

Saving Florida's Water

*As Struggles Deepen,
Opportunities Abound to Ensure
Future for Our Rivers and Springs*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL STONE

WHEN GETZEN FOWLER STARTED WORKING MAINTENANCE AT POE SPRINGS IN 1951 FOR 23 CENTS AN HOUR, IT WAS VASTLY DIFFERENT THAN TODAY.

The park, then privately owned, had a boardwalk, a concession stand, changing houses and diving boards, said 75-year-old Getzen, who has lived in and around the nearby city of High Springs his whole life.

With these features long gone and the park now under Alachua County Parks and Recreation, Poe had another unique feature back then not present today: Visitors could navigate the whole waterway that connects the spring to the Santa Fe River without ever touching a rock or the bottom.

“You use to could swim right on out into the river from Poe Springs,” Fowler recalled, estimating the water level was about 3 or 4 feet deeper in the early ‘50s. “The water was deep enough that you could





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Erica Gonzaga (holding camera) and Rob Damitz take promotional photos for their Gainesville-based company, aqUV, at Poe Springs on Saturday, March 28th.

The two, along with partner Daniel Blood, developed the aqUV water bottle, which has a built-in ultraviolet light bulb that sanitizes water and is meant to help provide clean water in underprivileged countries.



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swim — not super deep, but it was deep enough that you could swim.”

Such a dramatic water decrease makes Poe a “textbook example” of the peril happening across the state’s roughly 1,020 springs, said Bob Knight, director of the nonprofit Florida Springs Institute in Gainesville.

“Poe has been degraded terribly. It stopped flowing in 2012 for the first time ever,” Knight said. “Any spring that stops flowing is like, ‘What are we doing? What have we done?’”

Like many area waterways, Poe and the Santa Fe became all but stagnant by the dramatic drops in rainfall during 2011 and into 2012. But experts point to more deep-rooted problems as the real culprits behind quantity and quality declines in North Central Florida’s springs and rivers.

Over pumping from groundwater wells has diverted the liquid lifeblood toward agriculture, water bottling and, especially in terms of lawns, individuals homes supporting a growing population. Such extractions have taken the amount of water flowing out of the state’s springs down by a third, Knight said.

Less of this fresh water means more room for the saltwater even deeper underground to force its way upward into the water

supply — a process called saltwater intrusion.

At the same time, nitrates found in fertilizers, cattle feces and, if not properly controlled, human waste are making their way into the Floridan aquifer system. The aquifer is the network of Swiss-cheese-like rocks and caves throughout the entire state that allows rainwater to travel underground, mainly starting at sinkholes, and eventually reemerge as flowing surface water.

Drinking water high in nitrates can cause negative health effects, and it’s also believed to fuel the algae blooms that shroud clear water in green and kill native vegetation.

But it hasn’t been all bad news lately for the springs in and around Alachua County.

Following the 2011 and 2012 drought periods, a slight pick-me-up has come in the form of climbing rainfalls.

The 14 counties covered by the Suwannee River Water Management District, including northwestern Alachua County, were missing about 8.5 inches in 2011 from the historic average of 54.5 inches, according to figures from the district.

But during the past three years, the heavens have released showers higher than the average: 4.7 inches in surplus for 2012, despite several dry months; 0.9 surplus for 2013; and a giant 7.1

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extra last year.

Thinking back to the tail end of the drought in 2012, Knight is glad a stroke of luck from the weather has given the springs a shot in the arm.

“The springs are much more valuable than just our recreational use for them,” he said, referring to swimming, diving and other water activities popular among visitors. “The springs are the headwaters of all our rivers – in other words, if we didn’t have a spring flow in the Santa Fe River, the whole river dries up.”

But Knight emphasized it’s going to take people, not Mother Nature, to ensure the springs and rivers are pristine and can better survive the inevitable next drought.

The 1970s saw Floridians fighting for natural water en masse because of droughts combined with what was considered extravagant pumping, Knight said.

“But things are much worse now than they were then,” he

said, “and yet the public hasn’t been standing up to defend their rights.”

Certain groups, though, are taking a stand, and they say all who want help and participate are welcome.

SANTA FE, OTHER WATERS DRAW SUPPORT

Locally, the Santa Fe is perhaps the most noted running waterway, following the northern border of Alachua County and being fed by several popular springs, including Ginnie, Lily, Poe and Rum Island.

In its entirety, the river travels more than 70 miles westward from Lake Santa Fe northwest of Melrose until its confluence with the Suwanee River.

In a feat of spectacular natural wonder, the river disappears into a sinkhole at O’Leno State Park in High Springs and travels three miles underground before reemerging at River Rise State Preserve. This division separates the

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upstream Upper Santa Fe River to the east and the downstream Lower Santa Fe River to the west until it hits the Suwanee.

Sprouting along the lower portion alone are 40-some springs, Knight said, and their imperilment has sparked the creation of the nonprofit Our Santa Fe.

The organization incorporated in 2007 on the heels of the successful effort to stop four water-bottling plants from setting up shop along the Santa Fe River. Among its ongoing goals: having the Suwanee Water Management District put a moratorium on issuing larger water-use permits, and getting the Florida Department of Environmental Protection to work with farmers on bringing down their use of water, fertilizers and other chemicals.

Drops in such areas would come from what Our Santa Fe President Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson described as “right crop, right location.” For example, she said, growers could transition to slash pine because, even though the tree takes longer to reach its harvest point, it requires less treatment and irrigation.

In addition, the organization is collecting photographs of the Santa Fe River taken prior to 1990 to use in its campaigns and compare and contrast river conditions over time. Malwitz-Jipson said anyone with such photographs can call 386-243-0322 or email info@oursantaferiver.org to coordinate and that the photos would be returned if they needed to be scanned.

