

Friends of Istokpoga

NewsWire

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Istokpoga Watershed added to LOWP

by Clell Ford, Highlands County Lakes Manager

Lake Istokpoga is now officially included in the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project (LOWP)- Does this change things for management of the lake?

After several years of attempts by Istokpoga residents and County staff, the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan's Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project now includes all 600 square miles of the Lake Istokpoga watershed - even those parts outside of the South Florida Water Management District. Just for a review, a watershed is defined as the area of land that drains to a given surface water body. The area of land that drains to Lake Istokpoga extends from Crooked Lake in Polk County to Lake Annie, just south of Lake Placid. Though actual watershed boundaries have long been known, the South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) considered only that portion of the

watershed that is in their boundary as draining to Istokpoga. The Southwest Florida Water Management District, which administers the remaining approximately 300 square miles of Istokpoga watershed, refers to this area as the Lake Wales Ridge, or Kissimmee Ridge region. From a practical and budgetary standpoint, these two water management districts will keep their operational and administrative definitions. The actual lake watershed boundary has long been used by agencies including the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The

Lake Istokpoga and residents and users will potentially benefit from the lake's inclusion in the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project.

change now is the acceptance of that boundary by the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan (CERP), the 100 million dollar per year project to improve water quality in Lake Okeechobee, restore some of the water flows to the historic everglades, and provide a reliable source of drinking water for residents, agriculture and industry along Florida's lower east coast.

All the politics aside, Lake Istokpoga and residents and users will potentially benefit from the lake's inclusion in the Lake Okeechobee Watershed in several areas. First is improved awareness by CERP of the issues involving Istokpoga. Though the CERP only includes one Istokpoga project, a review of the

Istokpoga regulation schedule, there are other projects north of Lake Okeechobee that may allow for improvement in Istokpoga. Additionally, now that the importance of Istokpoga as a resource to be protected is being recognized, activities for restoration of the Kissimmee River that once only appeared to consider the

river environment, now are being reevaluated to include the Istokpoga environment and concerns about the ability of the lake to sustain itself. Representatives of citizen's groups and local government are invited to discussions of these issues.

Istokpoga is already being considered for possible funding from SFWMD for vastly enhanced water quality sampling in the lake; if SFWMD approves the project, many additional sampling stations will be established and sampled in canals and near-shore areas of the lake to assess water quality. Additionally, a proposal has been sent to SFWMD to fund navigational improvements and lake access for residents during low water periods. Historically, the

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lake has been managed by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and SFWMD for flood control and water supply. Shoreline development and consumptive use are two of the results of successful flood control and water supply planning. Now the lake ecosystem, which has been unintentionally degraded by this management

strategy is being considered in its own right. Staff of Highlands County, state and federal agencies are now trying to influence the CERP process to assist the lake. One longer-term goal is restoration of a more natural

water level fluctuation regime in the lake, one that follows the wet-dry cycle. This will involve many years of work and multi-agency cooperation. Though the effort may not be completely successful, lake stewardship requires that we make the attempt.

A long range, watershed management plan for Istokpoga is very much needed. Other large watershed areas are in the process of developing these plans to coordinate interagency activities in other lake systems. Such a plan, whose formulation would require cooperation from all of the agencies listed above as well as Highlands County and local citizens, will help ensure the sustainability and long term viability of Lake Istokpoga.

[Editor: Please note that the Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc. has been very active as one of the resident and citizen groups mentioned in this article.]

Lake Istokpoga Management Committee

By Bill Dwinell

The Lake Istokpoga Management Committee (LIMC) is appointed by the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners. This purpose of this committee is to review anything that might affect Lake Istokpoga and when appropriate make recommendations to the Highlands County Commissioners.

There were two meetings of the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee this summer. The first one was June 12. There was an insufficient number of committee members present to hold a formal meeting, hence the second meeting held on July 17th. where there was a quorum and successful meeting. Since there were so many important topics that were discussed, I will cover them both for you so you can

see the kind of issues that are facing Lake Istokpoga on a daily basis.

