

# Author presents unique look at river

## RIVER, From Back Page

"What I did do (at a time) was about 10 miles of river. I would hike around the edge, maybe, or kayak — see a portion of the river and come back and see what had been written about it, what scientific reports had been done, and whatever fragments of information I had," Belleville said.

It took him two years to write the book, which has received a number of positive reviews from national publications.

"Belleville went looking for the wild St. Johns and found it very much alive and well," wrote *Kirkus Reviews*.

"It is selling very strongly," said Barbara Bas, executive editor of the University of Georgia Press, who declined to release sales figures.

Belleville used bits and pieces of personal experience in writing the book.

"I had been collecting information over a period of years. I had been kayaking on the river. I had been scuba diving in the springs, and I had been fishing, but I hadn't made a concerted effort to pull my own information together," Belleville said.

The book begins in the headwaters of the St. Johns in Central Florida, and ends it where the St. Johns flows past Jacksonville to the Atlantic Ocean.

"The book flowed with the river," Belleville said, who is now working on a documentary on the Wekiva River, a tributary of the St. Johns.

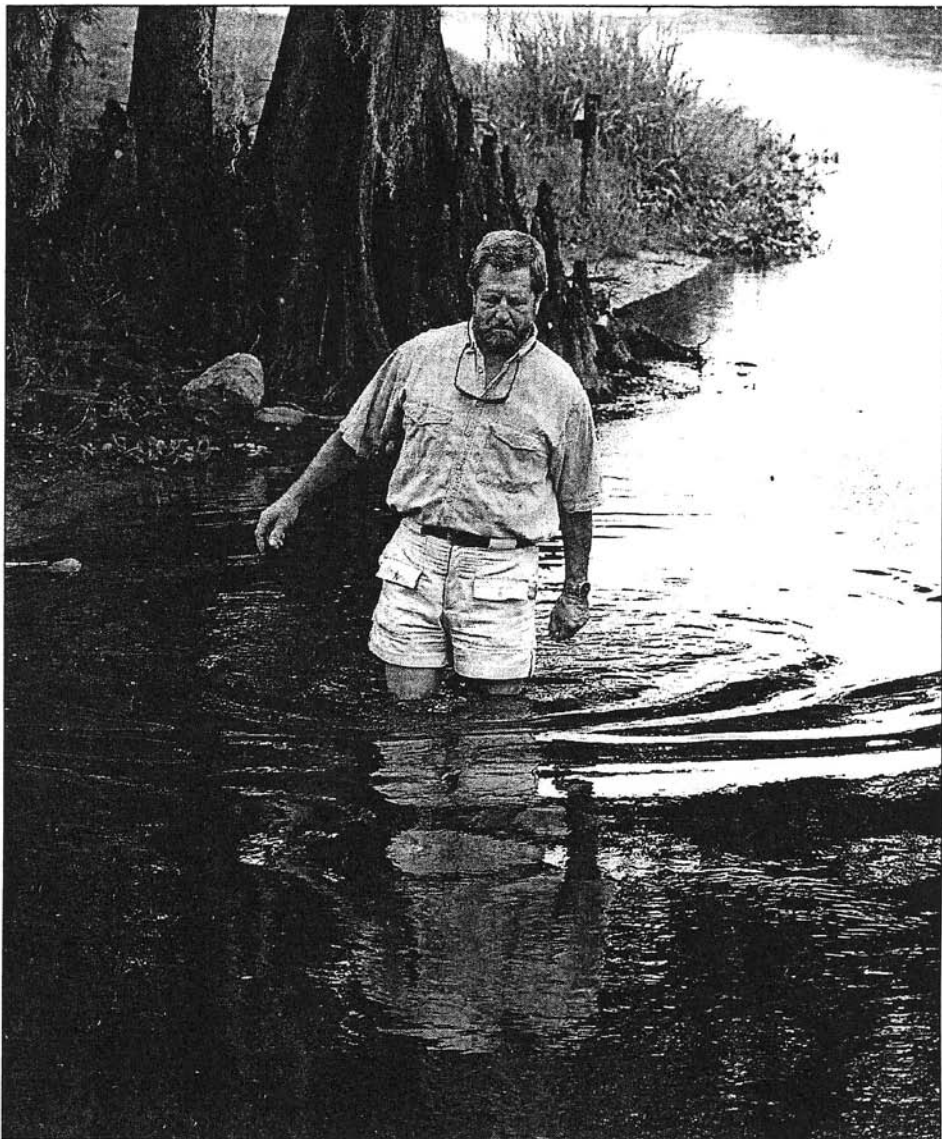
Sprinkled throughout are stories about the places, the critters, the underwater caves and the history that's played out along the river.

"It was the first great river in North America to be explored and settled by Europeans," he said. "In 1562, 50 years before Jamestown was settled, the French were rooting about on the shores of the lower river and set up a colony called Fort Caroline."

The St. Johns also served as a means for explorers to visit the interior of Florida.

"The best way to come inside was to come up the river," he said. "The river was the highway into the interior and explorers followed it for the next 400 to 500 years."

The river was Florida's first tourist attraction with its luxury hotels, boardinghouses and numerous landings, including the winter home of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Belleville said.



**SANFORD AUTHOR** Bill Belleville wades along the River. Belleville has explored every mile of Florida's longest and most misunderstood river. AP

The river was used during the Civil War and the steamship, the Maple Leaf, sunk by Confederate mines, sits on the bottom of the river south of Jacksonville.

Belleville went below to explore caves and secluded areas of the St. Johns.

"It's like a window back in time. You are stepping back several hundred years. There are

parts of that basin, when you get out there at night you can get lost," Belleville said. "To get lost in Florida is a wonderful thing, I think."

About 3.5 million people live in the St. Johns River basin, an area of 8,840 square miles.

Belleville is worried about the river's health.

"I think it is sort of teetering on

the edge of biological sustainability. Certain parts of the river are healthier than others," he said.

But for the river to return to its earlier grandeur will take a change in views about the dark waters.

"I don't think laws are going to do it. It's going to be the connection to the people that changes things."