculate the total volume of photosynthesis and transpiration, the power and the pump, of the Seminole State forest. It feels like a day of glorious banquets and a thousand lovely baths. Seven hundred people at the SJRWMD are working hard to insure that in the next doubling of our region's population--expected in the next twenty years--we will have water to drink and use. Now they predict that by 2010 we will be the first humans in Florida who have to pay for their water from some source other than the aquifer.

We reach a three-way intersection of the dirt path and following a small green and yellow signpost, start the descent along Pine Road to the culvert marking Sulphur Run. From a distance of a hundred yards, we see the deep darkness of the green where water flows. This is a different realm. A slender turkey crosses the sandy roadbed and we walk to investigate. For several minutes, while we try to find him among the bushes--we can see into the woods quite a distance now--he stands, stock still, blending with the browns and greys of the forest floor. Just when we turn to move on, he scurries toward the cover of the shallow creek we just crossed over.

Sulphur Run slithers through the middle of a swamp that just about circles a two-square mile area of upland called Sulphur Island. On the topo map, this island rises gradually from the hydric hammock to a height of seventy feet, taking the shape of a pear with the stem at the bottom. If you imagine the top of the pear has a clock-face, Sulphur Run goes from about nine on the clock to four in the east. There it empties into Blackwater Creek on its way to the lower Wekiva. Except in the highest of water seasons, the run is far too shallow and cluttered with snags for anyone to paddle up from the Blackwater.

We head now south along the Florida Trail toward Shark's Tooth Spring, a two-foot wide rill coming out of a hole just a little bigger than my thigh. When we arrive at the little footbridge for the path thirty feet below the spring, we sit for lunch, sharing apples and granola bars and water until we are fully rested.

Much of the human world now finds the faucet, the sink, and the water fountain or cooler more common than this natural equivalent. No office friends would camp in admiration in front of a faucet, turn it on, and feel the spiritual resonance Jim and I feel here. Putting water into closed plumbing systems, as we humans do, hugely takes away its usefulness for all other forms of life. To this extent, we have lost the openness, community, and democracy of water which it has enjoyed from the time of the first garden of creation.

Earthkind is waterkind. We feel that truth quite deeply here amid noises in the bushes. I begin to imagine that perhaps the bears and the deer or other critters are getting impatient, waiting in the brush, above and below, for us to finish our lunch before they come to the best place in their building to snatch a drink at the cooler.

It is useful to hold the measure of human friendship up to this forest ecology. Pairs of other animals can be observed in a variety of natural settings, but all the evidence of ethology shows little affinity in other species for independent friendships among adults. Only in the world of Winnie the Pooh or the Lion King, for the sake of the childhood imagination, do we see friendship between and within species. What really makes us different from the other animals? Is there any sense in which we are superior, above the other species?

Aristotle talked about the human as a social animal, but friendship is something much larger than that, and to me more precious by far. Without blowing up the balloon of anthropocentrism, I like to think of the humble human as a magnanimal, mostly because of our capacity to be kind, to build and maintain a healthy relationship which endures, reveals, and evolves. One cannot take a friendship for granted. One has to keep the eyes and ears at alert to know the range of suffering and joy that each life in its separate world enfolds. It largely grows, not from talking and email, but from doing things together.

The Greeks had a word for that, *synergy,* and in all my closest friendships there has been an electrical charge I could almost smell, a connection when we get together for dinner, some project, or an outing. I am groping here for a truth I know that every friend comprehends, intuitively and without question. So how different is that quality from the synergy of forest ecology where many species and populations of species, plant and animal, have a thousand interacting points in the energy transfers, the decomposition, the predation, the feeding, and the reproduction of the community of the forest?

We move out away from the gravelly run, south and up, climbing twenty to thirty feet above the trail and back to the high noon of Sulphur Run. Here Pine Road intersects with two other jeep paths, one south and one west by southwest, and we head out on the latter, keeping an eye out for the thick dark green and the tall sabal palms indicating a path of water flow. Immediately we feel the distance widens between us and the run; but when it gathers closer to us, we bushwack through palmettos (carefully), hoping to find new sources for the ten-foot wide stream.

Sure enough at the first bend in the topo-map where the lines of elevation converge almost to a point, there is a steep drop and we find the spring we've been hoping to discover. Well, it's more like a seep. Out from under a small tree is the only place where one might imagine an opening into the hill that would take us to the face of that great limestone water tower just below the surface of Sulphur Island. The rest of the water oozes out in several muddy places and barely creates a stream. I drop a few oak leaves through the tree roots and watch their little barks. Some stick to the sand and some get lofted on the clear stream and move briskly for a few feet. Smart tree, to put down roots right over the little spring mouth. All this seepage converges to a narrow and less vigorous rill that heads north and east into the run, somewhat out of sight. This spot reminds us of many a mountain seep along the Appalachian Trail or the Iron Mountain range of Jim's Virginia region.

