

PERSPECTIVE



JOHN MORAN | JohnMoranPhoto.com

JOHN MORAN: I spent a recent day exploring the Suwannee with friends. Our first stop was the SR 6 bridge, a few miles south of the Florida-Georgia line, on June 16. For years, Anthony Ackrill and I have been planning a rafting trip all the way down the river, and we started building the raft a couple of years ago. This will not be the summer for that adventure. Anthony had no problem jumping over the river here.

WAY DOWN is the SUWANNEE RIVER

PHOTOS AND CAPTIONS BY JOHN MORAN
STORY BY CYNTHIA BARNETT
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Winding like a brown silk ribbon 250 miles from southeastern Georgia to Florida's west coast, the Suwannee River has come to symbolize our state's water bounty. The river flows from the Okefenokee Swamp, splashes down limestone shoals north of Lake City and bubbles with nearly 200 crystalline springs on its way to the Gulf of Mexico. Long famous for the song, the river is also known for the superlatives: largest watershed in Florida, biggest whitewater rapids in the state, highest concentration of freshwater springs in the world.

That's what makes the latest images from the Suwannee so disquieting. For the iconic river also embodies Florida's vanishing water. Drought is as inevitable to the state as the waves that shape our coastline. But scientists say its impact is aggravated by overuse that has dewatered the Suwannee's springs and tributaries for half a century. White Sulphur Springs was a booming tourist destination in the early 20th century, gushing up to 46 million gallons a day. In the 1970s, it became the first of the river's springs to dry up. Water managers predict one downstream, Suwannee Springs, will be the next to cease flowing.

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JOHN MORAN ON SUWANNEE SPRINGS: After photographing the Suwannee River since the 1970s (when I moved to Gainesville from Fort Myers to attend the University of Florida), I wanted to see how the river is faring now in what could be the worst drought on the upper Suwannee in nearly 60 years. Flood and drought are part of life on the river, and locals have always accepted that, but they wonder about the extremes of recent decades. This favorite gathering place tells the story dramatically. Here is Suwannee Springs in 1989 (above). I remember how lovely it was when I made this photo of my friend George Tortorelli basking in the flow through the iconic brick arch of the old spring house. This month, George checked out that same spring house (right). Hydrologists think this could be the next spring to die.



A BEAR IN THE WOODS: This bear is part of a small, isolated population surviving predominantly on private ranch land in Highlands County. This photo was made on Hendrie Ranch near the town of Venus, south of Lake Placid. Without the proactive stewardship of the ranchers, there would likely be no bears in that part of Florida, according to the late David Maehr, who started the bear study there.

Keep bears on the list

BY TOM HOCTOR
Special to the Times

I have studied the Florida black bear and worked on conservation plans for more than 20 years, and it is from this perspective that I strongly disagree with this month's vote by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission to remove it from the state list of threatened species.

The decision makes two fundamental errors:
• It treats all Florida black bears as if they were one population — they're not. Some pockets are in better and some are in far worse shape than others.
• It concludes that a rising population of bears means that they are no longer threatened. That assumption, too, is wrong and is based on a flawed interpretation of bear reproductive trends.

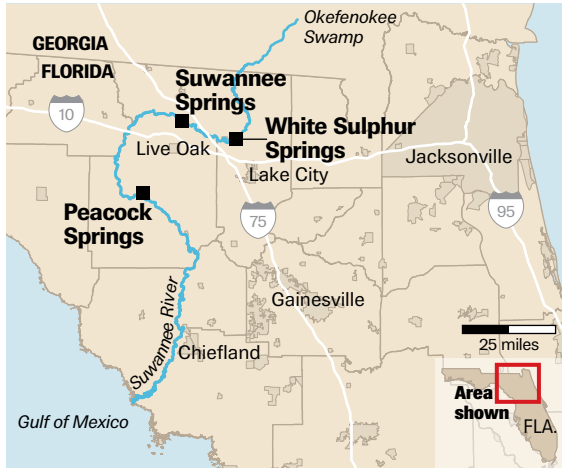
The Florida black bear (*Ursus americanus floridanus*) is a subspecies of black bear. There are four larger populations — Big Cypress, Osceola, Ocala, Apalachicola — and four smaller populations — Chassahowitzka, Highlands-Glades, Eglin and St. Johns — though some lump the St. Johns population with the Ocala population. Science-based projections predict widespread bear habitat loss and

fragmentation in the decades ahead, meaning delisting would likely be catastrophic, possibly fatal, for those four smaller populations.

Bears are very slow reproducers, and their population growth rate characteristically lags behind even significant reductions in mortality. So while it is true that most Florida black bear populations — except for Chassahowitzka — appear to be gradually increasing, the question is, Why? It's not because their habitat increased, but simply because they were no longer being hunted to death — after all, they were protected as a threatened species.

In the last two decades, Florida's human population has grown by more than 6 million. That has resulted in major habitat loss for many species, including bears, even while Florida's bear population has been increasing. In other words, more bears are sharing a shrinking space. This current increase in bear population simply will not continue as the expanding urban and suburban footprint in Florida cuts down and fragments their habitat.

