

**Florida Springs Restoration Workshop**  
**March 21, 2011**  
**History of Protection/Restoration Efforts**  
**Jim Stevenson**

Having spent many years in the Florida State Park system, I was among the first to inspect newly acquired state parks that were purchased from private land owners. I soon learned that – in the absence of active management - the public abuses the “commons.” Volusia Blue, Ichetucknee and Telford were extreme examples of public abuse of springs that I have observed. Protection must be provided by the owners whether private or a government agency.

Private owners were the first to offer a degree of protection by developing health spas for Yankee tourists after the civil war. Green Cove Spring, Suwannee Spring, White Spring and Hampton Spring were some of them. Early protection simply amounted to boardwalks and steps to control erosion around the spring.

Private tourist attractions offered a degree of protection but their development in and around the springs was often harmful but at least the attractions generated public appreciation of our springs. These attractions included: Silver, Homosassa, Rainbow, DeLeon and Wakulla Spring. Weeki Wachee experienced the worst and most shoddy development of them all. But at last, Weeki Wachee is a state park and the Florida Park Service (FPS) is able to implement restoration of the spring.

When we speak of ownership, let's remember that if the spring run was navigatable then it was and is state sovereignty land. In other words the state owns it. However the upland surrounding the spring was privately owned. State ownership of the submerged lands was merely an ignored legal matter as no agency was actually overseeing protection or management of these submerged lands. Whoever owned the uplands did as they wished with the spring and its run.

For decades, it was commonly believed that the way to protect a spring was to buy it and establish a state park. In 1949, Manatee Spring was the first spring (upland) acquired by the state and the first spring state park. Twenty years later Wekiwa Springs was purchased by the state in 1969 and the following year, in 1970, Ichetucknee Springs was purchased. Today there are 16 state parks named for major springs. These springs are the best of the best. Silver Springs was purchased by the state in 1993 and promptly leased to a corporation to continue operation as a private attraction. I predict that it too will eventually become a state park.

During those early years, the FPS had no understanding of protecting a spring and its run. Our focus was protection of the uplands and the spring shoreline from trampling and erosion. We did a relatively good job of protecting the adjacent uplands in those first spring parks.

Ichetucknee was where we first became concerned about protecting the submerged area of the springs, its run, and the river. We began deliberations on protecting the aquatic vegetation and managing tubers in 1972. We funded a carrying capacity research project in 1977 and implemented the first carrying capacity for tubers in 1978 and to this day the issue continues to receive attention and debate.

What does spring restoration mean? The uplands adjacent to the spring? The submerged area of the spring and run? Ecological productivity? Restoration of the water quality and spring flow or all of the above?

Whereas we once thought, and many people still believe, that all we have to do to protect a spring is to buy it and establish a park, now we know that the spring is the end of the pipe. Human activities determine the amount and the quality of the water flowing from the end of the pipe. Therefore, acquisition of the spring protects the hole where the water flows from the ground. It does not protect the water, and without the water, all we have is a hole in the ground.

You can't provide adequate protection of a spring – that is where people walk, drive their vehicles or operate their motorboats unless it is either closed to public use or is being managed by on-site staff. Otherwise the public will abuse the commons.

As you all know, we can't provide adequate protection of the water unless you take action in the springshed that supplies the water to the spring. Some of us began focusing on the water and the land uses in the springshed in 1992 when we formed the Wakulla Spring Basin Working Group and the Ichetucknee Springs Basin Working Group in 1995. Action in the springsheds has remained the focus of our work since then.

The best strategy with which to protect a spring is to buy the springshed. It's too late to buy an entire springshed (unless it is a very small spring) which would have solved all our problems but we can sometimes purchase the most vulnerable portions. The best example is the NFWMD acquisition of 41,000 acres of the springshed of the springs of the Econfina River that provided major springs protection. But the political justification ----was to protect Panama City's water supply. But that's ok. We will take it any way we can get it.

To date, we have achieved little success in over-coming public apathy when the issues are non-point: lawns, pastures, septic tanks, livestock, and pumping by domestic, municipal and agricultural wells.

However, some successes have been achieved when the public is “**outraged**” about a threat such as a cement plant, a bottled water plant or a city wastewater sprayfield; -- single source adversaries.

David Brower the founder of the Sierra Club said, “The first thing you do is show them the place that must be saved as John Muir did when he camped in Yosemite with President Theodore Roosevelt. David Brower led trips for VIPs on the Colorado River to stop a dam from being built in the Grand Canyon. He said “the visual truth of the situation can move millions of people.”

Governor Bush and DEP Secretary Struhs canoed the Ichetucknee because of the public up-roar over a proposed cement plant. This canoe trip resulted in the first two statewide efforts specifically to protect springs. In 1999 the Florida Springs Task Force was formed to develop protection strategies and in 2001 the governor's springs initiative provided state funding

specifically for springs protection. A few years ago DEP eliminated the task force and last year the legislature eliminated 75% of the Springs Initiative funding.