June 12:

- Discussed the hydrilla situation, including why it wasn't dying in the southeast part of the lake - no answers were presented.
- Karen Whall, FFWCC, discussed the water temperatures and dissolved oxygen levels she is seeing in the lake.
- SFWMD briefly discussed the basin wide phosphorus study conducted by Paul Ritter of SFWMD and stated they will not be doing another study.
- The Avon Park Correctional Institute (ACPI) is still discharging wastewater (including phosphorus) into Arbuckle Creek. Their plans to change this were discussed.
- LakeWatch has received funding for one more year. We still need to be concerned, but they will be staffed for at least one more year.
- The Economic Impact study proposed by FFWCC appears to have been funded. (*see article later in this newsletter*)
- Dr. Jennifer Brunty gave us an update on the water quality in Lake Istokpoga. Water clarity is still low, phosphorus is still relatively high coming into the lake from Arbuckle Creek..
- Beacham Furse gave an update on the FFWCC revegetation project. They planted 25,000 bulrush stems and 20,000 stems of knotgrass and maidencane. The Boy Scout Troop #403 from St. Lucie and Indian River Counties helped with the planting of 2500 of the plants.
- There was a discussion about Lake Istokpoga being added to the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project. This is a significant step in getting more attention paid to the Lake Istokpoga watershed.

July 17:

- After the customary approval of the minutes and covering of open work items and review of the June 12 meeting notes we reviewed the in-lake water quality monitoring.
- Carl Smith, Highlands County Aquatic Weed Control Supervisor gave us an overview of the current status of the hydrilla treatment. Additional Sonar was applied in three locations from the

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Eagles Nest area to the mouth of the C41A canal (S-68 structure). Carl stated that as of yesterday the hydrilla had started to die. There are two additional areas of hydrilla growth that need to be treated, one on the east side of Big island and one between Big Island and Bumblebee Island. Carl stated that he had funding for an additional 200 acres for clearing trails, that could be used to treat this area if he cannot get additional funding from DEP for these areas.

- SFWMD confirmed that Lake Istokpoga has been officially added to the Lake Okeechobee Watershed Project (LOWP) and that the team was working hard to get the data for this part of the watershed added to the overall project. Official discussions at the Project Coordination Team meetings would start when the initial data gathering had been completed. This is a result of folding the Lake

Istokpoga Regulation Schedule meetings into the overall LOWP.

- Greg White, SFWMD, reported that the Phosphorus Budget and Sediment Report on the Istokpoga watershed is due back soon.

- The APCI issue was still open (see above). County Commissioner Edgar Stokes reported that the search for an alternate location for the disposal of the effluents was being looked into and the outlook was good for a land swap.

- A brief summary of the DEP Wabasso Road Dairy hearing was given. It appears that DEP will issue a modification to their permit which will allow them to increase their herd size from 1152 to 2000. Our concern is only with the potential increase in phosphorus in the watershed.

- The last item of discussion was the USACE plans for Istokpoga Canal. This will be covered in a separate article in this newsletter.

I hope this will help you understand some of the complex issues facing our beautiful lake. If you want to learn more about these issues and other issues, events and happenings, Give me a call, the directors and I can use the help. Please note that

the LIMC meetings are open to the public and are noticed the same as all county meetings.

Istokpoga Canal Update

By Bill Dwinell

At the July 17th meeting of the LIMC Wiener Cadet, USACE Project Manager for the Kissimmee Restoration and Catherine Byrd from the U. S. Corps of Engineers (USACE) office in Jacksonville, were present to inform the committee about their plans for the Istokpoga Canal. Wiener set the stage by opening with a statement that the USACE had no plan at this time. What he really meant was that there is no officially approved plan at this time.

There have been several plans proposed in the over the past several years, but none of them have ever been approved. The current "proposal" involves

widening the canal all the way from the Kissimmee River to Lake Istokpoga. This is in addition to replacing the water control structure that is currently on Istokpoga Canal (G-85) with a new structure (S-67); adding a detention pond and a tieback levee.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service spelled out a number of issues with the plan for Istokpoga Canal

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife

Service (FWS) met with the USACE on June 30 and spelled out a number of issues with the plan, including damage to the habitat of several endangered species of plants and animals.

Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc. also has issues with what we know of the proposal. One of these issues is the lack of a solid reason for doing the work on the canal. The latest proposed work would destroy only the south side of this beautiful tree lined canal all the way from Lake Istokpoga to the Kissimmee River. If you haven't been up the canal, take a look at the pictures on our web site and you will see the beauty that would be destroyed if the proposal were implemented.

Wiener Cadet informed us that he would be back to one of the next two LIMC meetings with the USACE plan for Istokpoga Canal.. We look forward to seeing it.

It is our understanding that at the time this newsletter is going to press that the USACE may be close to completing the plan and is reviewing it with FWS.

