

THE RIVER RETURNS INTERVIEW

Kirby Green

Executive Director,
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Kirby Green is the executive director of the St. Johns River Water Management District, a position to which he was appointed on July 11, 2001. A former deputy secretary of the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), he is a native of Jacksonville, Florida.

The River Returns web documentary team met with Kirby in his office in Palatka, Florida, in January, 2005.

The River Returns web documentary can be viewed at:

<http://www.theriverreturns.org>

Question: If someone bequeathed your agency unlimited funds with no strings attached, what would you do with the money?

Green: If I was king for a day and had all the money I would need, the first things I would address are storm water issues on the river. And I would move everybody that currently is on septic systems to central wastewater treatment systems. We've got to do something to correct our development past. The storm water issue and the septic system issue are two major components of a non-point source puzzle that we have to solve. That's where I would spend my money.

Question: The premise of The River Returns film is that the St. Johns is, in fact, returning to some former version of its glorious self. Do you agree?

Green: There are a number of different ways the river is returning. One is an environmental return. For so long we (the state) looked at the river as a way to dispose of waste and move water away from the land so that the land becomes a better mechanism for development. That same water resource that we tried to move away is a precious resource that we need to protect and save in terms of supply for future generations. There is the realization that Floridians will use that water in the future as a drinking water source. We need to improve the quality of the water coming into the river in order to preserve it.

Question: Do all stakeholders -- developers, farmers, growers, commercial fishermen, environmentalists, etc. -- have equal claim to the river?

Green: State law requires that we first look at the environment. That's why we have to establish minimum flow levels to be set. Environmental concerns are one of the highest priorities along the river.

Question: Are there major success stories in terms of this river's return?

Green: Look at history of the upper basin. We, as a state, reduced the flood plain. We diked it, and we encouraged agricultural activities along that floodplain. In the last 20 years, the move has been to restore the floodplain to improve quality of water coming into the river. This restoration is one of the three largest restoration projects in the world (behind the Everglades, and a project in Brazil). The upper basin is a success story. In the lower basin, with the work done over the last seven to eight years, we've been improving the treatment of wastewater going into the basin, removing nitrogen, and taking discharges out of river. These are success stories that have improved the quality of water in the lower basin.

Question: What issues are paramount in this river's future?

Green: The biggest issue we have facing us is future water needs for a growing population. The river is going to play a major role in allowing us to meet our water supply needs. So now, there's a need to protect these waters for water supply. That's a major shift in the way we look at the river.

Question: There's a real pessimism among some people we've talked to on the river about its future. They seem to think that no matter what you do, the St. Johns River is doomed because of exponential growth. What would you say to them?

Green: I see it as an opportunity. There's no doubt that the population in this northeast Florida area along the river is growing and going to continue to grow. But we've learned a lot about how growth should occur and the way you should develop. We have more opportunities now to help correct some of the old development issues through new development as they impact the river. Things like the way we treat storm water runoff, and the way we protect the river. One of the big issues we face is the realization that in the next 30 to 50 years, we may get as much as 200 million gallons of water a day out of the river -- a future drinking water source -- to support growth in the area. Our charge is to protect the river, wetlands and spring flows in the area. We have been so dependent on groundwater flow for drinking water. We're about at the end of that sustainable

level. We need to go to an alternative source of drinking water to meet our needs so we don't have a detrimental impact to the environmental benefits of wetlands and lake levels and spring flows, and ultimately, river flows in the area by groundwater withdrawals.

Question: Farmers and growers along the river say they feel like they have targets painted on their back in terms of being whipping posts for all the rivers' problems. How do you address that attitude?

Green: If you go back and look at the Federal Clean Water Act, there's always been a realization that non-point sources of pollution have been a concern. But since the early '70s, we've chosen to look at industrial point-source problems. Realistically, if you look at pollutant loading in the river, probably 40 to 50 percent came from Industrial point sources, and 50 to 60 percent came from lawns, septic systems, and other non-point sources. We've tried to get industry to improve their discharges. The environmental community spurred the environmental agencies into starting to look at TMDLs (total maximum daily loads) for water bodies and streams. What TMDLs do is make us pay attention to non-point sources, requiring local governments to look at the way they're treating storm water and wastewater. These next few years, you're going to be seeing non-point sources play a larger role in regulation. We're beginning to focus on those issues, statewide and regionally. There's more and more discussion about the ways in which we do development around those parameters: the way development is occurring around the Wekiva basin, for instance, and its impact on Wekiva Springs. We're looking at the permits we issue to improve water quality and water recharge potential. There's a shift from the point source as the major concern, to non-point sources in terms of quality and quantity of the water.

Question: With non-point sources of pollution -- such as fertilizers and pesticides from residential lawns -- becoming a new focus for your agency, are there lawn police in Florida's future?

Green: It's an education process. Take lawn watering, for example. Everyone used to think you had to water five days a week to have a nice lawn. Research shows that two days a week is probably the healthiest way. We changed from heavy watering of grasses to more drought-tolerant species. We need to go through the same educational processes with regard to fertilizers and pesticides. You'll see more Best Management Practices adopted in terms of lawns in neighborhoods. Education is the key to any of this: education, education, and education.

Question: Who are the best watchdogs of this river?

Green: Without a doubt, it's the citizens. They all have a role to play. All have a vested interest in the river. They've got to come together, hopefully with us as a catalyst. I think it takes agricultural and environmental and development interests along with ecotourism and commercial fishing interests, all to come together and start addressing their concerns to improve the water. It's a big job and it takes more than any one agency to do that.