

THE ST. JOHNS MOSAIC & ECONLOCKHATCHEE

A Historic River of Lakes

by Bill Belleville

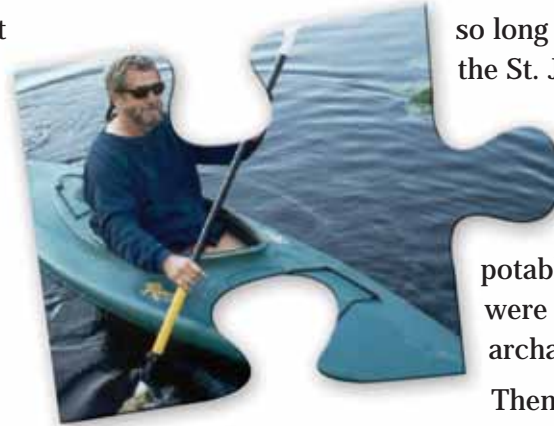
A kayaker paddles through the treetops of a Florida river, soaring through the foliage canopy like a giant bird. Heavy limbs of ancient live oaks flop lazily in the current as if they are metronomes keeping time to the river's pulse. The gunnels of his kayak come within a few feet of a tattered blue jay nest still cradled in a branch. Other limbs bristle with the spiky leaves of pine bromeliads and one with a green fly orchid, all just inches above the water.

The river is the Econlockhatchee, the second largest tributary of the St. Johns, and a series of tropical storms has filled its valley of paleo-dunes to overflowing. A month earlier, it was a shallow sandy-bottomed blackwater stream that you could have walked across. A year before, rain had been so sparse that it stopped flowing, and it was less a river and more a series of narrow sloughs. But now it is high and raging, full of eddies and little standing waves.

Like everything else in Florida, our rivers resemble few others. In various stages of our wet-dry seasons, they don't even resemble themselves. Gravity makes them work, of course, but it's a distinctly Florida-driven gravity that pushes water across barely perceptible gradients on the low landscape.

The liquid driving our rivers falls from the sky in extraordinary amounts. Then, it either gathers up into swamps and marshes, or seeps downward into the soft limerock of our crust. Wetlands—like the swamp feeding the Econ in Osceola County or the sawgrass marsh driving the larger St. Johns far to the south—brim and overflow, driving our rivers outward

from it. Or the bone-white karst underfoot does likewise, its own underground rivers pushed to the surface as springs by the unseen alchemy of hydrostatic pressure from the uplands. Subtle and nuanced, the Econ and the regional mosaic of the St. Johns are ecological treasures. Like much of Florida, their values are not in lofty geology, but in the singular majesty of biology.



Our Central Florida rivers have traversed the landscape for so long that we expect they will always be there. Certainly, the St. Johns—once descriptively called a “River of Lakes” by the Creeks—has influenced culture for thousands of years. At first, it provided a flowing source of sustenance, an avenue into a wet and soggy peninsula that could also be plumbed for food and potable water. The earliest clay bowls in North America were created along its shores, an art so distinctive that archaeologists described it as “St. Johns Pottery.”

Then, as now, this St. Johns flowed north from near Lake Okeechobee through the valley of an ancient lagoon, puddling up into regional lakes that today we call Puzzle, Harney, Jesup, Monroe and George. A classic slow-moving Southern river, the tea-colored St. Johns dropped barely an inch a mile. Crystal clear springs coursed into the river, texturing its wetland flow. River dwellers like the Timucua and Mayaca built great midden mounds of shell and animal bone and mud, elevating them above the flood plain. They worshiped the sun and the stars, imbuing wildlife with mystical powers. They had a reverence for the powers of the river that went far beyond utility.



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Of the newcomers, it was perhaps William Bartram who best introduced the spectacle of our river-lake system to the rest of the world in his “Travels” (1791), describing the St. Johns as the “Grand and noble San Juan.” Springs, like Salt in the Ocala National Forest and Blue near Orange City, became “fountains of ether.” It was an account that moved the Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge to write “Kubla Khan” about a secret place where “Alph the Sacred River ran/Through caverns measureless to man.” Alph was our aquifer, and the caverns were the limestone through which it flowed.