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Royce Unit of Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area Update

By Bill Dwinell

Work has been progressing at the Royce Unit of the Lake Wales Ridge Wildlife and Environmental Area. In case you don't remember this from our previous articles, it is located on the west side of Lake Istokpoga at 1630 Virginia Avenue, Lake Placid, Florida. Since the property was purchased the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) has been working to enhance the property for Florida residents and visitors.

There is now a new hiking trail, marked with white blazes, that will take hikers from the trail head, near the Royce Unit Office, right off the main road (Royce Road) to Lake Istokpoga. Parking is available at this location. The trail is about 4 miles long.

There are now four dove fields, bringing the dove field acreage to up to fifty acres.

New this year will be a general gun hunt and two spring turkey hunts.

Hunting Opportunities :

New this year will be a general gun hunt and two spring turkey

hunts. All three require a quota hunt permit, as well as a Florida Hunting license and a Wildlife Management Area Permit. A general gun hunt is a deer hunt that permits the use of all legal firearms, with any exceptions listed in the area regulations. It is also permissible to take small game in season at that time. The general gun hunt is November 15-16.

The turkey hunts are March 20-22 and April 2-4.

There will be four, three-day small game hunts, which require a Florida Hunting license, a Wildlife Management Area Permit, and a daily hunt permit. During the small game hunts, daily hunt permits are available on a first-come, first-served basis at the check station each day during the small game hunts. The small game hunts for the Royce Unit will be December 5-7, December 19-21, January 16-18, and January 23-25.

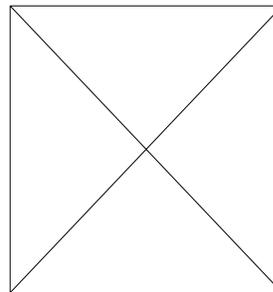
Dove hunt daily permits can be reserved the second Saturday of September between 8 am and 12 noon at the Royce Unit check station. Individuals may reserve

no more than one permit per dove hunt, and no more than two permits total. Any unreserved permits will be available on a first-come, first-served basis at the check station on the day of that particular hunt.

More information can be obtained by reading the area regulations available on the web at www.wildflorida.org/hunting/wma/SouthWest.htm or at the informational sign at the entrance to the Royce Unit.

SFWMD Okeechobee Service Center has new director

By Missie Barletto, SFWMD



The South Florida Water Management District's (SFWMD) Okeechobee Service Center has a new director. Robert M. "Bob" Brown recently replaced John J. Morgan, Jr., who has accepted a position with the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan implementation group at the

District headquarters in West Palm Beach.

A 15-year employee of the SFWMD, Mr. Brown brings a wealth of experience to the Okeechobee Service Center. Prior to coming to our area, he served as Director of the SFWMD Environmental Resource Compliance Division for several years.

"I grew up in a small community in north Florida and so I have a good understanding of the issues that confront rural communities," said Mr. Brown. "I look forward to continuing to provide a high level of service to Highlands, Glades and Okeechobee counties."

Mr. Brown invites folks to stop into the Okeechobee Service Center to introduce themselves. The office is located at 205 N. Parrott Ave. in Okeechobee, on the second floor of the Bank of America building. The telephone number is 800-250-4200 or 863-462-5260. Mr. Brown's extension is 3014.

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An Economic Analysis of the Impact of Invasive Aquatic Plants for Lake Istokpoga

By Dr. Frederick W. Bell, Professor Emeritus, Department of Economics
And Dr. Mark A. Bonn, Dedman Professor, Department of Hospitality Administration, Florida State University

The purpose of this project is to provide resource managers with an estimate of the economic value of natural resources that are negatively impacted by invasive aquatic plants resulting in economic losses. More specifically, the State of Florida appropriates monies for invasive aquatic weed control annually and wishes to evaluate the return on these expenditures. Therefore, we must know the value of functioning ecosystems that provide a range of services from boating to irrigation at a point in time sometimes called a baseline value.

One fundamental question is whether the economic benefits from the ecosystem exceed the cost of controlling the invasive aquatic plants that tend to diminish value?. The economic value of ecosystems has been extensively studied by Bell (1997; 1998) and by Bell, Bonn and Leeworthy (1998, 2001) from recreational use of artificial and natural reefs to recreational and commercial fisheries in Florida. Bell (1998) has also analyzed the economics of aquatic weeds for Lake Tarpon in Florida for the State Bureau of Aquatic Weeds with a primary emphasis on hydrilla infestation. This project will analyze data obtained from users of Lake Istokpoga in Highlands County, Florida plus information from various government and non-government agencies using a bioeconomic model of the lake to evaluate the economic benefits and cost of controlling invasive aquatic weeds. This will provide the Florida legislature; the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and the general public with a representative case study of economic returns from expenditures on invasive aquatic weed control. We shall briefly outline the details of this project below.

