FLORIDA NATURAL RESOURCES LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

A Report by FNRLI Fellows of Class VII, Session III • March 15-17, 2007

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Photo by Laila Racevskis

Introduction: Looking Back, Looking Forward

Fellow and co-facilitator Joan Flocks helped Jon Dain as he opened the current session at the Marriot Hotel Restaurant in Panama City by reflecting on the issues surrounding the Tampa Water Wars, a look back to Session II. Although some water supply challenges in the Tampa Bay area are resolved, the universal agreement among session stakeholders was that more hard work needed to be done.

While highlighting the agenda, Jon informed the others that the Session III focus on Econfina Creek would bring to attention a "feel good" chapter in Florida's environmental history, but one with an uncertain future. Although the conflict management process concerning Econfina Creek had not been highly contentious, it had involved many different stakeholders. Jon challenged the other Fellows by asking "How can we protect a natural resource, extend it to public use and also protect landowner rights – all at the same time?"

"Drama By The River":
An exercise in building consensus

After Jon finished opening the session, Burl Long related another water story, this one called "Drama on the River," in which the Fellows had to re-evaluate and prioritize their own values as they evaluated the behaviors of the fictional characters while they worked toward reaching a consensus. During the game, Fellows first worked alone and then worked in progressively larger groups. In doing that, players experienced the frustrations associated with compromise versus the accomplishments associated with consensus. Although there was nothing to lose in a fictional NRLI exercise, the Fellows still felt some stress and the emotional involvement. Several Fellows commented about how challenging it would be for people to play a high stakes "game" like that "for real."

Do I give in?

vs.

Can I agree?

Non-Market Valuation 101:
The Economics of Natural Resources

How do you place a value on the sight of a flock of birds flying across the sky just before sunset? Markets work well for setting values. Values are determined when people demonstrate preferences or make choices in the market. How can the expression of public preferences and choices be used to set values for goods or services when there is no market? How are the economic values and benefits of non-market goods and services determined?

The absence of a market suggests the need for non-market valuation methods. A non-market good or service is something not directly bought or sold, making its observable value, much less its monetary value, difficult to ascertain. Natural resource examples of non-market goods and services include opportunities like visits to the beach and viewing wildlife. One option for assigning worth to such things is to utilize a method for non-market valuation that combines both use and non-use values.

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Photo by Laila A. Racevskis

To us, the nature found in Econfina Creek was extremely valuable.

Economics of Natural Resources continued...

Natural resources are public goods and, as such, can be *non-excludable* (everyone can use them) and *non-rival* (use does not affect availability for others). However, everyone can affect the quality of the natural resources. Changes in the quality of natural resources impose costs on society as a whole. Who should pay the costs? And, who should help fix the problems caused by changes in natural resource quality?

Creating policy changes to address natural resource allocation issues requires institutional changes that result in altered power relationships, which can have various economic repercussions. To be effective, institutional changes require information on people's preferences and values. Non-market valuation methods provide tools that are needed to understand how people will behave when given a choice between the costs of reduced environmental quality, or social costs, and the costs to improve environmental quality, or individual costs.

Stage Setting with Bill Cleckley

To help with the preparation of our field trip to Econfina Creek and its watershed, Bill Cleckley, project manager in the Division of Land Management and Acquisition for the Northwest Florida Water Management District (NWFWMD), presented an overview of water management and conservation along the creek. Bill, together with other land acquisition and management staff, have been working in Jackson, Washington and Bay counties. Using a variety of techniques, they were successfully restoring a system of land parcels acquired to protect Econfina Creek, the source of the water

