

# THE GREATER KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE

## *A Land in Transition*

by Robert Dent

Two horses graze in their pasture of lush grass. A grandfather live oak shades them from the mid-afternoon sun. This scene could be typical in Osceola County ever since Spanish settlers introduced the horse to North America in the 16th century. But this scene is in the present, and the horses are no longer out in the sparsely populated open lands of the Kissimmee basin. Instead, they watch from a field in the center of Kissimmee, a steady flow of traffic passing them along Highway 192. This busy roadway stretches from Lake County in the west to Brevard County in the east. Osceola County, south Orlando and the Kissimmee River basin share this corridor. A Lynx bus stop is just a few feet away from where the horses stand viewing the never-ending procession of automobiles, trucks and people. They stand on a land in transition. They stand between rapidly developing Central Florida and the open stretches of prairie, marshes, oak hammocks, cypress domes, rivers, wetlands, lakes and pine flatwoods extending south from Saint Cloud and Kissimmee. 16,000 new residents called Osceola County home in 2003 pushing the resident population to more than 225,000 and more are arriving every day, pressing local governments to search for solutions to the growing traffic congestion, loss of open space and the over-crowded schools.

This rapid urban growth converting hundreds of acres each month from natural and agricultural lands to urban landscape sits on one of the most important environmental areas in Florida. The Kissimmee Upper Chain, the Butler Chain of Lakes, the Alligator Chain of Lakes and their myriad



of creeks and sloughs feed southward into Lake Kissimmee and the Kissimmee River. Along with the Osceola Plain, these lakes and creeks create the headwaters for both the St. John's River and the Kissimmee River, arguably the state's most controversial and expensive river. The Kissimmee watershed forms the basis of the fresh water and wildlife habitat that extends southward to the Everglades and Florida Bay. It produces nutrient and water volume excesses for Lake Okeechobee, as well as overflow, and extreme sediment and freshwater conditions for the St. Lucie River to the east and the Caloosahatchee River flowing westward to the Gulf of Mexico.

To gain a perspective, the Kissimmee River basin, including the Butler Chain of Lakes, the upper Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, the Alligator Chain and the lower Kissimmee Chain of Lakes, combined with the Osceola Plain encompasses an area of approximately 4 million acres. It stretches across Central Florida from the Atlantic Ocean westward to the backbone of the state known as the Lake Wales Ridge. State Route 27 extends north and south along this ridge. The watershed continues from Orlando in the north to the area of State Route 60 in the south. This is the origin of the watershed where water falling to the ground eventually ends up in the Everglades, the Gulf of Mexico or the Atlantic Ocean. Along the way, the partially restored Kissimmee River and its floodplain, meanders approximately 100 miles from Lake Kissimmee to Lake Okeechobee, sometimes through a one to two mile wide floodplain but mostly through a channeled riverbed created by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers more than 40



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years ago. The restored portion of the river and surrounding floodplain comprise a mosaic of wetland plant communities and provides habitat for a diversity of mammals, waterfowl, wading birds, fish, and other wildlife.

But within the northern area of this watershed, new residential, commercial and industrial development is occurring at an alarming pace, building a human infrastructure that threatens the sustainability of this enormous ecosystem. From Orlando down through northern Osceola County, the struggle between population growth and our natural resources has

proven to be difficult. Roads and other elements of growth such as rooftops, driveways, strip malls, parking lots, and the other manmade infrastructure make life in Central Florida convenient, livable and enjoyable. But these same conveniences disrupt our watersheds with barriers, minimize and fragment wildlife habitat and challenge our ability to protect the pristine natural areas and environment that drew many of us to Florida.

Each drop of water falling on our communities in this watershed contributes to our system. Some evaporates back into the sky to form

the majestic, towering clouds that gives us our weather systems and sometimes violent storms. Some of the water naturally finds its way to wetlands, lakes and sloughs, recharging our aquifer as they have done for thousands of years. Some channelized creeks such as Shingle Creek near Millennium Mall, flow south to Lake Tohopekaliga in Osceola County. Reedy Creek flows through the theme park area and continues southward to Lake Hatchineha. Boggy Creek also winds its way southward to Lake Tohopekaliga or Big Lake Toho as it is known by locals and fishing enthusiasts. The rest of this water searches for lower ground using our manmade mechanisms. This rainwater falls on rooftops, parking lots, driveways and roads. The rainwater picks up nutrients from our fertilized lawns, oil from our roadways and other pollutants and deposits them in our natural systems. It is channeled through storm water systems to prevent flooding, is stored in retention areas and then released into the 'natural' mechanisms carrying the tens of thousands of gallons of polluted water from a single storm event southward.



