

SECOND DRAFT NOTES (2/10/13)

Ichetucknee Springs Restoration Alliance Organizational Meeting

Saturday, February 9, 2013

Columbia County Public Library

Fort White, Florida

Attendees

Jenny Adler (H. T. Odum Florida Springs Institute)
Loye Barnard (Private)
Erin Condon (Florida Defenders of the Environment)
Catherine Copley (Ichetucknee River Estates)
Laura Dailey (Private)
Nichelle Demorest (UF/IFAS Extension)
Verlyn Jipson (Our Santa Fe River)
John Jopling (Private)
Yolanda Jopling (Private)
Robert (Bob) Knight (H. T. Odum Florida Springs Institute)
Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson (Our Santa Fe River)
Betsy Martin (Four Rivers Audubon)
Charles Maxwell (Private)
Lucinda (Lu) Faulkner Merritt (Private)
Carry Oliphant (Private)
Fritzi Olson (Current Problems)
Megan Olson (Four Rivers Audubon)
Rick Owen (Florida Park Service)
Irene Powell (Four Rivers Audubon)
Dan Rountree (Current Problems)
Terri Skiles (Private)
Jim Stevenson (Private, retired from DEP)
Cathy Street (Our Santa Fe River)
Jacqui Sulek (Four Rivers Audubon)
Sherry Weber (Private)

Meeting Summary

Jacqui Sulek welcomed the group and called attention to the Water & Land Conservation Constitutional Amendment petitions that were available. Sulek announced that the group would be composed of non-paid volunteers and that the initial meeting was being held for discussion and to gain perspective on three questions: What can we do to fill in what is not being done? What is our niche? What do we want to do?

Presentations

Jim Stevenson reported that he had been working on Ichetucknee issues since 1970 when the State of Florida purchased the spring and created a state park. The State purchased the spring to protect it, but owning the spring itself does not protect the water that issues from the spring. There are now 16 (soon to be 17, with the addition of Silver Springs) state parks named for springs.

For about 17 years (since 1995), the Ichetucknee Springs Basin Working Group brought together stakeholders to share information—this was the first time that information was shared between the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (FDEP), the water management district, the county, and the city. Today, there are only two working groups left, Santa Fe River Springs and Kings Bay. The Ichetucknee and other similar groups were dissolved “supposedly because of funding problems and ... the new leadership in Tallahassee, they just don’t believe in such things and they don’t believe in regulations either, so without education or regulations, we have a problem. Tallahassee is broke. We can’t look to Tallahassee to fix things. If we’re going to protect these springs, it’s got to be the folks right here in the springshed... .”

He reported that he had a list of springs working group tasks and that the group had spent many years educating local residents about the springs and how to protect them. “In the absence of cooperation,” however, “you must have regulations” and regulations are being eliminated in the current political climate. He mentioned his current work with the Wakulla Springs Alliance and “for the first time, they are giving Wakulla Springs a voice,” more so than the working groups because most of those members were agency people and “agency people can’t speak up or out, or they’re gone.”

Stevenson recommended maintaining a tight *focus* on one area with some boundaries and not straying off that area “unless you have to.” The main problems are spring flow and water quality.

Lu Merritt asked if there is any communication now between the springs alliance groups. Stevenson said the groups are “pretty isolated” and mentioned the Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute as an entity that could bring them together and/or facilitate communication between the groups. Stevenson also mentioned Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson’s email list as doing a good job of communicating issues.

Bob Knight reported that Ichetucknee Springs “is the economic engine for this part of Florida...the gateway to springs country” and that the state park receives an average of 250,000 visitors each year who inject a lot of money into the local economy. Ichetucknee Springs is a unique spring with its own kind of run, its own flora and fauna.

Knight mentioned the Center for Earth Jurisprudence here in Florida (Orlando) that is looking at the possibility of enacting legal rights for natural systems to exist, and that Ichetucknee has as much of a right to exist as any of us. “Ichetucknee is an environment

unto itself” that is part of a massive system of springs in the Suwannee River Water Management District.

Ichetucknee Springs contributes \$23 million per year to the local economy. The springs ecosystem is unique and supports hundreds of species including common, rare, and endangered plants and animals.

The Floridan aquifer system supplies about 2.8 billion gallons of fresh water per day to more than 260 artesian springs in the Suwannee River drainage area (SRWMD 2007). Groundwater withdrawals in the district were about 215 million gallons per day (mgd) in 2005 (USGS 2004). Only the very largest wells need consumptive use permits (CUPs). The groundwater area that supplies water to the Ichetucknee is shrinking in size. The area that contributes to the entire Suwannee Basin has shrunk by about 1900 square miles from predevelopment to 2005; the resulting decline in groundwater flow to this part of the Suwannee Basin is approximately 130 mgd.

Groundwater from about 371 square miles flows to Ichetucknee Springs. The historic flow of the Ichetucknee System was about 260 mgd. Flow in the Ichetucknee River has declined by about 40 mgd, or about 15 percent of the average flow. The magnitude of this decline appears to be consistent with the estimate of the amount of groundwater that has been diverted from the Suwannee Basin.

