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St. Johns River: A thirst for caring

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Every time I tell people about my travels on the St. Johns River and of the beauty it reveals, the response always is the same: "I've always wanted to take that trip." But these would-be voyagers never get there -- the obligations and distractions of modern life keep them anchored ashore.

What adventures they've missed! Sunrises so infused with swirling color that words fail. A black bear wandering along a misty riverbank. Standing in an island patch of towering yellow flowers. Chilly aquamarine springs so clear their depth can't be guessed.

With Americans becoming increasingly sedentary, our youth suffering from what is described as "nature-deficit disorder," and Florida facing critical issues about growth and land use, it is more imperative than ever that residents experience and appreciate the state's natural wonders. The St. Johns River deserves much attention, since it likely will be the future battleground for communities seeking water for thirsty residents.

In *Marjorie's Wake*, a film produced by Orlando-based Equinox Documentaries that will air on PBS this month -- and in which I have a role -- is an effort to stir people to stewardship and show them the importance of the river's fragile ecosystems and its lasting impact on the state's literature, music and art. The film retraces a 1933 trip on the St. Johns taken by Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings and her friend Dessie Smith. The two women traveled in a wooden boat from the marshy expanse of river in east [Orange County](#) north about 100 miles and then up the Ocklawaha River. Rawlings immortalized the experience in a chapter in her acclaimed book, *Cross Creek*, named for the small North Florida hamlet where she lived. It is a love poem to the river and a tale of rediscovering one's self by getting closer to the heart of nature.

"We all need, I think, a certain remoteness from urban confusion," Rawlings wrote of herself and her neighbors.

In this day and age, that may be the tonic for everyone facing the nightmare of growth. With an estimated increase of 6,000 people per week, Florida's population is expected to hit 47 million by 2050. Urban sprawl daily consumes 450 acres of forest and 400 acres of ranch and farmland, creating huge demands for roads, schools, and water supplies. Surveys show that only one-third of state residents were born here, meaning that decisions about Florida's future landscape likely will be made by people who may consider other states -- or countries -- their true homes. That makes this a critical time to help the public understand and value the state's natural features such as the St. Johns.

This film offers residents the armchair opportunity to "travel" on the river and, hopefully, find the same joy and inspiration that Rawlings discovered. From there, it is an easy step to caring about the waterway and working to ensure its best possible future. Hop aboard!

Leslie Kemp Poole is a board member of non-profit Equinox Documentaries, which produced the documentary In Marjorie's Wake. It will be aired on WMFE-Channel 24 at 9 p.m. on April 14 and at 11 p.m. on April 23.

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