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As our population continues to grow and more and more impervious surfaces are created, we must be mindful of the impacts. Aquifer depletion, flooding, and the contamination of waterways and lakes all contribute to degradation of our environment. Excessive nutrients from run-off create oxygen-starved water, resulting in algae blooms and eventually fishkills. People who have lived in Florida for more than 25 years will remember that these were the symptoms seen in Lake Okeechobee in the 1980s. But now those symptoms have worked their way upstream, mainly due to the enormous amounts of pollutants and nutrients that we introduce. And the situation is likely to worsen as our population grows.

So, how do you as a resident fit into this equation? Residents of Windermere, Dr. Phillips and Kissimmee impact Reedy Creek with nutrient run-off from their fertilized yards. Those living near the

intersection of I-4 and Florida's Turnpike contaminate the surface water running into Shingle Creek by the soapy water from washing cars. And in Belle Isle, Edgewood and Saint Cloud, excessive watering overflows into Boggy Creek, carrying pollutants and nutrients with it. These creeks form a funnel that collectively concentrates pollutants into Lake Kissimmee and south to Lake Okeechobee through the Kissimmee River. All of us are guilty of contributing to the problem. And all of us must work collectively with our local government and regional agencies to resolve the challenges if we are to reverse the damage. We

cannot see the problem as caused by someone else, but a creation of our own making and one we cannot ignore.

Our environment in Central Florida embodies and reflects our society. The late John Sawhill of The Nature Conservancy said, "Our civilization will not be remembered for the things that we built, but what we refused to destroy." There is still time to preserve what is most precious in Central Florida and the Kissimmee watershed. But the sands and waters of our figurative hourglass are literally slipping through our fingers.



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*The Nature Conservancy's Conservation Learning Center at Disney Wilderness Preserve offer visitors a unique opportunity to learn about habitat preservation and restoration.*



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# EXPERIENCE THE GREATER KISSIMMEE PRAIRIE

- **Shingle Creek** is a beautiful, canopied waterway flowing south to Lake Tohopekaliga. **Airboat Rental U-Drive**, located along Hwy. 192 in Kissimmee is the ideal location to begin your exploration. Take your own canoe or kayak or rent a canoe or airboat to experience the winding, deepwater creek. **Call 407-847-3672.**
- **The Nature Conservancy's Disney Wilderness Preserve** is a 12,000-acre restoration and mitigation site located in Poinciana. Hiking trails through pine flatwoods and oak hammocks and a boardwalk into a hardwood hammock to an overlook of Lake Russell are highlights. **Call 407-935-0000.**
- For an exhilarating experience, discover Central Florida on an airboat. **Boggy Creek Airboats** offers day and night group rides on East Lake Toho and Boggy Creek. They also offer swamp buggy tours to see wildlife while exploring a working cattle ranch south of Kissimmee. **[www.boggycreekairboats.com](http://www.boggycreekairboats.com).**
- **Forever Florida near Holopaw** is truly a hidden gem. Offering diverse wildlife, interpretive buggy tours, hiking trails, horseback riding and a full-service restaurant, this 1,300-acre private preserve is a must for family outings. **Call 407-957-9794.**
- The more than 60,000 acres of **Three Lakes Wildlife Management Area** is a great destination. **Sunset Ranch Interpretive Trail** (a designated no hunting area) leads to an overlook on Lake Jackson. For information and directions, contact the regional FFWCC office at **352-732-1255.**



*Robert Dent attended the University of Vermont before relocating to Florida in 1978. As chairman of the Martin County Conservation Alliance and president of the Martin County Chapter of the Native Plant Society, he championed many environmental issues including land preservation, wetland protection, and growth management. Mr. Dent was employed by The Nature Conservancy for nine years, and most recently served as campaign manager for the successful S.A.V.E. Osceola land acquisition referendum, approved by Osceola County voters in 2004.*

