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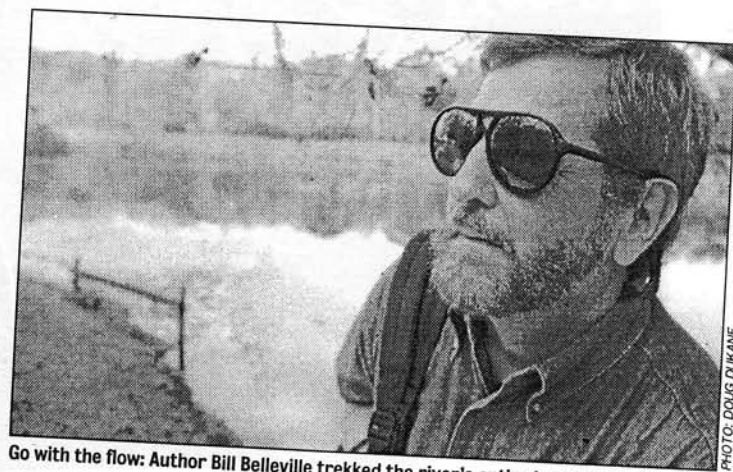
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As natural Florida fades, a book celebrates
the St. Johns as a unique watery wilderness



Go with the flow: Author Bill Belleville trekked the river's entire length in his travels

PHOTO: DOUG DUKANE

A current
affair

BY DEE RIVERS

More than any other of earth's features, we humans have turned to wild rivers for sustenance and smiles for our own lives. The best- and least-known such source in this latitude is the St. Johns. Here, the secrets of epochs lay deep in its shifting bottom and in its near-shore forests - from subtle biodiversity, to remains of long-gone indigenous peoples, to fossilized flora and fauna, to last-trace pilings from yesteryear's steamboats and today's no-wake signs that tomorrow will fall and rot into silt.

Most human relationships with the St. Johns and its sprawling basin are aggressive. For diversion, we fish its still sloughs. For midnight thrills, we four-wheel its swamps or jet-ski over its manatees. For romance, we make love on its currents. Mostly, we tend to take the river for granted. Few will notice the nice lick of light carried along in its shallows or the teeming life there that the eye catches only from an attitude of silent stillness.

Fewer still will notice when the shallows vanish.

Only lucky rivers ever touch a human heart enough to gain a serious ally. Only the luckiest will gain one who is a gifted writer. The St. Johns, a most unique riverine system, finally has such an ally and, at last, a book of its own.

The oldest, best advice ever given to writers is this: Write what you know. In *River of Lakes* (University of Georgia Press, \$24.95), a masterful account of his relationship with the St. Johns, environ-

mental writer Bill Belleville does exactly that, weaving his extensive knowledge of the river's geological, biological and cultural history with accounts of his own journey down its entire length.

"I was drawn to the river by the writings of William Bartram," Belleville says, "and because of a lot of mysteries that I thought needed to be answered."

Bartram, in *Bartram's Travels: 1773-74*, recorded the biological wonders of the continent's wilderness, including the exotic peninsula that is present-day Florida. "The big questions were: If you have the opportunity today, can you find any of Bartram's [St. Johns] experience? Is there enough wildness left in a state that's losing 20 acres of natural land an hour?"

As Belleville moved through his quest, the river revealed an unexpected complexity ... and surprise: Beyond the man-made margins, familiar marshes and whip-tips of tributaries was, indeed, a wildness that was pure enchantment.

River of Lakes imparts that enchantment. Its introduction traces the river's human history from its Paleo-Indian inhabitants to its pale tourists. There are past poets and present economics, ancient geography and place-name etymology. The book sweeps the reader along on each leg of Belleville's trip through the lakes, sloughs and watery sprawls that is the St. Johns River Basin. Creatures, characters, science and myth are all here.

Beyond the fact that Belleville writes like an angel is his ability to write democratically. He bashes the mindset of irresponsibility, rather than a particular

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NEWSFRONT

interest group per se.

"Well, I am all for laws and putting in jail these guys who pollute and break dredge-and-fill laws and things like that," he says.

He even says that developers can't help themselves, like dogs compelled to chase cats. "Developers don't really make me crazy except when they start quoting Scripture and talking about how the Bible tells them so, and that it gives them the right to do what they want to do - that makes me fucking nuts."

He does not preach to readers, however. "I think if you blow it all out, you turn people off," he says. "I try to tell the story, put in [environmental issues] where they belong and let it come together as a whole. If people come up against a big tirade, they'll put the book down. You have to take people along, give it to them in a palatable way."

One of the most palatable aspects of *River of Lakes* is its lack of pessimism. Somehow, in the face of die-hard development, pants-down payoffs and reversal of protective rulings, Belleville maintains hopefulness.

"I have learned to appreciate what's

'Is there wildness left in a state that's losing 20 acres of natural land an hour?'

left and not fall into 'woe is me, we're all doomed.' One thing that's saved me is that I really love to do things out-of-doors, in the resources, to look for places to go."

For example, he looks to the Seminole Forest, a wilderness off State Road 46, just west of Interstate 4, which, says Belleville, looks much as it did 500 years ago. He hopes *River of Lakes* will move people to make similar efforts. For although the malaise of the state is its transiency, it is the public's inertia and tendency to stay in their "hermetically-sealed buildings and never go out" that is the true tragedy.

It will not be the great empirical arguments that show increasing pollutants, feminized bull gators, mute birds or bears going mad that galvanize people into action. Belleville believes that it will be born of a human need to connect with a resource, a visceral, not intellectual, thing, a yearning for a sense of place.

If the public's response to his book so far is any indication, Belleville may have, indeed, touched a chord. *River of Lakes* has been the second best-selling book in Florida on Amazon.com for three weeks straight. It is also being taught in Rollins College's Environmental Literature class. Moreover, Belleville, who also makes video documentaries, has just received a grant to make a documentary about the Wekiva River.

Finally, he says, laws go only so far in Florida, and as with most life issues, things boil down to individual responsibility. "We are all downstream from somebody else. I try to make that point in the book. That, and that I hope people will venture into the wilderness and give it a chance to seep into their consciousness. Unfortunately, a lot of people only want a sort of MTV jolt, and a swamp doesn't give you that." ♦

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