

# St. Johns River restoration touted as greatest in Florida



St. Johns River Water Management District completed the restoration of the headwaters of the St. Johns River at Fellsmere Grade Recreation Area in south Brevard County. By many accounts, it's an enormous accomplishment and one of the best examples of environmental stewardship in Florida.



By **Kevin Spear** · Contact Reporter

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**P**ALM BAY -- The biggest environmental repair ever fully completed in Florida was celebrated recently with little fanfare at a boat ramp as sunbathing vultures watched.

It took decades for state and federal agencies to rehabilitate a span of St. Johns River birthplace more than double the size of Orlando, which is 50 to 80 miles away.

Agricultural damage to Florida's longest river had been epic but, according to many involved, that was met with an equally epic quest from what is now a bygone era of environmental stewardship.

"If we were starting from scratch, I doubt the project would have a prayer of gaining traction in today's political climate," said Maurice Sterling, who during some of his 37 years at the St. Johns River Water Management District had been in charge of the project.

"Forty years ago, it was an act of sheer audacity for a then-fledgling agency like St. Johns water district to propose such a bold and expensive initiative," said Sterling, now retired. "The water district had no real credibility, did not yet own any permanent office space and survived on a shoestring budget."

Once conjuring Everglades splendor, saw grass marsh where the St. Johns River comes to life in Brevard and Indian River counties had been ravaged by agriculture through the first half of the 1900s.

A rich ecosystem was crippled, leaving the river shriveled and polluted from the very beginning of its 310-mile journey north around Orlando through Jacksonville to the Atlantic Ocean.

Adding to the assault, sugar, cattle and citrus growers that had staked out fields in the river's former marsh were diverting torrents of filthy runoff to the coastal Indian River Lagoon, wiping out shellfish and sea grass and fueling algae growth.

In the 1960s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers started to obliterate remaining features of the river with flood controls that would dump even more runoff into the Indian River. But in the 1970s, the agency did an about-face.

Forming a partnership, the water district and corps spent \$250 million for restoration. Off the beaten path and not easily accessible, the project never drew much public attention.

Starting in the 1980s, they built 127 miles of levees and a series of enormous reservoirs. Some of those lakes contain and protect clean water along the river. Others capture fertilizer-contaminated water from remaining agricultural operations.

The remade wetlands little resemble what nature created but provide much of the same ecological function. The concept was adopted for Everglades restoration.

Fran Pignone, former Orange County commissioner and long active in county government, was a St. Johns district board member through the '80s and is credited for instrumental leadership in the river project.

The vast majority of work was finished a decade ago; Pignone was surprised to learn of the completion ceremony held in headwaters in south Brevard County. She and many other principal participants were not invited.

"I've often thought it was the best work I ever did," she said.

Discovery of Native American remains kept the corps from finishing a final reservoir until this summer.

The delay meant that the district celebrating completion of the restoration was not the same district that brought it to fruition.

Gov. Rick Scott and legislators have cut budgets and staffs at water districts, and districts now boast of rapidly issuing permits for wetlands destruction and water pumping.

"The water districts are a shadow of what they used to be," said Eric Draper, Audubon Florida president.

"There is no comparison between these agencies today and the ones that started restoration of Everglades and St. Johns River."

At the celebration last week, the St. Johns district director, Ann Shortelle, sounded surprised when asked if her agency had been rendered incapable of such a project.

"I don't agree," she said, stressing the district "absolutely" has the ability.

During remarks, Shortelle pointed out the decades of work.

Tim Murphy, corps senior civilian in Jacksonville, paid tribute to some of the water district's previous officials, including directors Henry Dean and Kirby Green, scientist Ed Lowe and the longtime manager, Sterling, as pivotal.

In a telephone interview later, Dean would not compare the water district today with the one during his 17 years as director.

"The project is the most significant and the most beneficial to so many stakeholders," Dean said. "It got done and everybody should celebrate."

Dean camped out in Tallahassee in the 1980s, urging lawmakers to approve an increase in district taxes to buy farmland for St. Johns restoration.

By comparison, water districts in recent years have been assertive about cutting taxes.

This summer, for example, the South Florida district blasted Audubon Florida when it called for response to destruction of district lands by exotic weeds.

"Audubon Florida wants to raise your taxes," the district stated this month in an unusually aggressive press release. The agency "is committed to no new taxes."

Sonny Vergara, director of the St. Johns district during early years of river restoration, said today's districts will remain feeble versions of their former selves until the public revolts.

"It would take huge community support that would overwhelm the concept that regulations and environmental issues are just things that get in the way of business and free enterprise," Vergara said.

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