

The Newsletter for all the Friends of Lake Apopka

# Making it **CLEAR**



The mission of FOLA is the restoration of Lake Apopka and surrounding wetlands

## Message from the President - Winter 2010

I am the third FOLA president. We began with Jim Thomas and Jack Amon and then came me. We all lead with our strengths, are passionate about our goals and maintain a shared sense of values that allows us to play to each other's strong points without intimidation. We agree on the importance of a strong advocacy group, the ability to compromise when necessary without weakening the purpose and the necessity of setting long and short term positive goals that create and maintain a vested interest in the restoration of Lake Apopka and the North Shore Restoration Area. We believe the lake and marshes will be restored.

I have asked both past presidents to write a letter for this newsletter expressing their Lake Apopka experience to you because we have been through a lot and we have dedicated ourselves to the long haul. We know we have more roads to travel. We know we are not in this alone. However, I for one figured that by this point, with the results we are getting from the data, that the battles would be fewer and the restoration efforts would be allowed to continue unfettered. But no. We continue to debate opposing viewpoints and spend precious time and energy in a negative direction.

I got involved in FOLA in 1996 with the development of the Oakland Nature Preserve and both projects have come to represent an extension of who I am and what I believe in. At times I get overwhelmed. I get excited, but also frustrated and even a little zealous. I have learned a lot about science and people and the nature of politics -- enough to know that even in the best of times someone is going to be hollering about something. One of our longtime members put it best when he said, "Any reading of the history of Lake Apopka restoration going back to the 1960's will show a persistent lunatic fringe of people, a cast of characters, that love to embrace fly-by-night solutions and re-visit restoration strategies of ill repute. They contaminate the dialogue and are, in some ways, the equivalent of unsafe sex". Now, this may sound harsh but I have to tell you, though exaggerated (a little), it isn't too far from the truth.

In the 18 years FOLA has been incorporated we have sat down with a cast of characters and gone through numerous plans, even to be haunted recently with the same scheme that got us together in the first place. Our main defense has held true from the beginning – stick with the science. And, yes it is technical, although once learned it can be taught. It can

also be taken out of context and be misleading if not understood, which can be very devastating to the project as a whole (and funding) if not corrected.

I believe we can all understand the frustration downstream as the restoration continues. (Time and patience do not always make the best partners). The problems in this system were years in the making and they will not be resolved quickly simply because we have acknowledged there is a problem. That was just the first step. There is a plan. Data supports the plan. We continue to see improvement.

It is for all these reasons and more that FOLA has once again taken a strong position addressing the Harris Council on their very negative 2009 Report. Our position paper is on our website at [www.fola.org](http://www.fola.org) along with the responses from staff at SJRWMD and the report summary. If you are confronted with making a decision or drawing an opinion on this issue I ask you to please do a little homework and make your opinion be an educated one. Don't hesitate to call – if I can't answer your question, I know who can.

*Mona Phipps, FOLA President*



*FOLA Presidents, Jack Amon, Mona Phipps and Jim Thomas. Providing 18 years of leadership, Jim was the first President and FOLA founder along with Jack who stepped down to become the first president of ONP.*

## FOLA: The Beginning

I remember fishing in Lake Apopka as a child, driving here from Tampa with my Dad, staying in fish camp cabins and catching lots of fish. When I moved to Orlando in the 1960's, I was appalled at what had happened to this great resource. Many of us were disgusted by the continued pollution and damage to the lake but found it difficult to overcome the strong agricultural lobby and the fact that the north shore farms were of great economic importance to the area.

Finally, after a ridiculous project, proposed by a renegade biologist, was presented to the legislature for funding, a local group of us decided to take action. We were able to assemble a number of advocates for restoration, vowing to not only stop the legislative bill but to continue working toward stopping on-going pollution and restoring the lake. This was in 1990-1991. We were able to kill the legislative bill in committee and then began to assemble a strong advocacy group which we named the Friends of Lake Apopka.

