

**Interview with Jim Stevenson (J)**  
**Interviewer: Lucinda Faulkner Merritt (L)**  
**Tallahassee, Florida**  
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**L:** I'm here today with Jim Stevenson, who has had a long and distinguished career with the Florida Park Service and the Florida Department of Environmental Protection. Jim served as Chief Biologist for the Park Service for 20 years, during which he developed the educational and land management programs for the Florida state parks. He chaired the Florida Springs Task Force that developed a protection strategy for our freshwater springs. He directed Governor Jeb Bush's Florida Springs Protection Initiative, and he coordinated the Ichetucknee Springs Basin Working Group until Governor Rick Scott and the Florida Legislature pulled funding from that effort in 2011.

Now retired, Jim carries a long-term institutional memory of the roles that our state agencies and elected representatives have played in the management of Florida's freshwater springs. It's an honor for me to interview him about his history with the Ichetucknee River System, in particular.

Good morning, Jim, and thanks for agreeing to this interview.

Take us back to the first time you saw the Ichetucknee. What was the occasion and what was your reaction?

**J:** Yes, not long after I was promoted to Chief Biologist for the Florida Park Service, the Ichetucknee was purchased by the State of Florida and the state park was established. Prior to that, there were only two springs state parks in the state park system. One was Manatee Springs near Chiefland and the other one was Wekiwa Springs down at Apopka. So this was a real treat, to have the State of Florida buy a spring. During my first visit, I was pretty much in awe of the diversity and variety of life and geological features there.

It has eight named springs that create the Ichetucknee River and each spring is unique in its own way. The Head Spring has always been a favorite and it's been used heavily for recreation over the years, but its water is clear and blue and a good flow. The other springs are unique in their own way, as well.

**L:** You mentioned awe, and I think that's a common reaction when people see springs for the first time. You've shared with me some stories about other people's reactions to the Ichetucknee, and the one that stands out for me is the time when visitors from another country had trouble leaving.

Which of the interactions you've had with people at the Ichetucknee stand out for you and what are your favorite Ichetucknee stories about those things that you like to share?

**J:** Well, everybody that visits the Ichetucknee is pretty much in awe of it, but this story that you mentioned stands out to me. It was about a University of Florida professor who was hosting some people from out of state.

He was at the takeout at the south end of the state park waiting for them to arrive in their canoe. In the meantime, a canoe with three men from Australia arrived; they pulled the canoe up on the shore and left it there for the concessionaire to pick up. These folks were from Australia and although I'm not familiar with Australian waters, they probably don't have water as clear as the Ichetucknee. So they started walking towards their vehicle and they stopped, turned around, and walked back to the river for another look. Then they proceeded back towards their vehicle; they stopped, walked back to the Ichetucknee and looked at it some more. And that kind of tells the story of the Ichetucknee right there. These folks were from another continent and were just flabbergasted by what they were seeing and enjoying.

**L:** That reminds me too that we do have people come from all over the world to visit our freshwater springs and especially to dive in the caves. I think there's one at Ichetucknee, Blue Hole, where you can go diving. You've been diving there, is that correct?

**J:** Yes.

**L:** Yeah, I thought so. You have a wonderful book called *My Journey in Florida's State Parks: A Naturalist's Memoir* which details your own evolution as a naturalist and describes how techniques of interpreting the natural world evolved within the Florida Park Service.

From your naturalist's perspective, what are the most significant features in and along the Ichetucknee? Why is the Ichetucknee unique and why should Floridians, even people who live in South Florida and have never seen it, care about the Ichetucknee?

**J:** Well, the Ichetucknee is unique in that there are eight named springs that feed the Ichetucknee River. And as I mentioned, each one is unique in its own way.

The history, as well, is quite important. The Indians occupied the river area for quite some time prior to the European discovery. DeSoto was there in 1539 for a period of time so he got to see the Ichetucknee, and after that a Spanish mission was established at one of the springs of the Ichetucknee; we call that Mission Springs today. In 1608, that's when the Mission San Martin de Timucua was constructed.