Increasing water withdrawals are one of the biggest problems facing the Ichetucknee: “We are withdrawing more water than the aquifer can provide” and “nobody is doing anything about this, it’s the water management district that controls this.” Knight also mentioned that FDEP and the water management district are not responsive to the public, only to permit applicants: “They almost never turn down a permit application.” Knight described a 60-foot decline in the Floridan Aquifer in Northeast Florida/Jacksonville/Nassau County area that has created a new flow gradient that draws water from Ichetucknee and that has caused Ichetucknee Springs to lose flow.

Knight also mentioned problems with nitrate levels in our water, and that nitrate levels in vulnerable aquifers are elevated all over the United States “and Florida is no exception.” The springs are also affected by recreational uses, leading to increased turbidity in the water and damage to underwater plants. In 2008, Ichetucknee Springs received a “B-” on its report card, getting very low grades for nitrates and algal cover.

Knight reported that the H. T. Odum Florida Springs Institute has completed the Ichetucknee Springs & River Restoration Action Plan that was begun by Normandeau Associates. Specific recommendations are made in the plan and its summary, both of which are available for download on the Institute’s website at:
<http://floridaspringsinstitute.org>

“We need a group of people focused on the Ichetucknee,” Knight concluded, because the Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) and Basin Management Action Plan (BMAP) for Ichetucknee “miss the target completely.” Those documents deal with nutrients only, not

with water quantity or flow, and the BMAP cannot deal with agricultural nutrient sources because of the way Florida's laws are written. These documents do not constitute a restoration plan for the springs. Minimum flows and levels, which should have been set years ago, are now problematic because the springs have lost some of their historical flow.

What's New?

Sulek then asked members of the audience to give updates on the activities of their groups.

Merrilee Malwitz-Jipson of Our Santa Fe River reported on a land tour that her group will offer on April 25 to staff of FDEP and the Suwannee River Water Management District. Sulek mentioned the importance of getting decision makers out to see the places they deal with in their work and the possibility of doing eco-tours as a fundraiser.

Stevenson, now retired from FDEP, is active with the Wakulla Springs Alliance and leads tours of the Wakulla Springs Basin on the third Saturday of every month; cost is \$18 and VIPs attend free. He also led a tour of the Ichetucknee Basin last October for Lake City and Columbia County civic leaders.

Lu Merritt described the activities of Florida Leaders Organized for Water (FLOW) and mentioned a literary event being organized by Florida's Eden, "Of Thirst, Beauty, and Vision: Writing to Save Our Waters" on April 22 (Earth Day) at Santa Fe College in Gainesville.

Fritzi Olson described the river cleanup work of Current Problems, including the Suwannee River from the Georgia state line to the Gulf of Mexico.

Bob Knight announced a Springs Conservation Summit to be held on March 5 in which the focus will be on *solutions* to our water problems. Knight is asking presenters not to use slides and to focus on a series of questions, including: What are the problems with springs? What are they doing to fix those problems? How long will it take? Merritt highly recommended an innovative new approach that will be described at that event by Rob Williams of the Center for Earth Jurisprudence in Orlando (<http://earthjuris.org>).

Sulek explained a need for citizens to get involved in scientific monitoring of the Ichetucknee River because a decrease in funding has hampered the State's ability to monitor conditions in the river. Sulek has received a \$5000 Springs Tag Grant for a one-year modeling study and needs volunteers to begin collecting data in a "Springs Watch" program in the river south of the state park. She also mentioned she had taken Bob Knight's springs ecosystem class at the University of Florida and recommended it; Knight said he may begin to teach the class through the Springs Institute instead of through the University.

Rick Owen, a district biologist with the Florida Park Service in Gainesville, talked about the need for long-term turtle monitoring in the state park. Knight added that the park has 20 years of data for vegetation in the park, more than any other park.

Betsy Martin announced the Alligator Lake Spring Festival on April 13 in Lake City, an environmental awareness event at the headwaters of the Ichetucknee Trace.

Nichelle Demorest of UF/IFAS Extension in Columbia County mentioned a new agricultural extension agent, Mace Bauer, who has worked with farmers on Best Management Practices (BMPs) and on water education efforts. She also mentioned that Governor Scott wants the University of Florida to work on water education.

Stevenson stressed the importance of press coverage of our water issues to spur other action.

Vision

Sulek asked the attendees to say a few words about their vision for the group: Where does this group go? Why are you here? What do you see?

Laura Dailey lives on the Ichetucknee below the park and is on the board at Three Rivers. She reported that she visits Tallahassee about once a month to talk about seven years of inaction on springs legislation. She picks up trash on the river "in season." She is an anthropologist with a specialty in cross-cultural communication and public policy. Stevenson asked her to try to recruit members who live along the river. Dailey mentioned "tremendous resistance to people coming in and even explaining what we know about what's happening...I don't want to hear it." She suggested making contacts with local organizations such as thrift stores and talking about the crisis to help spread the word.