Heading back to the trail with a sense of accomplishment, I am still thinking there is one more likely spot on the topo map where the spring the ranger mentioned two months ago might exist. So we proceed along the sandy road, just as before, keeping an eye out for the tall sabal palms. Another third of a mile later we once again penetrate the brush and descend, soon to a steep ridge, a much denser jungle, and finally a shining little stream. The water again is perfectly clear and the flow is much more copious than Shark's Tooth. Here green-patched and shell-flecked limestone rocks have tumbled out of the bottom of the hill in several places and half a dozen holes appear at various levels, the lower ones making streamlets of their own.

I whip out my camera, as Jim hops and vaults from rock to palm tree base to rock again, across the thirty-yard stretch. I am puzzling over an irregular boulder, sitting upright and facing into the first big hole. It looks like a stocky animal of some sort who is sipping at the stream. Between the two readily discernible ears, there's a fist-sized hole (as though brain surgery had been performed). A pocketful of dry oak leaves are nestled in there. Below its shoulders are stubby front feet, and a broad rump sticks up a little behind. The whole figure is about as big as UGA, the famous bull-dog mascot. In fascination, I find myself angling and clicking a half-dozen pictures of the little beast from every angle, then some more of the rest of the vents and

streams and tree trunks. I finish with one of Jim sitting in the middle of the bluff which yields this magical treasure: earth-made water, as clean as you please, and water-made stone to drink it.

We start to take stock of our discovery and I am wanting to name the spring for the rock-figure. "Rhinoceros," "hippopotamus," "litho-hippo," I crank out names for Jim's approval. "How about Lithopotamus Springs?" Who knows? It doesn't need a name, really, but it is a particular and unique place in all this earth, just like the rest of us plants and animals, so we want to be able to proper-name it. In the world's census of water bodies, it needs to be counted. It changes and therefore can tell us things. Clearly, at some seasons of high water, it flows from those higher cavities and makes quite a gush. I feel like John Muir "discovering" ever new glaciers (except that he had the pleasure of being guided there by the natives). I wonder where the nearest Timucuan mound would be.

We are filled with an indescribably deep pleasure. It's not just the hike, the natural history, the sandhill ecology, or the mystery of water. All these are a part of what many now call "deep" ecology, the biocentric experience. But what happens when friendship is joined to all that? Perhaps that is why so many grass roots groups call themselves Friends of the Lake Apopka or Friends of the Wekiva.

Rock Cub Spring

Ready to turn back north to our car and home, we walk west again and unwillingly south a little, expecting to find the road or path we took last year when we went down the west side of Sulphur Run and crossed on a defunct road with a washed-out culvert. Eventually, after a few confusions of path, we recover our old trail and are heading directly north to the field below the parking area. Just to do something different, when we see a narrow path veer off the choppy, old jeep trail, we head slightly west of due north on this nearly overgrown footpath or animal track.

Soon we discover, walking amidst palmettos and scrub, dry bear scat, fairly frequently occurring on the path, like every other hundred feet. Maybe someone should mark this as the Bear Trail, heading north toward the Ocala National Forest. Gradually the scat becomes more and more fresh, until Jim finally quips: "Pretty soon we'll come around a turn and discover a bear with his pants down." I am getting more than a little excited because somehow, after four decades of outdoor activity, I have never encountered a Florida black bear in the wild and here we seem to be on a path where several have recently been loping along like us.

Finally we see a pile so fresh we think we need to follow tracks, but none can be found and farther along the piles disappear. At this point, the picture of a mother and cubs preceding us and then breaking off the trail enters my slow brain. Half a day later, when describing to Jean at home the rock we found at the spring, I begin to realize that the most likely form for the animal sipping at the spring is a bear cub. How could I have missed the possibility that the rock is a native artifact, perhaps even chipped and leveled to fit in that place? I wait eagerly today to look at those photos to see any evidence that we have discovered an example of Timucuan stone art. No matter if it is, by an archaeologist's standards: in our mind now, this will always be Rock Cub Spring.[1]

[1] In subsequent visits to this now favorite site, I have found that the rock in the shape of the bear cub is actually moveable, flat at the bottom, and not an outcropping of a larger foundation. Furthermore, it looks as though it would fit neatly into the space just east of it, as though it were possibly the handiwork of some human who jarred or cut it loose, wishing to make a shrine of this found sculpture.