Good things have happened. For example consider some of the good deeds the SRWMD has accomplished for the Ichetucknee. They were a primary founder and provided the funding for The Ichetucknee Partnership. In 2009, they acquired a conservation easement that has protected 3000 acres in the Ichetucknee Basin. They have led the restoration of Alligator Lake, the headwaters of the Ichetucknee. They obtained Letters of Intent signed by 20 farmers to implement BMPs in the Ichetucknee Basin. Furthermore they gave us the film “Springs Heartland” and purchased Otter Springs. Thank you Executive Director David Still.

While we have accomplished a lot of the recommendations of the task force and millions of dollars have been spent on numerous important projects, the health of our springs is still declining. If our springs are lost, let us not permit the people of Florida to claim that they “didn’t know that our springs were at risk.” Writers like Archie Carr, Al Burt and Bill Bellville eloquently written about threats to our springs.

Artists Margaret Tolbert and Annie Pais and photographers John Moran and Jill Heinerth continue to show Floridians the beauty of our springs. Filmmaker Wes Skiles did his part producing such films as Polluting the Fountain of Youth, Waters Journey: Hidden Rivers and Springs Heartland. These springs champions were inspired here in the springs heartland. They have been dedicated messengers telling the springs story to the people of Florida. We have lost Archie Carr, Al Burt and Wes Skiles but we trust that others will be inspired to take their place.

Several of you are scientists that know a great deal about the technical status of our springs. It is important that you share your knowledge with the public--as well as your peers. The organizations: Save Our Suwannee, Friends of the Santa Fe River and Friends of the Wekiva River have played a significant role in organizing grass roots support for springs protection.

Activist like Guy Marwick, Annette Long and Pat Harden have spent many nights at public hearings and county commission meetings for years. A critically important voice is the media. If you don’t exist in the media, you don’t exist. The Tallahassee Democrat, Gainesville Sun, Lake City Reporter, and Ocala Star Banner have been champions of springs protection.

So where does this leave us? What to do?

## **Protecting Florida’s Springs Challenges and Solutions**

### **Challenges**

- Few Floridians have ever seen a healthy, pristine spring and even fewer understand what healthy springs use to look like. Most think that the present condition of a spring is how it has always appeared.
- Springs of south Florida are gone. Today, the springs are north of I-4; however, 73% of the population is south of I-4. Therefore most Floridians have never seen a spring and legislators are not being pressured by their constituents to protect them.

- South Florida is running out of fresh water. Where will that 73% of the population get their water when their wells go dry? From water rich north Florida? We have springs in so called water rich north Florida that no longer flow because of pumping.
- Springs protection is only important to a small percentage of citizens and environmental organizations in north Florida. Therefore it has not been possible for spring protection legislation to compete with other statewide issues and needs.
- The public likes simple solutions. Springs protection is complicated. It is unpopular because it requires behavioral changes, new regulations, and economic costs for cities, counties, agriculture and homeowners. Corporate, agricultural, and local government lobbyists have effectively opposed springs legislation. It has been Mother Nature against father greed and guess who is winning?
- Unfortunately, it will require a **crisis** to bring about public outcry such as bacteria causing prohibition of swimming in a popular spring park, or a major spring that has stopped flowing, or murky water flowing from a spring or a favorite spring choked with algae.

### Solutions

- DEP's "**Florida Springs Task Force**" was composed of springs scientists and other experts who compiled the latest science and status of springs. The task force no longer exists. Perhaps the new Florida Springs Institute will fill this role.
- Form a "**Florida Springs Alliance**" to educate the public and the media and to pressure officials. Also, each significant spring should have a **Friends** group to lobby for its protection like the Friends of Wakulla Springs. Bill Moyers said: "*There is only one force strong enough to counter the power of organized money today and that is the power of organized people.*"
- Raise awareness of the values and the degradation of springs. **Field trips** of the springshed and the spring for officials and the public are a very important strategy. In his book "River of Lakes" Florida writer Bill Bellville states, "*We don't protect what we don't value. And one of the surest way to value a place is to connect with it, if for only a little bit.*"
- **Public outcry** (perhaps the word is outrage) must out-weigh the political influence of lobbyists and moneyed interests like the Farm Bureau. Senator John McCain said: "*Special interests control the debate. Until they are matched by public opinion, little progress will be possible.*"
- To date, most progress has been achieved by focusing on **local government** ordinances and comprehensive plans in counties where major springs occur; counties where the local people care about their spring. Marion, Levy and Wakulla Counties are foremost examples. Remember the bumper sticker: "*If the people lead, the leaders will follow.*"

- *Our springs need leaders.*