“The information generated by this survey will not only demonstrate what an important economic resource we currently have in Lake Istokpoga, but will also help justify the resources required both by state agencies and the public for the long-term management of the lake” - Beacham Furse FFWCC

Survey Methods: Two groups will be analyzed.

First, there will be an annual survey of 800 Lake Istokpoga users. During the survey, these users will be divided into two groups: local residents and visitors. Because of the strong seasonality where visitors fluctuate from quarter to quarter in Southeast Florida, 200 surveys of users (i.e., residents and visitors) will be conducted in each of the four quarters between July, 2003 and June, 2004. Places of survey around the lake will be determine through analysis of the SCORP (2002) (i.e.,2000 State Comprehensive Outdoor Recreation Plan) data base for Highland’s county, and from on-site meetings with research

management teams. Such interview points as boat ramps; docks, beaches, and marinas will be chosen for the random sample of users of the Lake Istokpoga. The resulting survey should have an error of plus or minus 6% for any variable collected. The survey will collect four kinds of information as follows: (1) data on user willingness to pay for ecosystem services of the lake using the Contingent Valuation Technique;

(2) user expenditures on the local market economy while using the ecosystem services of the lake; (3) the willingness to pay by users using the Contingent Valuation Technique for various levels of invasive aquatic weed control; and (4) socio-demographic and market characteristics of individuals using the lake. The contingent valuation technique asks a series of open-ended (i.e., What would you pay?) and closed ended (i.e., Would you pay \$X?) questions about the users willingness to pay and has been tested with acceptable results to the authorities and private groups in four relatively large counties in a recent study of the reef system in Southeast Florida (2002). Also, socio-demographic and behavioral information will be collected on the users to include a distinction between local residents and visitors to the area as discussed above.

Dr. Mark Bonn will be in charge of all surveying throughout the period and will be assisted by a survey team brought in from Tampa, Florida. This team presently does all the interviewing for tourism to many counties and has recently participated in similar projects as this one in the Suwannee River Area for

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the Suwannee River Water Management District, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection's Division of State Lands, Florida Springs Task Force and the St. Johns River Water Management District respectively. Dr. Bonn and his team have many years of experience interviewing users of natural resources such as those encountered around Lake Istokpoga. This primary data will be the basis upon which to evaluate the use value of the lake and its economic impact. Second, contacts with the South Water Management District; the U.S. Corps of Engineers and other relevant agencies will be made to estimate economic values flowing from flood control, navigation and the Everglades Project.

Final Products of the Research:

The research outlined above will yield four final products to the Bureau of Invasive Plant Management of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection:

1. An analysis and estimate of the economic value placed on Lake Istokpoga by all user groups as outlined above. We call this the baseline estimate since it will be for the year 2003-4 and will contain the existing level of invasive aquatic plants. To compared economic values all estimates will be expressed not only in absolute terms (i.e., annual dollars of use value; value of the ecosystem asset), but in terms of the value generated per acre of the lake system;
 2. An estimate of the economic impact (i.e., market spending produced by users; spending by others) expressed in expenditures; wages and employment generated by the users of the lake ecosystem in absolute and per acre terms;
 3. An estimate of the relation between invasive weed protection expenditures and both the use value produced and economic impact generated by this form of water pollution control using data generated by (1) and (2) above plus data from the Bureau of Invasive Weed Control;
- An estimate of the economic value expressed both in use value and economic impact terms (e.g., sales; wages and employment) produced by various levels of invasive weed control for Lake Istokpoga. All values will be expressed in both absolute and per acre terms

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for easy comparison. The final report will contain each of these elements expressed in separate, but progressively related chapters (i.e., four core chapters).

The Tourist Tax - What does it mean to you?

According to Louise England, Executive Director of the Tourist Development Council: All of the money that is collected from the tourist tax in Highlands County goes into two separate trust funds. One is for the lakes portion and the other for tourism marketing. Currently the balance in the lakes portion stands at \$13,072.82. The tourist tax has been collected since January 1 of this year, and that is a four month total.