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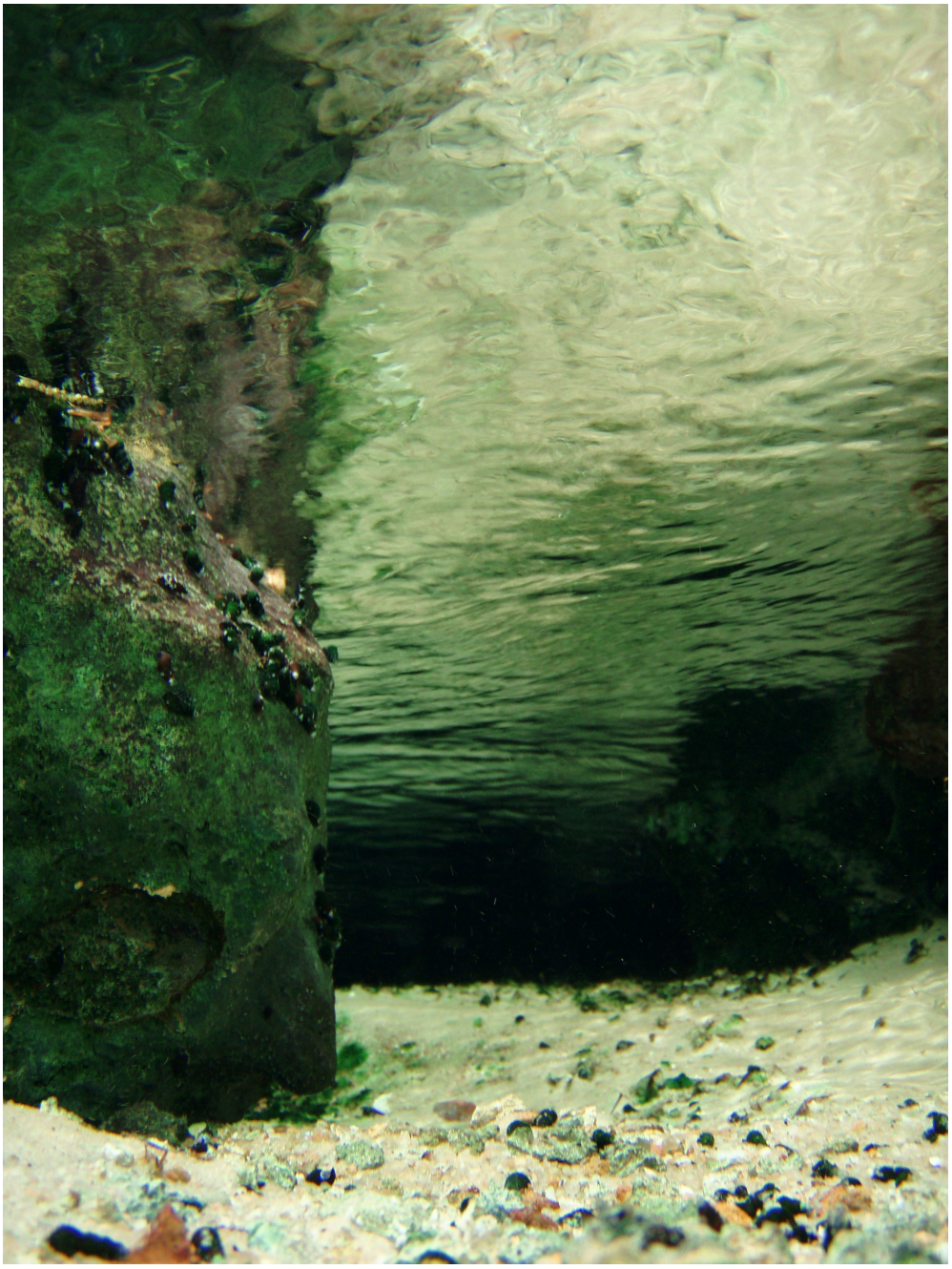

Photo by Rainer Schael

Econfina Creek remains as beautiful underwater as it is above water.

Stage Setting continued...

supply system for Panama City, and its recharge area. Accomplishing this end required building stakeholder trust. Some of the effective techniques used to preserve and protect the area included direct land acquisition, in concert with effective restoration and management of habitats, and the purchase of conservation easements with the cooperation of landowners.

