

Inside This Issue:

Introduction
Page 1

The Kissimmee River
Channelization and
Restoration Projects
Page 2

Initial Reflection
Page 3

Field Trip:
Kissimmee River
Page 4

Stakeholder Panel
Page 5

Last Day
Page 6

Everglades Restoration: The Kissimmee River System

Sebring

Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

Introduction

The natural resource issue that was the focus of Class VIII's first session was the restoration of the Kissimmee River system, but, just as important, the first meeting also involved orientation to the "Institute," as well as introductions made by Fellows and the Project Team.

The group of Fellows is comprised of 21 women and men representing diverse backgrounds and professions, including biologists, attorneys, economists, ecologists, technicians, educators, land managers, agricultural spokespersons, and real estate professionals. Although we come from all walks of life and from various parts of the world, we have the common goals of learning about natural resource issues in Florida. We want to do our best to resolve the demands and expectations of multiple stakeholders in

contentious resource conflicts.

One of the most pleasant memories of the first session was meeting the Program Team and each other. Many of the Fellows have had many travels and interesting experiences to share, and the last day's feedback session could not have been more pleasant with such a great group of earnest, intelligent folks.

Learning about the incredible and tragic history of the Kissimmee River flood control project was an interesting core issue for each of us. It provided important lessons concerning the consequences, both intentional and unintentional, of large-scale alterations of natural systems and public land acquisitions. ■

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The Kissimmee River Channelization and Restoration Projects:

Brief History of a Boondoggle

The Kissimmee River flows from Lake Kissimmee in central Florida southward about 100 miles to Lake Okeechobee. This river system is Lake Okeechobee's largest watershed (the Kissimmee Basin totals about 2,400 square miles), and it supplies about half of that lake's annual water flow. In its natural state, the river generally meanders through a marshy 1- to 2-mile-wide floodplain, forming the headwaters of the greater Kissimmee-Okeechobee-Everglades ecosystem.

Due to periods of severe flooding in the upper Kissimmee lakes region in the 1920s and 40s, at the government's request a flood control project was undertaken by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. The intent of the project was to provide an outlet for flood drainage in the basin and to provide protection for lands adjacent to the Kissimmee River. Between 1962 and 1971, the winding river was "channelized," portions of the river becoming a 56-mile-long, 300-foot-wide, 30-foot-deep drainage ditch. Flood control had been accomplished, but no sooner had the project been completed, the environmental activists and sportsmen voiced their concerns

about the many detrimental impacts caused by the project, including a tremendous reduction in waterfowl and game fish and loss of almost 55 square miles of wetland habitat. Almost immediately, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) ordered the restoration of as much of the river as possible while still retaining its mandated flood control objectives. This new phase would become the largest river restoration project in history. After 20 years of remediation studies and land acquisitions in the river floodplain, almost 22 miles of the drainage canal are now being back-filled, two water control structures have been removed, and parts of the original course of the river have been restored at an estimated cost in 1997 of \$414,000,000. The reconstruction should be completed in 2010.

As part of the restoration, government has acquired, or will acquire, either voluntarily or by condemnation approximately 132 square miles along the river, taking title "in fee" or via conservation and/or flowage easements. This, of course, has caused serious conflicts with affected land owners. In addition, as the lands are acquired, various citizen stakeholders (e.g., fishermen, hunters, hikers, horseback riders, boaters, bird watchers, and other groups desirous of using the public lands) will make demands in their own interests, leading to further conflicts among their groups and with the government agencies charged with protection and management of the resource. These are the issues around which our first session revolved. ■



Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

The history of the Kissimmee River Restoration Project has been a complex one involving the government, restoration groups, and citizen stakeholders.



Artwork by Jon Dain greets NRLI Class VIII.

Initial Reflection

I looked down at my shoes; they weren't new but it still felt like the first day of school. My new classmates gathered around while I introduced myself: "My name is Steve Allen. I was born in ... and I want to be your next American Idol!" Then, I stepped around the crude outline of the United States that we had created on the floor using masking tape, sharing with the Fellows all the different places that I have lived and other basic information about my life. We had just come from our first lunch together and were in the process of individual introductions. Who were these people? I finished my introduction and sat down to watch the others do the same. Each stood in turn and moved around the floor marking different places they had grown up, gone to school, and built careers.

This part of the session was followed by the program directors outlining our objectives and expectations. Each of us sat attentively as we learned what would be expected of us in the months to come. Packets of information and reading assignments were handed out, the session's schedule was reviewed, and the reasons why we had come to Sebring were explained.

Later in the afternoon, Lawrence Glenn, director of the Kissimmee River Restoration Project, led us through a PowerPoint presentation outlining the efforts of South Florida Water Management District in restoring the Kissimmee River to its original condition. He provided a narrative on the history of the project and spoke about metrics that were being used to evaluate its progress. We learned that the first phases

of the project had been completed, and that expectations were high for the project's overall success, based on early indications noted in some of the initial segments of the restored river system. His slide show revealed the location and scope of the project with graphics comparing the restored sections of the river to the unrestored sections. Some of the Fellows asked him very specific questions, revealing their scientific knowledge base. We all watched as Glenn explained the vast breadth of the project and defined the terms of its success and the schedule of its completion. It was a very informative presentation and unveiled a great deal of detail to the group.