As for the lake projects, nothing has yet been decided. There is an oversight committee from the Highlands County Lakes Association that is developing criteria and gathering ideas for projects. One very important criterion for any project on which tourist tax money can be spent is that it have public access. The committee is working on determining exactly what is meant by public access and if there are any guidelines that should be followed.

A form for submitting ideas to the this committee has been created. Contact Debra Worley at dworley@htn.net for a copy of the form if you have suggestions for projects on Lake Istokpoga.

Fall Meeting

November 13, 2003 will be our fall meeting. All of you snowbirds should be back in town by then. **This**

meeting is very important and we hope you will come out to hear the issues facing our lake.

Our guest speakers will be Jennifer Brunty, Natural Resource Specialist with the Highlands County Soil and Water Conservation District, and Clell Ford, the Highlands County Lakes Manager. As I am sure you all know, septic systems are a key source of pollution to our lakes and streams. Jennifer and Clell will conduct a seminar for us, as responsible homeowners on the proper care and maintenance of our septic systems. There will be a video, slide show, as well as a folder of educational materials for each participant.

Susan Gray, Ph.D., SFWMD, Director of the Lake Okeechobee Division, will speak to us about the Lake

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Okeechobee Protection Plan, from the perspective of Lake Istokpoga. This is very important to Lake Istokpoga.

Our meeting will begin promptly at 7:00 PM at the Lorida Community Center, Lorida, Florida. We hope you will join us a few minutes early for refreshments. We will start serving refreshments at 6:45 PM. Come out and join us. Bring your neighbors and anyone else that enjoys the benefits of our beautiful lake with you.

FLOW - A project of The Nature Conservancy

By Robert Nelson,
Conservation Projects Director, The Nature
Conservancy (TNC)

This is a summary of what TNC's Florida Lands & Outstanding Waters (FLOW) program would like to see in the Arbuckle Creek area.

The TNC would like to focus on the area from Avon Park Air Force Range (APAFR) south along Arbuckle Creek, starting from the north and moving south. Our goal would be to restore the creek flood plain on private and public lands along the length of the creek between Lake Arbuckle and Lake Istokpoga. This would entail

disabling the levees that have been erected along the creek on both sides, allowing the water to enter these old flood plains and flow through these marshy areas, hopefully leaving behind excess nutrients and restoring the natural wetland functions. The wildlife habitat value of these marsh areas is very high, as is the grazing value. We hope to negotiate permanent conservation easements with the ranch owners which will allow the restoration of these marshes. We also intend for the ranchers to remain in productive business on these areas. The easements will restrict most uses of the marsh areas including grazing except when the marshes are dry. Short periods of rapid rotation grazing will be allowed during the dry season. The ranchers will be required to use best management practices [BMP's] for cow/calf operations as prescribed by the Institute of Food and Agricultural Services (IFAS). This will include meeting nutrient

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outflow requirements. Their performance will be monitored for compliance. Our concepts are backed up by scientific analysis of previous wetland restoration projects we have undertaken, and by other scientific modeling exercises related to nutrient uptake of healthy wetlands.

We hope to implement FLOW type projects all over the Kissimmee/ Lake Okeechobee watershed at a scale large enough to substantially improve the valley's ability to absorb nutrients and store water, and provide natural habitat for an entire suite of Florida's wildlife.

The Nature Conservancy is the world's largest private, international conservation group, with headquarters located in Arlington, VA. Founded in 1951, our mission is to preserve plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive. Our 1 million members have helped us protect more than 116 million acres of habitat throughout the world. We own and manage 1,400 preserves — the largest system of private nature sanctuaries in the world.

In Florida, the Conservancy has protected more than 1 million acres of natural lands, advocated and supported public funding for conservation at the state and local levels, and influenced the management of conservation lands in public and private ownership. Founded in 1961, the chapter's work is supported by more than 44,000 individuals, foundations and corporations who share our conservation commitment.

Lake Level Going Up!

As most of you already know, the level of Lake Istokpoga is regulated by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). If you haven't noticed, we are now in the phase of this regulation schedule where the lake is being allowed to refill. By the time you get this newsletter, it may be nearing the winter pool level of 39.5 feet MSL.

With all the rain we have had, I see no reason why it won't stay at 39.5 ft. until spring when the regulation schedule again calls for it to be lowered.

See <http://www.saj.usace.army.mil/h2o/plots/isthp.gif> for a up-to-date look at where the lake is compared to the regulation schedule.

Happy fishing and boating!