Later, a Spanish road was put in; this was the first government road in Florida that they called the Camino Royale—that was how it was pronounced. That later became the Bellamy Road which was funded by Congress. So that road, which wraps around

the Head Spring on its way between St. Augustine and Pensacola, passed within a few yards of the Ichetucknee Head Spring.

**L:** Wow, so it's not just the springs, it's the history, too—combined.

**J:** Yes.

**L:** And I'm reminded of a publication that I think you had something to do with, about the old-timers remember Ichetucknee. And someone back in the '40s mentioned that from the area that's now the parking lot at the north entrance now—which is where Bellamy Road ran—that they could hear the water coming out of the spring before they could see it. I always thought that was a remarkable memory and I was glad that it was captured, because conditions have changed.

I've heard you say that without water, a spring is just a hole in the ground. I'm sure some of our listeners have heard the terms Ichetucknee Trace, Ichetucknee Springshed and Ichetucknee Basin. Can you explain those terms and why we need to understand them when we are talking about the water in the Ichetucknee?

**J:** Yes. In the past, there was more water available in that system than there is today. The Ichetucknee is fed by a 350-square-mile Basin or recharge area and the Trace that you hear people talk about is the former riverbed of the Ichetucknee north of the Head Spring. So in the past, the river was much longer and had more water in it. Today, the only time we see water in the Trace is after heavy rains from a hurricane and then you can make out the route of the Trace to the Head Spring.

There are other terms that can be used interchangeably, like Aquifer and Basin and Springshed.

**L:** OK, thanks. On page 28 of your book, you write about the constant tension between the Park Service employees who wanted to emphasize recreation and the employees who wanted to emphasize protection of natural systems. You write that, "This tug of war resulted in better development, use and management of parks," and you mentioned tubing management at Ichetucknee as an example.

Can you walk us through some of those discussions as they occurred, and explain how management of tubing at the park evolved over time?

I remember tubing the Ichetucknee or floating in a canoe even before it became a state park, and I know there have been some changes.

**J:** Yes. The Ichetucknee was heavily used prior to state acquisition. Thousands of tubers, many from the University of Florida, would float the river. It was a very popular place for folks to spend a hot summer day. But over time, when we purchased it, we felt that it was being abused by too many feet walking on the bottom of the shallow portions of the river. So we had a University of Florida

carrying capacity study done in 1978 through 1981, and they provided a report that guided us in setting the carrying capacity.

That carrying capacity implemented by the Park Service was not as restrictive as the researchers had recommended, but it was a great improvement over the way it had been before. So that set up a maximum carrying capacity per day for the upper river at 3000 people. And after 3000 people go down the river, it's cut off at two-thirds of the way down. The lower third doesn't have a capacity because it's deep enough that people's feet can't touch the bottom.

So it's a matter of balancing the number of people that the river can accommodate with the ecology that is damaged by heavy use.

**L:** You said the upper river is limited to 3000 people; I thought it was 750.

**J:** That's true. At the Head Spring where you can put in your tube or your raft, from there to what is called Midpoint, 750 people can go down the river, and then that portion is blocked off. From there, 2250 are allowed down to Dampier's Landing, so that's a total of 3000 people permitted on the upper two-thirds of the river.

**L:** Great, thanks. Thanks for clarifying that.

If it were up to you, would you make any changes to tubing management of the Ichetucknee or would you make any other changes to recreational policies at the park, given that some of the recreation can damage the natural system?

**J:** By all means, we need to be more sensitive in the management of the river because the upper portion is still being damaged. What is happening there is that it's very narrow and very shallow and easy to wade. And a lot of folks, especially the youthful users, like to get out of their tube and wade and pull up the grass and throw it on the girls to make them squeal and these kinds of pranks. So that is damaging the upper third. So I'm advocating that we discontinue tubing on that upper portion and shift those 750 people down to Midpoint—in other words, halfway down the river—others can still see the upper two-thirds, by canoe or kayak.