The Econfina Creek watershed boasts one of the highest water recharge areas in northwest Florida. Because of the 30 to 40 inches of rain per year, an estimated 1.3 to 1.9 million gallons of water per square mile per day feed into the basin and the aquifer. Located entirely within Florida, Econfina Creek is the premier water source for Bay County and the surrounding counties in the Panhandle. In addition, 11 springs or spring groups, which include several first and second magnitude springs among a total of more than 36 vents, have been identified within the Econfina Creek basin. NWFWMD has conducted studies showing that the recharge area for the Econfina Creek springs encompasses an area of approximately 184 square miles (~117,800 acres). To ensure the continued existence of that water source, both for recreation and for public consumption, NWFWMD created an ambitious land acquisition program in 1992 that has netted 41,149 acres within the Econfina Creek watershed and recharge area (9,446 acres in the floodplain and 31,703 upland acres, including the recharge area) at a cost of approximately $48.7 million. In addition to this amount of land are private landholdings managed for conservation, including the 869 acres of the Patronis family.

Photo by Laila Racevskis

Bill's love for the creek and enthusiasm for his work permeated every moment of the presentation.

A major problem faced by the area is the fact that everyone just "loves it too much." People swim, fish, hike, camp, jet ski, ride horses, hunt, etc. All of these activities precipitate erosion, habitat destruction and pollution. Furthermore, sand mining, road construction and general development are altering and transforming the landscape. Coastal well drilling is amplifying salt water intrusion problems. Although land acquisition has protected Econfina Creek to some extent, proper land management has become more crucial.

Approximately 600 different species and seven diverse habitats are found within the area. Nevertheless, most of the land has a history of being logged, planted and/or otherwise altered. One of the most important steps has been replacing the ubiquitous sand pines with the native longleaf pines, which is easily established unless undesirable ground cover takes over first. The second significant portion of the restoration effort has been growing wiregrass to create a ground cover. The native Florida wiregrass is extremely difficult to grow in a nursery setting and is very expensive to plant as plugs. Another option has been seed collection, which presents all kinds of problems, such as removing the chaff and adequately and evenly spreading the seeds over a landscape. In spite of these obstacles, project members have managed to plant 10,000 acres of longleaf pine, 800 acres of wiregrass plugs and 200 acres of direct seeding of wiregrass.

The springs of Econfina Creek provide a unique biological habitat. Gainer Springs, first magnitude springs that are currently owned by the Patronis family, release 65 million gallons of water per day or 190.5 cubic feet of water per second. There are 50 or more lakes, which are periodically stocked with fish. Econfina Creek has the steepest gradient of any creek in Florida. Fourteen miles of the Florida National Scenic Trail are found in the area.

Our canoe trip allowed us to see firsthand Econfina Creek as the source of life in the area.

Understanding Habitat Restoration

Photo by Laila Racevskis

Facing misty and overcast weather for our field trip, we took to our vans armed with rain gear and high hopes for clearing skies. Ultimately, this day did not compare to the cold, blustery day at the Tampa Bay Water Reservoir during Session II. The clouds cleared after our trip through the woods, and the warm sun accompanied us during our trip down the creek.

On the way back, we saw the several managed sites where Bill and his crews were working through the various stages required to restore the natural habitats of those sites. What we saw were elevated North Florida sandy hill habitats covered with wiregrass and longleaf pines that were being restored to replace the slash and Ocala sand pines. We saw patches of titi, a Florida native plant and butterfly attracter, along with swamp yellow jasmine, Chickasaw plum, gopher apple, sparkle berry, cabbage palm, red cedar, several varieties of lichens and, a special finding, sundial lupine. It was a botanist's delight!

We traveled to Hobb's Pasture at the edge of Deer Lake, near Trading Post Creek, where we stood on an identified archaeological site. We imagined projectile points embedded in the sands just inches below our feet and wondered about the problem of allowing public access to the unique natural resources and protecting the artifacts at the site. Bruce Delaney heard a bald eagle's call, and some of the members saw through binoculars a pair of eagles sitting at the top of a bare cypress tree across the lake. While there, we talked with Echo Gates and Peter Martin, an engineer and an architect, respectively, with the Genesis Group, a contractor working with NWFWMD. They were working to help restore the Econfina Creek watershed by designing facilities to enhance recreational opportunities while reducing erosion along some of the springs that feed into the creek.

Our five-vehicle caravan also visited Porter Pond and Dog 3, a clear-cut timber harvest area. We ended the tour of upland habitats within the watershed recharge area at Rattlesnake Lake. From there, we headed to Econfina Creek to paddle in its cool waters and enjoy for ourselves its natural beauty.