Knight said that changes on the river are accelerating and "getting worse faster...we are losing the plant community in the Ichetucknee River" and that algal growth is "scary." "Diversity is gone...time is running out."

Loye Barnard explained that she is taking a break after 50 years of working on behalf of the springs and river, and that she will help when she can.

Rick Owen explained that he was attending as "a citizen who loves springs" and spoke about relationships with Tallahassee. He explained that his opinions "can be pushed up but can be stifled at some point," but feels he can be a conduit of communication between the Alliance and the Florida Park Service.

Betsy Martin said she has lived near the head spring for 27 years and is "here to help."

Cathy Copley lives close to the confluence of the Ichetucknee and the Santa Fe and is on the board of the Ichetucknee River Estates Association. She is a retired professor of literature and the environment. She spoke glowingly of Carry Oliphant's stewardship of the river.

Yolanda Jopling said that she and her husband, John, are concerned about the river and willing to get involved. John Jopling said, "I have loved this river passionately for 50 years" and described being "tired of not doing a damn thing." He is a lawyer/advocate.

Irene Powell has lived near the river and heard stories from the 1970s from her neighbors and is concerned about changes.

Megan Olson lives close to the river and expressed concern about “not enough water...at a tipping point...sense of urgency.” Sulek reminded us that the restoration action plan enables us to go to businesses with recommendations for specific actions.

Bob Knight recommended working around intransigent political groups that will not commit to taking action or even listening to the problems.

Erin Condon is the executive director of Florida Defenders of the Environment (FDE), formed in 1969. She explained the history of that organization’s involvement with stopping the Cross-Florida Barge Canal, working for the removal of Rodman Dam, and now, trying to start the Ocklawaha River Alliance. FDE is getting more involved with springs issues and freshwater resources issues in North Central Florida.

Charles Maxwell described himself as “one of those relics y’all are talking about”; his family has roots in the area going back 200 years. He mentioned how politicians are driven by votes and that he is witnessing “more and more groups and less and less water,” and how “it takes a lot of effort to change our habits.” One of Maxwell’s family members was the postmaster at Mill Pond Spring!

Dan Rountree of Current Problems described that nonprofit organization’s large number of volunteers and his own interest in swallets and swallet tours, including an upcoming tour of Alapaha Sink on February 28.

Terri Skiles mentioned an interest in doing monitoring and that as a SCUBA diver, she has witnessed springs deterioration since the 1980s; “We have photographic evidence of it.” She remarked about the importance of farmers, media, politicians, lawyers, and ordinary citizens, and mentioned “friendly farmers turned off by certain things that they perceive.”

Fritzi Olson reported that Current Problems gets people out “who would normally have nothing to do with environmentalists.” Current Problems is partnering with Alachua County for a springs-saving landscape class at Poe Springs on February 16.

Jenny Adler described how she came to the area to work as a fish biologist with the U. S. Geological Survey and “fell in love with the springs.” She set a goal to swim in all the first magnitude springs in the state; she also does underwater photography. She blogs at <http://magnitude1.blogspot.com> and wants to get more young people involved with springs issues. She called the group’s attention to the March 23 “soft opening” of John Moran’s and Lesley Gamble’s “Springs Eternal” exhibition at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville and another event on April 20. Adler hopes to start a graduate program in interdisciplinary ecology at the University of Florida this year.

Cathy Street of Our Santa Fe River lives on the Santa Fe and told about doing water sampling that found 2-1/2 times the nitrate level that state agencies had identified on the river. Her finding was later confirmed by officials.

Lu Merritt mentioned a first visit to Ichetucknee Springs in 1969 that pointed to her present work on water issues. She has an academic background in anthropology and public administration and a driving interest in the intersection between the environment, literature, and the arts. She envisioned a book and/or website with history of the springs, memoirs, photographs, art, poetry, and stories as a vehicle to raise awareness.

Next Steps

Sulek then reported that she has been speaking to Carol Lippincott, a facilitator who has worked with the Blue Springs Alliance in Volusia County who is sending a proposal to work with the Ichetucknee Alliance. Sulek recommends “seriously considering hiring Carol to set up the next meeting” because that will save us time and enable us to reach consensus about what we could do as an advocacy group. We have model bylaws, nonprofit papers, etc. There is a possibility that the Three Rivers Trust Board of Directors, which has a \$1 million endowment set aside for research and education on the Ichetucknee, can provide some funding the group’s advocacy work.

About half of the group indicated that Saturdays were good for meetings.

Stevenson stressed the need to recruit effective board members and “doers.”

Sulek then described the “Our Water, Our Future” event held recently in Lake City, at which she combined art and science in the program, reached “beyond the choir” by getting sponsorships from the Chamber of Commerce and Florida Gateway College, and urged people to stop pointing fingers and realize “We all have to work together.” We need to create friends, not enemies! She showed a brief video of the evening.

The meeting ended with Sulek’s presentation of a gift to Jim Stevenson in thanks for all his work on behalf of Florida’s springs.

Notes prepared by Lu Merritt