Later, Florida pioneers settled atop the same man-made bluffs, gradually fanning out into the pine flatwoods and sandhills that marked the regional watershed of the river. In communities like Geneva, they tapped long leaf pines for turpentine; elsewhere in the watershed they logged cypress and live oak. Author Patrick Smith memorialized their tenacity and grit of these “Crackers” in books like “A Land Remembered.” Resorts were built around the same springs that nurtured the Indians, bringing tourists by steamboat to popular landings at Clifton Springs on Lake Jesup, and villages like St. Francis farther downstream. Author

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings wrote fondly of a boat adventure she once took from Puzzle Lake downstream to the Ocklawaha in “Cross Creek.” Later in the 20th century, naturalist Archie Carr explored our St. Johns and left in awe of a biological diversity spiked with warm temperate and subtropic climates, augmented with the upwellings of ancient seawater from springs and lake bottoms. “Faunally speaking, the St. Johns river is an extraordinary stream,” wrote Carr, “like no other in America.” Animals rare or non-existent elsewhere flourished here: It is the only freshwater American river where saltwater stingrays live and breed. Manatees, those giant herbivores, seek thermal refuge every winter in springs like Blue. Migratory birds, like the swallowtail kite, use it as a flyway, and year-round residents like the imperiled Florida black bear, thrive here in numbers greater than anywhere else. Endemic snails and fish live in its spring runs.

But the increased growth within the state has created environmental impacts. Wetlands have been dredged and creeks channelized. Scientists, like botanist John Kunkel Small, warned as early as 1929 that the



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landscape of Florida would turn arid if draining continued. In the 1960s, the St. Johns and tributaries like the Econ were sumps used to carry raw sewage away. The cache of towns like Sanford—once made affluent by river trade—faded.

Federal laws required that sewage be treated. But the effluent was still loaded with nitrogen and phosphorous. In the 1970s, some eight million gallons of such effluent was pumped into the Little Econ daily. By 1976, nutrient loading in the Econ was described as the most disruptive influence on the upper St. Johns. A massive kill of over ten million fish below Lake Harney got the attention of citizens and elected officials alike.

Today, the Econ has been designated an Outstanding Florida Water for its unique natural values. But unlike the other regional St. Johns tributary, the Wekiva, it lacks the grassroots support for protection, legally and otherwise. As Orlando continues to move eastward, the 280 square mile watershed of the Econ bears an increasingly heavy burden. As with the St. Johns itself, storm water and septic tank leakage

continue to plague it. And natural lands are being cleared at an alarming rate—nearly 20 acres an hour.

Humans are dominant in this watershed now. While we are regaining a measure of appreciation for our rivers, we are a great distance from the reverence of the people who first molded pottery along the wooded shores.

The good news is the spirits of the Timucua and the Mayaca haven't left us. They are still revealed in the details—the orchids on an oak bough, the tree frogs in the sabal palms, the caverns measureless to man.

Perhaps if we regard our rivers with reverence, they will reward us by keeping our wildlife alive, our

drinking water clean and sure, our springs strong and our waters healthy.

But the choice is ours alone. Unlike the Indians who preceded us, we don't have the luxury of thousands of years to decide.