The whole idea is to get the feet off the bottom of the river, and it won't be well managed until that's done.

**L:** I know the Ichetucknee Alliance has supported that idea and the park management plan is kind of in limbo right now. Have you heard anything more about what's happening with that park plan?

**J:** They were ready to go before the council that approves these plans and they pulled it at the last minute for a reason that I don't understand. So they need to reschedule it and move forward, and I'm hoping they will do so.

**L:** Thanks, yeah, I haven't heard anything more about that either.

In a related note, what do you think about some of the ideas that have recently been floated about allowing logging, hunting, or golf courses in some of our state parks?

**J:** Yes, that's a very bad idea. We had a secretary in DEP for a short period of time who wanted to make money off of the natural resources of the parks through timbering, through hunting leases and permits, and also logging. I was strongly opposed to that and once we got the word out around the state, virtually every major newspaper in the state wrote editorials about this issue and how it should be prohibited.

There's a term, "non-consumptive use," which is the type of use and management in state parks and national parks and Nature Conservancy sanctuaries. In other words, you do not consume the resources, whereas state forests and wildlife management areas do consume the resources. So it's fine for them to graze and hunt and timber, but not in the state parks.

**L:** Thanks. Over the years, the Ichetucknee has faced various threats. I know that Columbia County residents mounted an effort a number of years ago to keep dairy farms out of the county to protect the Ichetucknee from pollution from animal waste. And I remember the controversy around the cement plant that was built on land near the river. I think it was that controversy that led then-Governor Jeb Bush's canoe trip down the river and his establishment of the Florida Springs Protection Initiative. Can you talk about your involvement in either or both of those things?

**J:** Yes. In 1995, I formed the Ichetucknee Springs Basin Working Group which was composed of agency people and organizations and private citizens who cared about the Ichetucknee and who had information, whether scientific or just general knowledge, about the Ichetucknee. We met quarterly and learned from each other and gradually became very knowledgeable about the Ichetucknee springs and river.

In 1999, a corporation wanted to put a cement plant four miles from the Ichetucknee, although when the word got to the public it was thought that it would be right on the Ichetucknee River. And again, the public rose up and fought that. Again, all the major newspapers in the state opposed it and there were demonstrations and it really showed citizen activity to protect a natural resource.

So it became very, very political. And Governor Bush had just taken the reins as our new governor. And he had hired Secretary Struhs from Massachusetts to head up the Department of Environmental Protection, neither of which had ever seen a Florida spring. They decided they needed to see the Ichetucknee because of the uproar.

So as I was the most knowledgeable person about the Ichetucknee at that time, I was asked to lead them on a canoe trip. We first met at the Head Spring and I gave them

a talk about how the Ichetucknee Basin functioned and what the threats were. Then we got in the canoes and started down the river with me interpreting what they were seeing. We stopped at each spring and while at Devil's Eye, Secretary Struhs was finally convinced that Florida's springs were in trouble—not just Ichetucknee, but all the springs. So he directed me to form a Florida Springs Task Force, which I did. It was composed of 15 experts on various aspects of Florida springs.

We studied it for a year and produced a report with recommendations on how Florida needed to save the springs. Soon after that, Governor Bush put in his budget for an appropriation for springs protection and the Legislature funded it to the total of 2.5 million dollars. Now by today's standards, that may not sound like much money, but back then that was the very first money ever appropriated for protection of a Florida spring.

So we jumped into action and came up with some important projects to help protect not only the Ichetucknee, but all of Florida's springs. That money continued annually until the Governor Scott administration eliminated the money around 2010.

**L:** That's interesting to me that both were Republican governors and here we have one who was supportive of our natural resources and another one, not so much. It's just an interesting shift that has happened over time, because I think Florida has had tremendous bipartisan support for preserving natural Florida for a long, long time. People who are just coming to the state now or just waking up to the problems with some of our natural systems may not be aware of that—that there was that bipartisan support for a long time.

