

Suwannee Audubon

What we're about

Suwannee Audubon's No. 1 Mission is to work toward building a deep and wide appreciation of the Suwannee River ecosystem. This system embraces many springs, rivers, creeks and swamps which form an aquatic orchestra. The region of interest is east of the Gulf of Mexico, southeast of St. Marks, north of Inglis and west of Gainesville, Florida. This area is similar to the boundaries that define the Big Bend or "Nature Coast." This vast riverine system includes such streams as the Ichetucknee, the Santa Fe and the Ga.-Fla. Withlacoochee. Significantly, the Suwannee system boasts more clear water springs than anywhere in the U.S.A. Scuba divers come here from afar. Scientists study the system. Sometimes the news is good. Too often, it is bad.

And here lies the heart of our mission: To cultivate an understanding and love of the natural Suwannee eco-network, a system that makes impossible our supporting any activities or programs which harm it in any substantial way. Here is a great and famous river truly endangered by relatively recent acts of man. Danger to the river will continue if the people of the area do not understand the reasons for protection. Among those reasons must be the aesthetic one: Rivers are God's creations and they deserve to remain natural. Improving on God's handiwork almost always has bad consequences for the inhabitants of the planet, including the humans causing the problems, typically fueled by greed. The Suwannee River System is a natural piece of art and we know who the Artist was. This must be accepted as an even better reason to save it than the scientists' arguments. Still, the scientists do report that without attention now the river's future is apt to be marked by significant degradation in both water quality and water life.

We make available this message for schools and youth groups via a program called "What's it good for?" Participants learn that everything in Nature has a place and a purpose and it is fun and probably even important to discover their secrets.

Suwannee Audubon has a long history of supporting Florida Xeriscaping. (Xeric =dry.) Most native plants survive droughts and even moderate freezes. They require little or no "watering" and so help to conserve the Suwannee resource (water.) Native Florida plants should be favored in Suwannee Country.

People who appreciate Nature (rivers, forests, critters) do not maliciously attack Nature. Nature appreciation is an educational need.

Suwannee Audubon partners with other groups local, regional and national. To name a few: Sierra Club, Four Rivers Audubon Society, Florida Defenders of the Environment, Clean Water Network, Save Our Suwannee, and Friends of the Great Suwannee Reef.

The Suwannee River absolutely deserves, by virtue of its character and its history, to stay as natural as possible. Every bottling plant on its springs, every motor churning its surface, every house, enterprise and septic tank on its banks is a degrading influence. The task ahead is large.

HISTORY

Suwannee Audubon (Society) was formed in 1984 by Joanne and George "Grif" Griffin* who started the group to fill an obvious need in the Suwannee valley for a real Nature / Environmental organization. Up until that time the forests, swamps and streams were reconsidered as properties and "resources." Developers from south Florida eyed the Big Bend as a high profit opportunity. Large dairies eyed the area for its cheap land and comparative agricultural soundness, at least for pasture. Other interests, too many to list, tried to move in. Some succeeded; some did not.

During the 1980's and 90's the club grew and began to exercise some political clout especially through the work of Joanne Griffin, President who became a "regular" at the Suwannee River Water management District meetings. Joanne worked closely with the late Judith C. Hancock in efforts to stop irresponsible acts

by phosphate companies on the upper Suwannee and to head off rules and legislation that would compromise isolated wet lands and hasten the demise of native amphibians.

Suwannee Audubon (we dropped the "Society" part in recent years) held regular meetings with a membership ranging in age from 20 to 80. A great group! Today, Suwannee Audubon has many members not only local and regional but throughout Florida and elsewhere in the nation.

Although regular meetings are no longer held, SuwAud continues to publish a spicy quarterly newsletter, WINGS, and sponsors several FIELD TRIPS each year. The trips are designed to italicize both the beauties and the problems of the present Suwannee Area Scenario. Field trips have proved to be among our most popular functions. Not only do members participate; usually the public is invited.

ACTIVISM

Long Pond

Back in 1984 we faced our first test and failed it. A developer from down south wanted to develop land within the Long Pond ecosystem south of Chiefland. This system connects to the Suwannee. We brought in consultants and well-known environmental champions. We lost. Beautiful Long Pond was developed.

Lower Suwannee Refuge

From the beginning, we supported making the Suwannee a nationally-recognized Wild and Scenic River. Our reasoning was that anyone can look at the river for three minutes and see that it is indeed a wild and scenic river. Meanwhile, also at the federal level, there were rumblings about having a National Wildlife Refuge at the lower end of the river with its vast marshes and swamps. We were attracted to the idea and Suwannee Audubon went on record with a resounding YES! SuwAud and many other individuals and organizations went to bat for the Refuge despite a surprisingly hostile local climate. But we hung in there, wrote letters, made phone calls and suddenly realized the tide had turned. The necessary purchases were negotiated successfully. We got the Refuge on both sides of the Lower Suwannee. The Refuge system is now one of the principal, natural features of the Dixie-Levy scene and is considered among the finest and wildest wildlife refuges in the entire Southeast. The Refuge is open to regulated hunting, year-round fishing, exploring, birding and hiking.