Malwitz-Jipson said the same contact information can be used for anyone interested in volunteering to help with events,

such as film showings and guest speakers; collecting photos; membership recruitment; and contacting officials and other community members about water issues.

“We’re all in this together,” she said, “and we feel strongly that people who want to be a part of their community can actually make something happen.”

Our Santa Fe is one organization among many that have emerged in the wake of the growing danger to Florida’s water.

Another, Save Our Suwanee, is working mainly on keeping overflow from the Valdosta, Georgia, wastewater treatment plant from running into the river, said Malwitz-Jipson, who recently started serving as president of that organization as well.

Winding about 260 miles from the Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico, the Suwanee is fed by 55 springs and has Florida’s only whitewater rapids, near the city of White Springs.

Those wishing to volunteer on the wastewater project and areas such as membership, the newsletter and the website should email volunteer@saveoursuwanee.org, Malwitz-Jipson said.

Yet another group, the Ichetucknee Alliance, is targeting the core issues of decreasing water levels and increasing nitrates at the river, said Lucinda Merritt, the alliance’s secretary.

The Ichetucknee has lost about 20 to 25 percent of its historic water flow to pumping, and algae blooms are clouding the water and engulfing vegetation, Merritt said.

“I remember going down the river back in the ‘60s when



Karen Yochim



Gil Alba



“Gainesville is sort of moving in the right direction. We’re using less water every year instead of more.”

it was clear as glass from the head spring down to the takeout point, and it’s not that way now,” she said.

A relatively short, spring-fed river, the Ichetucknee travels 6 miles from the headspring in Ichetucknee Springs State Park in Fort White until its confluence with the Santa Fe River at the northern tip of Gilchrist County. It provides 25 percent of the Santa Fe’s flow and, later, 4 percent of the Suwannee’s, according to the Ichetucknee Alliance.

The current target for volunteers would be joining a monthly canoe and kayak trip that tests the river’s quality and gathers other data, Merritt said, adding those interested should email ichetuckneealliance@gmail.com.

These organizations, closer to Alachua County, are three of many focused on protecting the springs and rivers throughout North Central Florida. Anyone wanting to volunteer or become a member can see a lengthier list at FloridaSpringsInstitute.org/Springs-Allies.

STARTING IN THE HOME

Outside of direct help with nonprofit water organizations, there are several things Floridians can do in their everyday lives to minimize the impacts to the aquifer system, said Knight of the Springs Institute.

First and foremost, they should reduce watering and fertilizing plants and lawns, he said, noting that using vegetation native to Florida will most often prove resilient regardless of current rain trends.

Residents should “tolerate the fact that native grasses and

things will turn brown during the dry periods and will be green the rest of the time,” Knight said. “What we need is an ethical change where people see that using fertilizer is wrong.”

If fertilizers are spread, overuse does not make the plants grow any faster, the institute’s website explains. And for water retention, it recommends applying mulch to beds and leaving grass clippings on the lawn.

In addition, homeowner associations should consider changing their rules on fining members for having brown lawns, he said.

The movement that encourages native plants that don’t need as much synthetic help is called “Florida-Friendly Landscaping.” Its website, FloridaYards.org, has a database of suitable grasses, flowers, shrubs and other plants for the northern, central and southern regions of the state.

The site also offers an interactive planning map that helps transition from a lawn-dominated landscape to one with beds and native plants.

As for saving water indoors, the Springs Institute’s websites lists several things people can do: test for a leaky toilet by adding food coloring and seeing if it disappears in 30 minutes; upgrade to low-volume toilets and showerheads; turn off the faucet while you wash dishes, shave and wash your hands and face, and brush your teeth; take shorter showers; catch shower water to reuse on plants; and have your septic tank inspected.

Then comes contacting elected and department officials who have the means to change the rules on water, Knight said. But the powers citizens hold, in the voting booth and from petitioning,



have to come from “so many numbers,” he added.

When combined, the water advocacy groups have about 90,000 members, Knight said, “but still, when I go say something in Tallahassee in a Senate meeting or a House meeting, it goes on deaf ears.”

Specifically, the officials should be encouraged to deny certain permits to pump water, explore use of surface water instead of groundwater, and put greater fees on groundwater that financially rewards people for less use, like the tiered-rate system Gainesville has.

“Gainesville is sort of moving in the right direction,” Knight said. “We’re using less water every year instead of more.”

But the statewide need for water is only going to grow, with the Florida DEP estimating an additional 2 billion gallons will have to be drawn daily by 2025.

But Knight said he knows the will is there to change by then, citing the 75 percent approval voters gave in 2014 to the Amendment 1 Florida Water and Land Conservation Initiative.

“There’s a ton of belief in the state that the environment is important,” he said. “It doesn’t matter what party, what religion, what your economic status is — the environment’s important for everybody, and the people in Florida understand that.” **OT**

Do your **Wisdom Teeth** Hurt?

Wisdom Teeth, or *Third Molars*, are usually the last teeth to develop and appear in the mouth. They are called “**Wisdom Teeth**” because they usually appear during a person’s late teens or early twenties, which has been called the “age of wisdom”. The normal position for developing **wisdom teeth** is behind the upper and lower second molars. However, often times the mouth does NOT have enough room for these extra teeth and they become **impacted**.

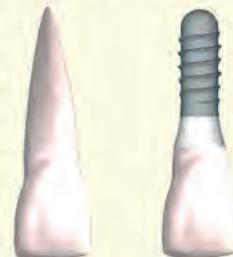
This can lead to very serious dental health and medical problems such as pain, infection, crowding of teeth, cyst development, loss of other teeth, or development of pathologies that could lead to more serious surgery. In fact, for nine out of ten people, at least one **wisdom tooth** remains under the gum tissue due to lack of space in the mouth.

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