At the creek, we met Debbie Gay, owner of the Econfina Creek Canoe Livery (the only canoe rental on the creek itself) and a participant on the stakeholder panel. She loaded us into canoes two by two and talked to some of us about protecting the creek and its banks. We experienced firsthand the conflict with which NWFWMD staff members are struggling: resource protection versus public use. Recreational overuse causes bank erosion problems and directly impacts the drinking water supply source for Panama City.

While on the creek, we saw many of the native flame azaleas in bloom among the many magnolias, cypress and other trees along the banks. Our canoe trip ended at the Patronis Pavilion, adjacent to the creek at the Gainer Springs, where we prepared for the afternoon stakeholder panel session.

Stakeholder Panel

Photo by Rainer Schael

The desire to preserve Econfina Creek has motivated stakeholders to cooperate with one another.

Under the Patronis Pavilion, private land owned for more than 50 years by the Patronis family, Fellows listened to six, diverse panelists brought together by their mutual love for the river and its environs. What unfurled was a story of conversion, of commitment, of cooperation, of collaboration and, ultimately, of success. For Fellows, who had agonized over the seemingly insurmountable problems of Everglades Restoration and Tampa Bay Water Wars, this was a refreshing story of an area, as yet, free from the full-on assault of rampant development that is currently being experienced by the rest of the state. Because of those willing to take the time and make the effort to cultivate, nurture and deepen relationships among stakeholders, the Econfina Creek ecosystem has a cadre of allies all fighting diligently for its protection and restoration.

The first panelist, Rob Middlemas, formerly on the Board of NWFWMD and currently vice chair of the Florida Wildlife Federation, spoke to our group about the concerted effort that has been undertaken by the Water Management District to reach out to the various user groups of the river in order to educate them about the value and importance of the vital resource in their midst. According to Rob, "Education is key, and it takes everybody." One tool that the district used to prevent conflict among the various user groups was to draw a map, clearly designating specific areas for particular recreational activities. In this way, individual groups' needs for recreational space within the Econfina preserve were met, while still maintaining a larger plan for resource protection.

Debbie Gay, our second panelist, is the owner and operator of the Econfina Creek Canoe Livery, the only canoe outfitter on the creek. The livery boasts a fleet of some 60 canoes and a handful of kayaks. Debbie assured us that none of her customers can escape her spiel on the importance of being a good river steward before each is allowed to launch his or her craft into the water. She readily conveyed to us her love of the river and of the solitude and peace that it has brought her. She is holding on to what she knows is irreplaceable while also working to see that her family members do not put visions of dollar signs ahead of a priceless resource.

Our third panelist, Sylvia Gates, was admittedly quite surprised at her position on our panel. She opened up her talk with her conversion story – how she was transformed from a four-wheeling, truck rider who raced over trails to a horse enthusiast, member of the Restless Riders and owner of Sunray Ranch and a dedicated volunteer for the Econfina Creek. Sylvia was, at first, resistant to any constraints upon her free use of the wild lands of the creek basin. Through a process of dialogue and education, she came to realize the damage that some of her and her friends' activities were having on this area that she loved. Thus, began her new role as a volunteer. In this position, Gates has spent many days laying out horse trails within the creek restoration area, within a framework that minimizes erosion and other impacts on the terrain. Her words "we're all here to protect our water"

lingered in our minds.

It soon became apparent that Louis Roberson, who was quiet and unassuming on the outside, was a key player in forming the collaborative relationships that were the life-blood of the creek's resource protection plan. As regional director for the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Louis was instrumental in opening up channels of communication with the Water Management District and, in turn, in reaching out to other stakeholders. Working to ensure that no user group would be left out of consideration, he helped to develop the idea of a mobility-impaired area for hunters. Referring to the process of bringing conflicting stakeholders together, he exclaimed, "Don't be afraid of it. Get in there and do it."

A colorful and memorable character, Don Walters, chairman of the Orange Hill Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD), employed his boisterous personality, along with his deep love for people and the creek, to bring people together and to "bring 'em round." As he explained it, the Econfina project has been a success because stakeholders have been able to work across county boundaries. Don transformed SWCD into a major player in working for the protection and restoration efforts, most significantly, the work on erosion control in the Econfina basin.