* The Griffins had earlier (1975) founded the now highly respected Peace River Audubon Society in Charlotte County, Florida.

So, we celebrated our being a part of the movement that made the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge a reality. But we had to admit defeat on the Wild and Scenic status. There was simply too much fear on the local scene that the "feds" would make the river more difficult to access for fishing, boating and other recreation. As it turned out, the river has lost public access more through river development, both commercial and residential, than it ever would have lost with federal "wild and scenic" protection. We continue to support federal designation of Wild and Scenic for the Suwannee. Such designation can help keep the Suwannee alive.

Where fresh meets salt – For good or for ill

:Dredging at the mouth of the river

:Occasionally, some channels at the mouth of the Suwannee River where it enters the Gulf need dredging to facilitate the passage of commercial fishing craft and recreational boats. Suwannee Audubon always has maintained that there are places at the mouth where dredging is appropriate and other places where it is not. We opposed the dredging of Alligator Pass because of its popularity as an aquatic pasture for hungry sea-cows. Yes, manatees. They come into the Suwannee regularly and make their way to Manatee Springs and Fanning Springs and at least as far upstream as Branford. U.S. Fish & Wildlife agreed with our position and both Alligator Pass and the manatees got off the hit list. Dredging proceeded with special concern for

manatees at a different, more logical pass and all was well. Except the dredging issue keeps returning and is back on the radar as we type these very words. More about this in the Current Issues section of the present piece. The question is always the same: WHO wants the dredging and for what purpose? Also: Who can you believe? BMI (Big Money Unlimited) has parked at the mouth of the river and is generating press releases and pro-dredging propaganda it seems almost weekly. The Army Corps stands ready if it can find the funding and an acceptable dump site for the so-called "spoil."(The evil stuff they dredge up.)

Mega-Pollutional Campgrounds and other waterfront atrocities:

were proposed and hyped and supported by several who knew better, including some "Audubon" types that should be ashamed of their behavior. One campground brainstorm for the upper Suwannee would have had to deal with the septic product of as many as 3,000 camping units. Largemouth Bass and Channel Catfish were not enthused.

SuwAuduboners, opposing the scheme, attended and dang near WEPT at the pivotal, public meeting where respected environmental attorneys and groups SIGNED ON to sell out the river. Suwannee Audubon, Four Rivers Audubon and many other real eco groups prevailed. The proposed Camp City was denied permitting. Later, the crazed entrepreneur behind the scheme was hauled into court on various charges and we have lost track of the legal disposition of these karmic events.

Helping to stop the giant camp city goes in our journal as one of the Major SuwAud victories for the river. For every victory &. It seems there is a defeat. But we are determined to turn the tide by winning more than we lose. Let's win the next one and the one after that, not for the gipper but for one of the most famous rivers in the world.

Each little victory, each little win is a big one for the Suwannee, a river that cannot stand any more abuse. Famous or not, she's endangered.

Then there was the proposed Hazardous Waste Facility

to be built and operated by a NE Florida processor of bad industrial stuff, needing a rural, not-to-attract-attention site for handling certain types of hazardous waste. At first, everyone within the local (Dixie County) establishment hailed the idea as a source of jobs and county taxes. Then, a few critics such as Suwannee Audubon pointed out that the company's ethics record was less than good and the materials to be processed had very toxic potentialities. Other eco groups came on board in opposition to the proposed facility and the company claimed these objectors were a bunch of radicals. In time, the local residents decided that the protestors were not crazy but informed folks who had figured out that the company had banked on the natives being stupid hicks who would poison their county for a job. The company fussed and hurled insults but ultimately hit the road back to Jacksonville.

Fanning Springs State Park and the at-the-bridge Wayside Park

are two separate items but related. The Springs were a long-time recreational hang-out for local swimmers and picnickers. Next door, the U.S. 19-98 Wayside Park was among the oldest non-interstate rest areas in the state. The State wanted to close it down. Suwannee Audubon and a host of others went to bat to SAVE the Wayside Park. Today, it remains a state-run, riverside rest area and continues to be exceedingly popular with locals, Floridians, vacationers and tour busses.

Making the springs area into a state park had long been a favored notion both locally and in Tallahassee. It finally came together with the support of Suwannee Audubon and practically every other environmental and eco-tourism group in North Florida. Fanning Springs State Park is now one of Nature Coast's favorite fun spots and is enjoying much needed state protection and improvement.

Dairies can be problematic /// Feed Lots can be even worse

Cows have their place but not too near rivers, please. This has been an on-going dialogue between Suwannee cattle/dairy interests and environmental citizens. Suwannee Audubon has opposed TOO LARGE dairies or animal herds of any kind. Suwannee Audubon has supported Suwannee River Water Management District guidelines and regulations for dairies and would support far more on-site monitoring. Suwannee Audubon supports small "family farm" dairies. Suwannee Audubon opposes the practice of "feed lots" in the beef industry. Feed lots typically intensify the manure problem which is not only smelly and attractive to flies but a possible source of troublesome run-off both organic and chemical. Large numbers of cows within "flow" of the Suwannee are a problem. Recent "readings" of the river's water quality suggest bovine impact. There are official warnings about eating Suwannee fish.