I have worked on habitat delineation, conservation plans and wildlife corridors for the Florida
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Way down is Suwannee

Nature photographer John Moran has spent three decades documenting the Suwannee. He's never seen it as low as during his trek to the upper river earlier this month, also marked by smoke pluming from some of the 3,600 wildfires that have burned 197,300 acres of Florida since January. Just south of the Florida-Georgia border, dark water does not flow so much as puddle under the State Road 6 bridge. On the river's sandy banks, Ogeechee tupelo trees look like Southern belles whose fine silk vestments have gone missing; enormous hooped root balls stand exposed without their familiar watery skirts.

The National Weather Service now describes the drought straddling the Florida-Georgia border as "exceptional," ditto a growing stretch of Southeast Florida from Miami-Dade County north into Martin County. At the Florida Climate Center in Tallahassee, state climatologist David Zierden says dry conditions otherwise comparable to those in 2000 and 2001 have been exacerbated by Florida's record-breaking heat. Tallahassee seared an all-time record of 105 degrees on the 15th and is on pace with other Florida cities to break another for the month of June.

Statewide, Zierden reports that three-fourths of Florida has fallen into severe drought, making life unpleasant for people and impossible for some wildlife. Lake Okeechobee, backup water supply for 5 million South Floridians, is nearing its all-time low. Endangered Everglades snail kites abandoned nests there and left young birds to die when dropping water levels forced out the apple snails they eat. In southwest Florida, state health officials warned people should neither swim nor fish the Caloosahatchee River because of toxic algal blooms stoked by lack of freshwater. Across the state on the east coast, boat rentals were shut down last week on Blue Cypress Lake, part of the headwaters of the St. Johns River, after low water levels made navigation near impossible.

In each case, drought puts in sharp relief the human exaction on Florida's waters. At Lake O, for example, water managers were installing additional pumps last week to send more water to nearby farms. Residents and business owners in Lee and surrounding counties, where the public health warnings have been expanded, held a news conference Thursday to decry what the permitted use for one industry takes away from others reliant on a healthy Caloosahatchee.

Perhaps most surprising is the latest story on the Suwannee. David Still, mild-mannered executive director of the Suwannee River Water Management District, last month wrote an exasperated three-page letter to Kirby Green, executive director at the St. Johns District. He charged that St. Johns water managers relied on "gross misrepresentations" of impacts to the Suwannee when they granted a new groundwater permit for the Jacksonville Electric Authority to hike pumping to as much as 162 million gallons a day to meet future demands.

Federal scientists have linked a 25 percent decline in the flow of the Ichetucknee River, a tributary of the Suwannee, to pumping in northeast Florida and southeast Georgia. The long-term trend of drying springs and tributaries, according to Still and his scientists, is not the lack of rain. It is, rather, heavy groundwater withdrawals for various uses, including the sprinkling of Jacksonville lawns.

Moran, whom I've known as "Suwannee Johnny" since the day I started my first newspaper job 25 years ago, recently focused his lens on one river to give us a close-up view of Florida dry. As the Suwannee gave Floridians a song, and a symbol of bounty, so it reveals the vulnerability of our state's freshwaters.

John Moran is a nature photographer based in Gainesville.



Cynthia Barnett is senior writer at Florida Trend magazine. She is author of the books *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.* and (due out in the fall) *Blue Revolution: Unmaking America's Water Crisis.*



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JOHN MORAN ON PEACOCK SPRINGS:

The water this month (above) looks dark and uninviting, and a sludge of algae covers the spring in the background. The growth of algae is fed by waste and fertilizer. It breaks my heart to see it this way. This is not the spring I fell in love with when I first visited Peacock Springs on a long bike ride from Gainesville in the summer of 1977. I've recently gone into my archives to unearth a stash of long-buried color slides. I made this picture of the identical view 20 years ago (right). When I hear the phrase, "I want my America back," this is what I think of. I want my Florida back. I want my springs back. I want to live in a state where it would be unthinkable that the public and our political leaders would allow the loss of such a natural legacy. We need a new way of thinking about how we use water, or the Florida we say we love will scarcely be a place our children's children will want to live or work or play.



JOHN MORAN ON WHITE SULPHUR SPRINGS:

This month, the old spring house surrounds a hole in the ground with a stagnant puddle (above). It seems a distant memory that this was once a clear-flowing spring. This (left) was White Sulphur Springs in its heyday, circa 1930, as depicted on an informational display at Stephen Foster Folk Culture Center State Park. This was for many years a popular tourist destination for Northerners who came by the trainload to take the healing mineral waters. But in the 1970s, it became the first of the Suwannee's springs to dry up. These ailing springs would hardly inspire artists, musicians and poets. Stephen Foster never saw the river he made famous in 1851. But if he could travel down it a century and a half later, it would not bring to mind a happy tune ...