After the presentation, NRLI Executive Director Bruce Delaney led the Fellows in choosing group procedural and etiquette norms and, joined by Jon Dain, assigned several Fellows tasks to be done during the first NRLI session. We discussed the days to come and were invited to attend an informal round table later in the evening when we could share our own knowledge of the Kissimmee River project.

This and other events throughout the day cemented the idea of what the Institute means in terms of the personal and professional connections that we would form with each other, and they also brought into focus that we were part of a larger tradition that tied us to the previous and future NRLI classes. ■

Field Trip:

Kissimmee River

The first field trip for the 2008 NRLI Fellows included a guided boat trip on the Kissimmee River as well as a swamp buggy tour through lands purchased by SFWMD. Having a firsthand look at the restoration painted a picture that will not soon be forgotten. We identified more than 40 species of birds. We learned how to estimate the size of an alligator (number of inches from nose to eyes is approximately the same number of feet from nose to tail). We noticed a greater number and diversity of wildlife in the restored section of the river than in the channelized section, which is evidence that the restoration efforts are working.

After our boat trip, Jeff McLemore, SFWMD Kissimmee land steward, chauffeured us on huge swamp buggies. We observed a variety of habitats and learned how SFWMD manages the land. Jeff pointed out that Native Americans were the first to use prescribed burning as a land management technique in Florida. When we returned from our buggy ride, we enjoyed a picnic lunch and discussed all that we had seen and done during the morning field trip. ■



Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

Jeff McLemore, SFWMD Kissimmee land steward, provides guided tour to Project Team.



Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

Above: Peter Johnson and other Fellows take notes while taking in a firsthand view of the Kissimmee River restoration area.



Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

Left: Jeff maintains his tour guide status and guides the Fellows in a swamp buggy on land.



Despite the differences among the stakeholders, they all agreed about the need for restoration around the Kissimmee River. But the need to give up their land was the most difficult action for the stakeholders.

The panel included: Matt Albertz (sportsman); Elda Mae Bass (property owner); Steve Bronson (property owner); Fred Davis (NRLI alumnus, SFWMD retiree, and member of the Florida Trail Association); and Byron Maharrey (hunter, outdoorsman, and air boater).

Several conflicts were discussed related to the Kissimmee River Restoration Project. The property owners were upset that as soon as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers finished channelizing the river the SFWMD began planning restoration. Property owners also were forced to sell their property (some had been there for several generations) for the benefit of the restoration project. The sportsmen discussed their issues with access to public property, and the property owners were quick to point out the dangers living near hunting areas. The Florida Trail Association also had concerns with safe access within lands that are actively hunted. Most panel members agreed with the need to restore the Kissimmee River, but all had strong

feelings deeply connected to the land. One landowner described losing her land was like “cutting off an arm.”

In regards to resolving conflicts, the panel made several recommendations:

1. Communication is the key. Convene a stakeholder group before you do anything else. It is better to put everything on the table, right or wrong, and move forward from there.
2. Always be prepared to continue to work with the stakeholders. There is never a final decision. Decisions are only temporary agreements.
3. Similar to number 2, nothing is ever considered “done.” There is always change.
4. Communicate honestly to build credibility and trust.
5. Most of the time, the user groups (stakeholders) are not all that different. Once people start talking, they usually find they have more in common than they first thought. ■

Stakeholder Panel

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Photo by Melody Ray-Culp

NRLI Class VIII Fellows watch and listen during a presentation of Session I. Throughout the year, they will be confronted with conflicts and asked to be leaders that will make resolutions.

Last Day of First Session

On the morning of the last day of the session, we were led through four main activities:

1. Introduction to natural resource management
2. Introduction to the required "practicum"
3. A "debriefing" session
4. Feedback from the class

We divided into small groups and discussed our own instances of having been leaders. Two main concepts were discussed: harnessing the power of the group and reacting to the problem while empathizing with the stakeholders.

It was not until on my drive home that I really started to ponder some of the things we had been told. We were told that a primary goal of NLRI is to develop and strengthen leadership skills. But what is leadership? The class's definition included: setting an

example, organizing and gaining support, providing direction and instructions, motivation, and empowerment. When I arrived at home, I looked up the word "leader" in my dictionary, which defined the word as a "guide" or "conductor."

We were told that emotional intelligence is important to leading. However, I could not but ask myself the following questions: Is a leader a mediator or moderator with his finger to the wind, or does he rally his troops for a cause? When leading, does one coordinate to work out a group compromise through polite procedural give-and-take? Or does a leader make his or her own path regardless of the majority view and does not rest until the goal is achieved? What lines cannot be crossed? When should they be compromised? ■

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