

# Conchs help writer spread environmental message

By Steven D. Barnes

ORLANDO SENTINEL

**SANFORD** — Environmental writer, producer and activist Bill Belleville has the kind of career most people only dream about: jetting off to exotic locales to explore undisturbed wilderness, experiencing diverse cultures and earning a good living at what he loves most.

But the best part of his job, he said, is educating people about the dangers to our fragile ecosystem and helping them learn to protect it.

Belleville, 52, has written more than 1,000 magazine articles on subjects dealing with conservation, marine ecology, sustainable development and adventure travel throughout Florida, the Caribbean, Latin America and Australia. The award-winning writer recently published *River of Lakes: A Journey on Florida's St. Johns*, a nonfiction book that details his journey down the river.

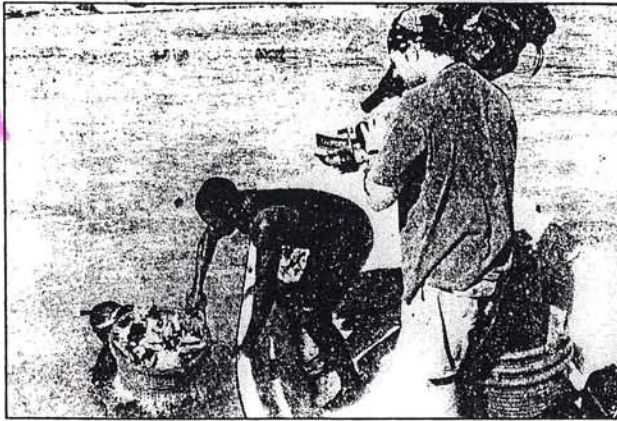
A longtime Florida resident, Belleville began his writing career at a weekly newspaper in Central Florida 25 years ago. He has worked on stories that have taken him to the bottom of water-filled sinkholes in the Dominican Republic to the Amazon River.

Recently he spent a month in Cuba with U.S. and Cuban scientists, documenting the diverse marine life that surrounds the island nation as part of the first Western expedition of its type in 40 years. Following the study, he had the opportunity to discuss environmental issues with Cuban President Fidel Castro.

During his stay, Belleville produced 17 essay-style dispatches and numerous digital photos for the Discovery Channel Web site. He also provided research assistance for a related documentary film, which aired on the Discovery Channel.

His latest film, *Conch Cowboys*, produced by BDG Productions in association with The Florida Channel, will air in the Orlando area Saturday at 6 p.m. on WMFE-Channel 24.

The 30-minute program documents the drastic decline in the number of conchs in the Florida



COURTESY OF BILL BELLEVILLE

**Close to nature.** Bob Giguere, co-producer of 'Conch Cowboys,' tapes farm-raised conchs basking in the Turks and Caicos.

Keys. The creatures were once so plentiful there that locals took them as their standard, dubbing Key West "The Conch Republic."

But overharvesting and the degrading of water quality in the shallows where they live and breed have so decimated the population of the large, pink-lipped mollusks that it is now illegal to harvest them in Florida.

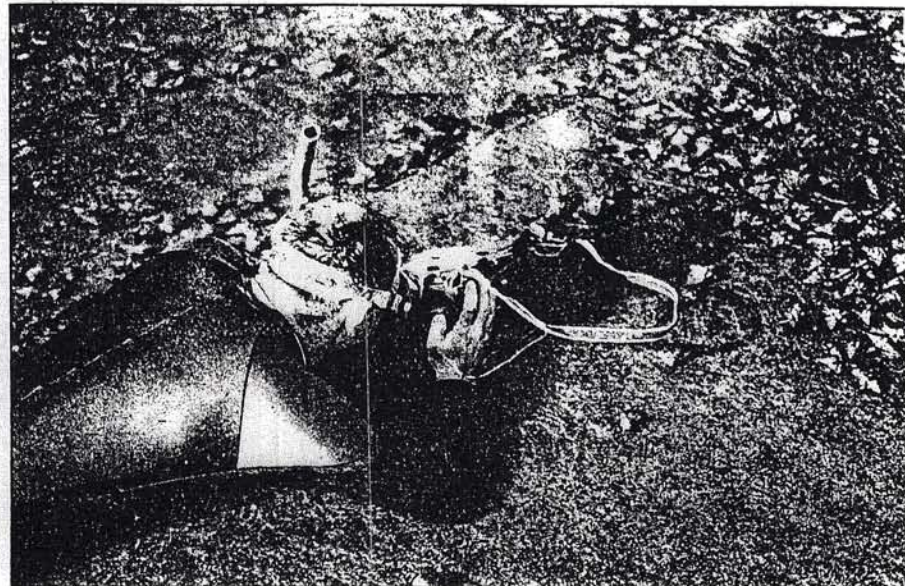
To help him understand the threats to these large snails, Belleville spent about a month conducting research on their habitat and diving in the waters off the Keys and the Turks and Caicos, a small island nation off the southeastern tip of the Bahamas where conchs still thrive in waters that resemble those of the Keys before pollution began taking its toll.

Working with top scientists and local activists, Belleville and co-producer Bob Giguere documented the threats to the conchs as well as steps that are being taken to protect them, including preservation of habitat and new methods of raising the delicacy at the Caicos Conch Farm, an aqua-farm in the Caicos.

He said the fate of the conch is more than an isolated event because the animal is an integral part of a complex food web. The conch is a food source for lobsters, octopuses, sharks and other near-shore

predators. Belleville said the conch is also an "indicator species" that serves as a sort of canary in a coal mine by giving clues about the health of the surrounding waters.

"If the conchs die off, the whole food chain is going to move someplace else," he said. "It's a domino affect."



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**Capturing conchs.** Videographer Chris Flood of The Florida Channel tapes conch divers at Ca Conch Farm, subject of a documentary television film called 'Conch Cowboys.'