Increasingly, there is a compelling argument for consuming "soy milk" rather than cow's milk. It tastes good and is nutritious. Growing and processing soy beans does not have the fierce polluttional impact of cattle herds. Groceries must change to meet and make the future. Or, to put it another way: "If drinking soy milk helps the Suwannee River, which brand should I buy?"

Then there were new challenges around every bend

and we addressed each of them "as best we could." Fairly often, it worked out. For example, we supported SRWMD in a number of critical purchases that have brought Americans and Floridians some wonderfully wild lands and special stretches of river! Here ecosystems and river frontage were up for grabs and time was of the essence. They're now ours. The public came out on top. But slightly more often, John Doe came out on the bottom while \$\$\$ interests rolled over him. Like we were saying, we have to buck this trend! Ask us about the cement plant.

Did someone say "Cement Plant?"

The Suwannee-American Cement Plant was strategically named to sound patriotic and above reproach. There are interlaced interests here including both mining and manufacturing. But upon close examination, the plant's plans favored the production of the product well above the health of the air or the art veins of pulsing water in the vicinity. Suwannee Audubon and a host of others predicted environmental problems if the plant were to be permitted. Indeed, we MARCHED, shades of the 60's, (with Suwannee County Sheriff escorts) up the highway, right to the raw construction site where the press took lively photos. Unfortunately, all we got out of that event was the pictures! So much for peaceful protest. (Sometimes it works.) Today, the plant is very much a reality, the damage becomes more apparent with every passing day and it is likely that the operation will gain approval of expansion sure to produce still more pollution of air and water.

CURRENT ISSUES

The Suwannee-American Cement Plant (continued)

now a company largely owned by a Brazilian corporation very large and powerful on the international cement scene, continues to be sharply defined on the eco-threat radar screen. This operation has a high probability of damaging the Ichetucknee /Santa Fe / Suwannee riverine system, all the underground streams which connect with it and domestic wells throughout the area of impact while poisoning the sky.

Columbia County Development

Sure, every Florida county wants to see growth and jobs and all the so-called benefits of development. North Florida is not apt to learn from the experience of South Florida because it doesn't understand the insidious character of the virus. There are clear signals in Columbia County and at Lake City that growth decisions may very well impact the Ichetucknee very negatively and related ecosystems as well. Since Ichetucknee is one of the most popular summer fun destinations in the entire area, if it gets sick, much more gets sick.

The Pipe Line

THE PIPE LINE!

Over a period of several decades going back to the Florida land boom of the 1920's South Florida has used up its own resources as if there were no tomorrow. The Sun Coast is running out of fresh water. Now, with one of the densest population concentrations in America, the Tampa–St. Pete metro area is looking northward for & for what? You guessed it. They want to pipe the Suwannee River down to where it's "really needed." Well, this issue has arrived. There were noisy and passionate public meetings and the issue has briefly gone away. It will be back. Every day, the river and all its connecting fingers above and below ground work for us in tens of thousands of different ways, nourishing our wildlife, blending at the estuary to sustain marshes and blue crabs, growing our trees, watering our livestock, making our iced tea. Our slogan is not complicated: The Suwannee's Should Stay Where God Put Them.

DREDGING AT MOUTH OF SUWANNEE

Proposed once again with the Army Corps of Engineers ready to plow as soon as they can break loose the funding. Unfortunately, the proposed dredging is deeper and larger than needed and will be highly destructive of the Great Suwannee Reef, a vital, marine ecosystem. Street talk asserts that the dredging is favored by the same interests who want to see larger craft on the river including commercial carriers of such products as cement. Street talk is not always accurate but in this part of Florida it tends to be based on fact.

Bombing of the Big Bend

The U.S. Air Force has some weapons it wants to test. These are flying bombs which they hope can hit their targets. They want to use a platform out in the Gulf of Mexico and shoot bombs at a certain space along the big Bend coast in an attempt to establish relative accuracy. The bombs will vary from minimally explosive to very explosive. Potential sites have been identified in Levy, Dixie and Taylor Counties. Suwannee Audubon opposes the plan since all of the sites so far named are essentially in wilderness areas where Florida beauty with its streams, wet lands, plants and critters would be hit unmercifully hard. We believe other areas can be found that would be more appropriate than along Florida's Nature Coast. Not only would Nature be impacted by the bombs. People could be killed. Just one bad miss could wipe out a school, a church a small town or a considerable stretch of country road..

Additional Issues: There are many.

Frankly, we do not have the room to list all of the current issues. Watch this space. In future editions we will do updates with the latest threats to the Suwannee. There are new ones almost weekly. We do not meet them with glee but surely with determination to head off what we can.

THERE IS NOTHING ELSE QUITE LIKE SUWAUD