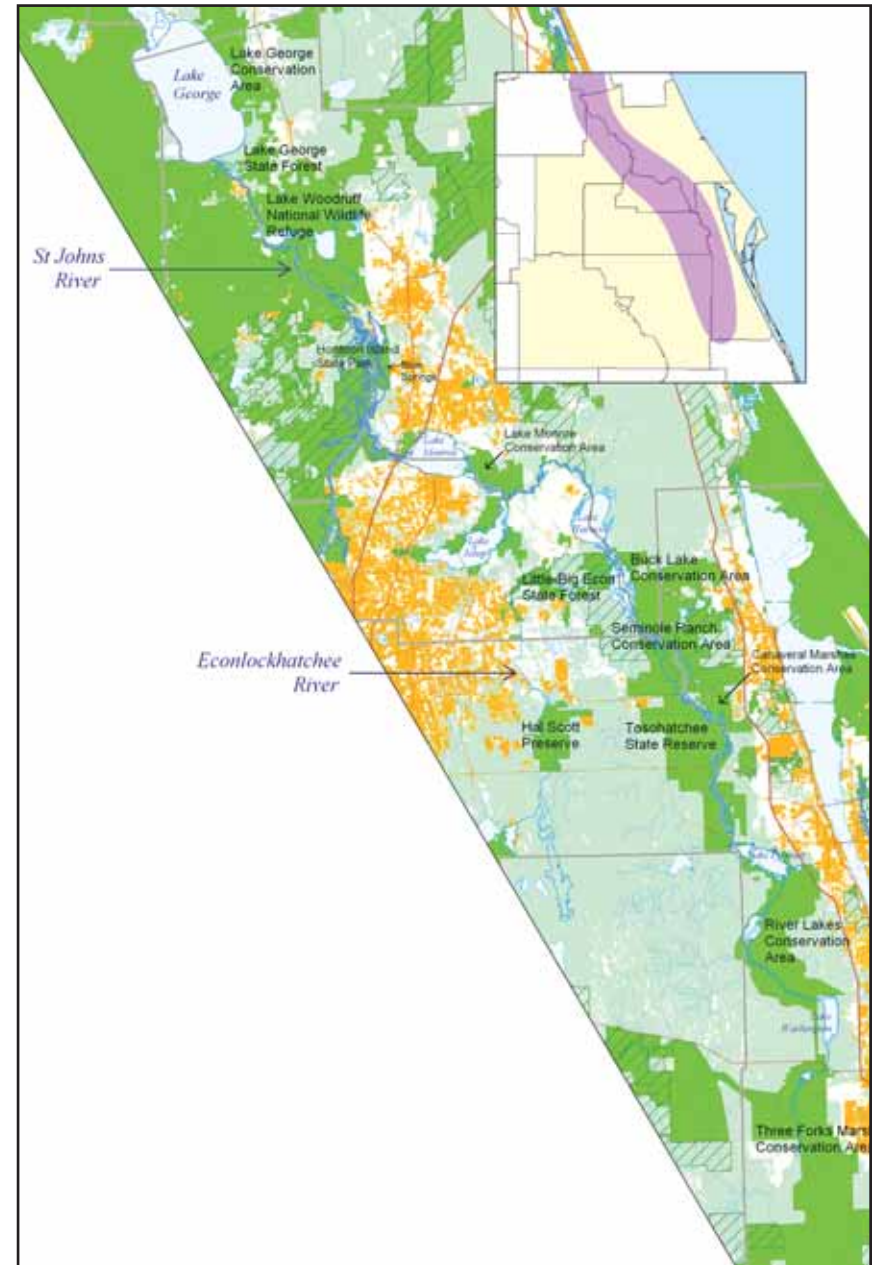
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EXPERIENCE THE THE ST. JOHNS MOSAIC & ECONLOCKHATCHEE

- Thousands of acres of *St. Johns River Water Management District* conservation land hug the shores of **lakes Puzzle, Harney, Jesup, Monroe and George** and are open for public use.
- Other public land, such as the 21,000 acre **Lake Woodruff National Wildlife Refuge**, is prime birding territory. Migratory ducks, as well as wading birds and raptors can be seen by motor boat, canoe or kayak.
- **The Econlockhatchee** embraces one of the premier state forests in all of Florida along the high paleo dunes of its riverine corridor.
- Like elsewhere along the St. Johns, the best swimming and snorkeling is in its springs--especially **Alexander, Salt, and Silver Glen** on the western shore of Lake George in the 383,573 acre Ocala National Forest.
- The thermal protection of **Blue Spring** on the St. Johns lures a regular contingent of the endangered West Indian Manatees into its run every winter. Boardwalks in a state park there allow easy viewing. Scuba diving is allowed into the deep 120-foot spring when the manatees return to the river.
- For information on trails and other access to conservation land, see the **"Recreation Guide to District Lands"** available free from the SJRWMD www.sjr.state.fl.us. Background on state parks along the St. Johns, including hiking, paddling, and water sports, can be found at www.floridastateparks.org.



Bill Belleville is an award-winning author and documentary filmmaker specializing in the environment. He has published four books including "River of Lakes", described by the Miami Herald as the "definitive book on the St. Johns," and over one thousand magazine articles. Mr. Belleville has been named Environmental Writer of the Year by the Florida Wildlife Federation and Florida Audubon Society, and a "Champion of Sustainability" by the Healthy Community Initiative of Orlando. He lectures widely on behalf of the Florida Humanities Council.