**J:** And it was all about politics. The Governor and Secretary went to Ichetucknee on that trip because of politics. There was so much fuss around the state about this cement plant issue that they were seeing votes. They were counting votes. Well, Governor Scott wasn't faced with a crisis—or at least not a crisis that he would recognize with Florida's springs—so he never did anything to protect them.

So again, these are often political decisions. They have to be backed up by science, but they are political decisions and it shows that the public *must* stand up for our springs or we won't be able to save them.

**L:** Yes, agreed. And just for the record, the Ichetucknee Alliance—right after Governor DeSantis was elected and took office—we have invited him to canoe down the Ichetucknee, but we haven't heard anything back. And I think it's probably exactly what you said, there's not a crisis up here in North Florida that's getting his attention as much as the crises in South Florida with the water quality. Even though we have the same problems up here, they're maybe not as visible for some reason.

**J:** Our human species has to face a crisis before we'll take action. We wait until the last buffalo is ready to go off the cliff before we decide to act. This is a phenomenon not just for springs, but virtually any issue.

**L:** I wish the human species were maybe a little bit smarter than all of this.

You answered most of my question about how the Springs Protection Initiative differed from the Task Force and the Springs Basin Working Group, but can you summarize maybe some of the recommendations that those groups came up with, things that have happened and maybe things that have not happened? I know I'm going off track a little bit here.

**J:** Yes. The Working Group's purpose was to learn everything we could learn about how the Ichetucknee functioned and what the threats were, but we had no authority to do anything. We couldn't ask—well, we could ask people to do things but we couldn't tell them to do anything. Whereas the Task Force had a little more muscle in that it was appointed by the Secretary of the Department of Environmental Protection. So there was more weight given to those recommendations than to the Working Group.

But the science must continue. I mean, we're continually learning more and more about these springs systems and I don't know that we'll ever know it all, but it keeps life interesting.

**L:** Definitely. And the Ichetucknee Alliance is firmly science-based.

You've shared with me a timeline of land acquisition in the Ichetucknee Trace and Basin from the time the land for the state park was acquired in 1970 for close to two million dollars, to the purchase of other lands that were acquired in order to protect the water that feeds the springs and the river. The total for all those purchases is close to 38 million dollars.

That's a lot of money that Florida's taxpayers have provided so we can all enjoy the Ichetucknee, but the river has lost flow over the years and nitrate pollution in the Ichetucknee is twice the state standard. We know that both of those things—loss of flow and increased nitrate levels—can lead to algae growth, and you've told me that algae in the Ichetucknee has affected you personally. Can you describe that for us?

**J:** Well as far as my experiences with algae, my last time on the river was four years ago when my wife and I were practice-rolling our kayaks at the Ichetucknee. It was the cleanest water within a couple-hour drive, so we commonly went there to practice rolling kayaks. I was sick in bed the following day because of my exposure to algae in the river. And more and more people are becoming allergic to it. It lets off biotoxins that can affect your respiratory system and cause other ailments as well.

As far as losing flow, in that 350 square miles the City of Lake City is right in the middle of that. It's not a large city, but they do draw water from I think five municipal wells. So that has some impact. We've come to realize that an even greater impact is coming from Jacksonville and perhaps even Brunswick, Georgia, where a

large industry and the big population of Jacksonville is withdrawing a huge amount of water. We're told by the Florida Springs Institute that probably 25 percent of the normal flow has been lost.

**L:** Right. And so in terms of your algae allergy—that's strange to say—did that get diagnosed by a physician? How did you know that it was algae that was bothering you?

**J:** Just from personal experiences. Of course I consulted with various doctors, but they knew little about it but were hearing more and more, especially from South Florida.

