



STEVEN BARNES (JULY 1999)

A liquid treasure. Just downstream from popular Wekiwa Springs State Park, where it begins, the Wekiwa River widens until it resembles a giant mirror.

A beauty in our midst



DENNIS WALL/ORLANDO SENTINEL

Survey. Colin Hobbs (from left), Terrence Tysall inspect while Andy Pacheco, Scot Whitney film.



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Filmmakers. Bob Giguere (left) of Channel 24 and Bill Belleville show river's importance and perils.

With subtlety, not shouts, a Channel 24 documentary connects viewers to the Wekiwa River by revealing its beauty, its secrets and its fragility.

In reminding Central Floridians of an irreplaceable treasure, *Wekiva: Legacy or Loss?* doesn't turn loud or garish. It doesn't go breathless. It doesn't use the annoying tricks of local TV news.

The WMFE-Channel 24 documentary, airing at 8 tonight, keeps things subtle to connect viewers to the river.

The program succeeds by surveying the Wekiwa system's beauty through pretty photography of springs, fish, gators, bears and birds. The documentary also contemplates the Wekiwa's fragility in a rapidly growing region, where 1.3 million people live within 20 miles of the river.

For newcomers to Central Florida, the program offers a valuable introduction to the 17-mile river that rolls through Orange, Seminole and Lake counties, and to the Wekiwa system that encompasses 20 springs and nearly 50 miles of streams.

The filmmakers want viewers to understand the river's history and importance, then recognize the perils of pollution, traffic, erosion, bad planning and ecological ignorance.

"The river has changed considerably. It has

become so overgrown with grass," says Eleanor Fisher, co-founder of the Friends of the Wekiwa River, an environmental group. "It's not the river it was."

But it's still a lush wilderness with many areas that remain unexplored or scientifically unknown. The program records the discovery of aquatic snails in the Wekiwa Basin.

Divers make the first entrance of a small cave at the Wekiwa Springs State Park, where they find fossils, a rare albino crayfish and colonies of an algaelike substance on the walls.

The program salutes the diversity of animals, from mosquito fish to gopher tortoises to limpkins. Alligators, which are faring well in Wekiwa waters, get the star treatment: a montage in which they build nests, reproduce and dine. Snake is on the menu.

The effort to protect the Florida black bear is crucial. If that umbrella species can be kept in the system, other species will be protected. Nearly 600 bears have died on Florida roads in 10 years.

The speakers include scientists and members of the Friends of the Wekiwa River. A poignant note is sounded by Dave Sukkert, a volunteer at Wekiwa Springs State Park, who says the park gave him comfort after his mother's death. "It means so much to me," he says.



Hal BOEDECKER

TELEVISION

This is first in-depth look at Wekiva

TV FROM E1

Writer-producer Bill Belleville calls the program advocacy journalism, though nature advocacy might be a more accurate term. There is no exposé here.

"We start with the premise that the environment is a critical and sacred place," the Sanford filmmaker said. "There is no argument, no he-said, she-said about that. Let's show how fragile and beautiful the Wekiva is."

Belleville wrote the book *River of Lakes: A Journey on Florida's St. Johns River*. With Bob Giguere of WMFE, Belleville co-produced the program,

which was funded by a grant from the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. The fine narrator is Jay Glick.

The plan is for WMFE to rerun the documentary several times, and the first repeat will be at 1 p.m. Nov. 26. Then the program might find a wider audience on other PBS stations. The videocassette can be ordered at the Web site: wekiva.river.org.

WMFE has heralded *Legacy or Loss?* as the first in-depth documentary about the river. "That's astounding to me," Belleville said. "It's one of the best chunks of wilderness in Florida. It's so accessible and so intact." The river attracts more

than 200,000 visitors a year.

Belleville described the program as a reality check. "Serious problems with the river have not been addressed," he said. "If we're not careful, we'll lose the springs that feed the river and then the river."

The filmmakers' approach was "let's create a sense of place, let's not preach," Belleville said. Without turning shrill, they make a persuasive case for the river's stewardship.

This is the most important kind of program: a public service.

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