Lastly, as owner of 1,200 acres on Econfina Creek, some of which have been in his family since 1957, John Patronis spoke of the enormous responsibility of being a landholder and, simultaneously, a good steward of this precious resource. At first resistant to the overtures of NWFWMD, John "came around" to recognizing the advantages of working together as opposed to working at cross purposes. Ultimately, everyone wanted the same thing – they wanted the enchanting Econfina Creek to be a source of joy, solace and, of course, drinking water for a long time to come. With vandalism and erosion being an on-going problem on the creek, John has advocated for a 100-foot set-back line and for meaningful laws.

John showed that, despite all the positive commentaries, problems still linger. He said, "I wish the Water Management District would do more to give conservation easements to landlords." Finally, John touched on another issue that was in the back of many of our minds – the influence of the St. Joe Company's extensive land holdings on the entire area. To quote John: "Unless St. Joe loosens up, I don't know what we are going to do."

Missing Stakeholders?

We recognize that the development of this project and the achievement of certain goals are major accomplishments, and we applaud all the stakeholders for the work they have done. However, during the stakeholder panel discussions, we learned that while the conflict management process associated with the preservation of the Econfina Creek watershed has not been tremendously contentious, not all stakeholders have been involved, probably not even all the key stakeholders. The following are some of the missing stakeholders:

- **Bay County Commission (BCC)**
  The BCC can produce policy changes that affect natural resource allocation issues, invoking institutional changes that alter power relationships.
- **Silviculture and fisheries industries**
  The agriculture industry is involved in implementing the Econfina Creek land restoration and management plans from timber harvests to the cultivation of wire grass seeds.
- **Homeowners**
  Don Walters did mention several times that he wanted to see affordable housing for people in his own county and not somewhere else, but representatives as homeowners were not among the stakeholders.
- **Major landholders**
  - St. Joe Company
  - Department of Defense/U.S. Air Force (Tyndall AFB)

Photo by Laila Racevskis

The six panelists showed us the possibility and power of bringing together people with conflicting interests.

The Debrief Session

Fellows Regina Morse and Bill Sargent helped to debrief our experiences by posing several questions. The first question was, "What are the strategies that NWFWMD used to involve stakeholders?" Fellows listed many strategies, including community meetings, personal contact, consensus building, education, breaking down barriers, relationship building, identifying key people and important stakeholders and, in some cases, using the "big stick" approach. Secondly, Regina and Bill asked us to list the key stakeholders. Our list included landowners, local business owners, recreational users, and key individuals who feel a love for or may be affected by institutional changes implemented for conservation of the creek. Interestingly, about 50 percent of the stakeholders identified by the Fellows did not appear to be involved in the current Econfina Creek conservation process. Following that, we discussed the concepts we learned, including running an effective meeting, the processes involved in building consensus and the importance of stakeholder involvement. Lastly, we outlined the tools that we had learned, such as developing a meeting agenda, specifying the goals of a meeting, the five levels of involvement for meetings, consensus building and prioritizing issues. Did we learn all that in one session? Boy, the Fellows and the NRLI staff are a good team!

Photo by Rainer Schael

Jeff McLemore reflects on the field trip.

Miscellany...

- Two books that Fellow Teresa Watkins recommends for identifying native plants are: *Florida Wild Flowers and Roadside Plants* by C. Ritchie Bell and Bryan J. Taylor and *North American Wildflowers: Eastern Region* by William A. Niering and Nancy C. Olmstead, revised by John W. Thieret.

- For more information about Econfina Creek:

- NWFWMD Web sites
◊ recreational activities and the springs in the floodplain: www.nwfwmd.state.fl.us/recreation/econfinacreek.html
◊ The Florida Department of Environmental Protection Web site
◊ Econfina Creek Canoe Trail: www.dep.state.fl.us/gwt/guide/regions/panhandlewest/trails/econfina.htm
- The University of Florida/IFAS Web site
◊ the Econfina Creek wetlands: wetlandextension.ifas.ufl.edu/counties/detailmaps/jackson_econfina.htm

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This report forms part of a series written by current FNRLI Fellows. Reports represent and are a product of the experiential learning process that is a highlight of the FNRLI program and have not been formally peer reviewed.