*(CELL PHONE CALL INTERRUPTS DISCUSSION)*

**L:** So you said you're hearing more and more, especially from South Florida, about the algae—from doctors, right?

**J:** Yes, more and more instances of allergic reactions. The reactions that I'm having, I will get rashes and it's primarily respiratory with me. I can feel it in my chest from these biotoxins when I get near it. So it's really limited my recreational use as well as exploration. I was a cave diver until this algae hit me and even whitewater kayaking up in the mountains, there's algae in mountain streams now.

**L:** Wow.

**J:** So I pretty much stay out of the water. When leading tours, I have to—I can let folks walk down to the water to see the lake or wherever we're at, but I stay up on the hill away from the water and they come back up for us to talk. So it's restricting my activities. It's just a really serious problem for probably wildlife as well as humans.

**L:** Yeah, and I wonder if any other cave divers have noticed it. I don't really communicate with that community, but if it's affecting you I'm sure it's affecting other people. And I think that's really tragic that we've let it get to this point, that people are having trouble enjoying our beautiful water. It's sad.

One of the biggest messages that the Alliance has tried to put forward in the past year is that the problems with our springs and rivers aren't so much scientific problems—because we know a lot of the science involved at this point, although there's always more to learn—but they're also political problems because it's up to people to solve them. I think you've alluded to the fact that you agree with that and so I was going to ask you if you agree with that and if so, why and if not, why not?

**J:** Well, it all begins with awareness and that's brought about by education. We tend to think that once the population is educated that they'll do the right thing. It's my view that many of these citizens, once educated, will voluntarily change their



behavior for the good. But there's another set of citizens that won't change their behavior, so that's where regulations are needed to require them to do the right thing. It's unfortunate that it has to reach that regulatory point, but it's necessary.

The politics are obviously a people problem and we don't want another crisis or two to change behavior and to cause the political winds to blow from a better direction, but unfortunately as we mentioned earlier, a crisis is often necessary to get people's attention.

**L:** Yes. I've often heard you say that once we lose a major spring in Florida, then more people are going to pay attention. And it's sad to me that we have to wait for that to happen. I hope maybe we don't.

I've heard too that—not all gloom and doom—that the Ichetucknee River System might well be the easiest spring system in Florida to restore to health. And that's the stated purpose of the Ichetucknee Alliance, to restore, protect and preserve the Ichetucknee.

My friend Mark Smith has given me a nickname, "The Ich Witch," so imagine that I'm the magic witch of the Ichetucknee and I'm waving my magic wand and I would like to give you absolute power to protect the taxpayers' investments and to restore the Ichetucknee. What are some of the things that you would do?

**J:** Well, people tend to appreciate a natural resource when they can see it and enjoy it. So tours—whether canoe trips or tours of the Ichetucknee Basin I think are really important. I used to, in years past, give a lot of those tours to inform and educate the public. Also schools are important. You know, we adults—it's hard to get us to change our behavior. But if you talk to some fifth graders, it's amazing—they're like sponges. And they take the information home.

In 1999, we held a field trip to Rose Sink. It's part of the Ichetucknee system. We had 250 fifth graders from the two elementary schools in the Ichetucknee Basin. We had four or five stations set up where they could learn from different instructors. One was a cave diver and he showed them the dye that he had released in the cave that found its way to Ichetucknee. Another was the park biologist talking about the spring basin. Another was the DEP biologist talking about stormwater management, and there were other subjects. Every 20 minutes, they would change to a different instructor. So all the kids got to hear every instructor.

And occasionally teachers will have the students write a thank-you letter to the host who put on the program for them. I received a big stack of really nice letters from these students. Remember, they were fifth graders; I guess that was 10 or 11 years old. One little girl said, "I was tellin' my daddy about my day at supper and he was going to fertilize the lawn but he decided not to fertilize the lawn." She had learned that the nitrates in the fertilizer are causing problems at our springs.

A little boy said, “When I get cows, I’m going to keep them out of the creek.” He knew that cows will stand in a creek and recycle on the spot, and that wasn’t good.

Another little boy—it’s kind of amusing—he said, “Why didn’t you people do something about this a long time ago?” Well, he’s right. Why didn’t we?

A little girl got my attention. She said, “Dear Mr. Stevenson, I hope you live for a few more years to help others with Ichetucknee Springs.” I thought that was nice of her.

**L:** (laughing) That was wonderful and I will share her hope! That’s great, out of the mouths of babes.

I see many posts on social media from people who love the Ichetucknee and our other springs, but it also seems to me that many people are apathetic about our natural treasures or they may feel powerless to make changes.

What advice do you have for people who love the Ichetucknee and want their children and grandchildren to have the same kinds of experiences there that we’ve had?

**J:** Again, it’s various forms of education, whether it’s school field trips or actually going to the schools with presentations, giving programs to the public in Lake City, and getting advice from some of the leaders in Lake City and Columbia County. These are all steps that we’ve taken in the past and need to be continued. It would be great to have a monthly column in the *Lake City Reporter* about the status of the Ichetucknee—the good and the bad. People need to know what’s going wrong but people need to know about successes.

We need a model farm. We’ve got a new Commissioner of Agriculture now. Maybe she should be approached about having a model farm in the Ichetucknee Basin to show how little impact farming can actually have if done properly.

So there’s a number of these things that we need to do. You need to come at it from every direction. There’s no single course of action to solve this problem.

**L:** Yes, it’s a multi-pronged problem that will require multi-pronged solutions.

Columbia County is interesting. I’ve looked at some of the statistics. It looks like most of the water use in Columbia County is for public supply and private supply—people on wells—but most of the nitrate pollution is coming from agriculture. So when we say that everybody is involved and needs to be involved, it really is everybody including those people over in Jacksonville who are drawing water away from the Ichetucknee. And I love the idea of a model farm because one of our other messages is there’s no solution to these problems without our agriculturalists.

Back in 2013, you spoke at a meeting in the Fort White Library that resulted in the establishment of the Ichetucknee Alliance and you're now on the Alliance's advisory board. You've always advised us to keep a narrow focus on the problems of the Ichetucknee.

Do you have any other advice for us, anything that you haven't already mentioned that we could do to become more effective? As you know, we're a small group but we recently had a successful membership drive in Gainesville and we're planning another event like that in Lake City for this fall.

**J:** Yes, because of your low membership, it's hard for you to do very much. That's why I've continually suggested that you folks remain focused on one or two issues. If you spread yourself too thin, everybody just gets exhausted and you'll find your members fading away. So by picking a couple of priority issues and staying with those, I think you can be more effective.

Next to that is recruitment of more members. If there was a way to inform the public of the need for members and the good things that the Alliance is doing, perhaps that would help you recruit more as well.

**L:** We try. We do try to do that. We have a website and we have an active Facebook discussion page that people should know about. But I realize we need to do more.

There's a surprise bonus question here at the very end. Mark Smith's song that we're using in this podcast is called "The Wisdom of the River." He wrote it about the Ichetucknee. There's a line in the lyrics, "When the river talks, I want to listen 'cause it might say something that I want to know."

Imagine for a minute that the Ichetucknee could speak. What wisdom would it impart to us?

**J:** Well there's a Chinese proverb that you know very well— that in order to protect the water, you must protect the land. So if each of us living up here on top of the hill will, shall we say, clean up our act, the water flowing to the Ichetucknee will be cleaner and the Ichetucknee will be happier.

**L:** Thank you, this has been great. Anything else you want to add at the very end?

**J:** I appreciate what the Ichetucknee Alliance is doing. We cannot save the Ichetucknee without a citizens' group such as the Alliance. There are other springs citizen groups around the state like Wakulla Springs just south of Tallahassee as the Wakulla Springs Alliance. Without groups like this, we aren't going to win this battle.

**L:** Thank you, Jim. I appreciate your time.

**J:** Thank you.