We had already learned the importance of strong environmental advocacy which must depend on large numbers of active, educated and realistic people. After all, our task is to solve biological problems with political solutions so numbers and facts are important.

We had learned from other groups that, to be really successful in appealing to the public and the politicians, we had to follow the science of the problem, not the emotions. We had to study and understand all the facts about the problem and educate our membership about them. We learned you can't just protest against a problem or group but it is important to suggest solutions that are realistic, even if it often involves compromise. Finally, we knew we had to get our membership to respond to the political group responsible for dealing with the problem at hand. Numbers count!

When we presented our proposals to our local legislative delegation about 1994, we got a good response and the action began. The final outcome was bigger than we expected: the only proposal that could work was to buy the farms and close them down. This was hard to support because of the huge economic impact to the area but we finally had to bite the bullet and support this decision.

The rest is history. In spite of some huge problems, the process began to work as the former farm lands were re-flooded and restoration back to the original marshes began and continues to improve. As this happens slowly we have to remind ourselves the lake underwent 50 plus years of heavy pollution and that the magnitude of this project is one of the largest ever attempted. The recovery is bound to be a slow process but the fact is, Lake Apopka is recovering. To a newcomer looking at the lake today, the brownish-green color looks bad, but to those of us who saw it in the mid-nineties when it was florescent green, it looks pretty good!

One of the things we didn't expect was the need for continual advocacy. Most of us assumed that when the real restoration began, we could disband and go back to our families, friends, businesses and hobbies, but this is not the case. Part of our duties now involves keeping the public involved and updated on the progress and problems. Surprisingly, we still have battles to fight as new threats to the restoration appear and our advocacy remains important.

We have supported many issues, like getting a phosphorus limitation rule passed, fighting surface water withdrawals from the lake and

on-going efforts from outside sources to withdraw funding from the restoration program. We also spend a lot of rewarding time advocating for positive projects like funding experimental restoration projects, adopting development design guidelines, a greenways and trails master plan that highlights a trail all the way around the lake, and development of ecotourism opportunities. We also started the Oakland Nature Preserve to use for environmental education programs about the ecology of West Orange County and Lake Apopka.

Getting all this done by volunteers has been an amazing process! The fact that the data shows a slow but steady recovery is our reward!

*Jim Thomas, Past President, 1991-1993, 1997-2003*

## Overcoming the Odds

18 years ago FOLA began its advocacy for "Making It Clear." My first contact with Lake Apopka was in the 1970's, a lost and "dead" lake. Compared to the vibrant and healthy Windermere and Clermont Chains, the story was depressing and seemingly hopeless. A few were benefitting by polluting the lake at the expense of the broader community over a fifty year period. It seemed to be such an outrage, but only a handful of individuals helplessly raised a protest. Political power was with the concentrated economic interests. With this history, FOLA was conceived.

I remember some of the challenges of FOLA in the 1990's: convincing some of the muck farmers that we were not going to disappear, farmers winning in Tallahassee, the reversal of the Waste Load Allocation Rule (Phosphorous Limitation Rule) the short sighted and myopic editorials of the Orlando Sentinel, the sudden death of over 1,000 white pelicans, and the invasion of thousands of mice to the north shore.

On the other side of the ledger it is worth recalling some bright moments: the video history FOLA produced of the lake and distributing 20,000 copies of a Sentinel supplement on the lake to all the fifth graders in Central Florida, the support of the West Orange Chamber and West Orange Times who viewed the restoration as a regional economic development issue, the toasting with FOLA Cola by the Florida Legislature as the Central Florida political leadership guided the approval of 100 million dollars to initiate the buyout of the farms and a supporting nutrient budget.

Others can speak more fluently to the challenge and successes of the 2000's, which are ongoing and significant. The lake is healthier every year. Soon the Loop Trail around the 52 mile perimeter of the lake will be a reality. It is a remarkable story.

I think what we must learn from this noble effort is that our best hope to solve some of the several complex problems in modern life, is to follow the FOLA example. Take the long view:

- patient persistence
- educate ourselves and engage the broader community
- be guided by sound, peer reviewed science

The job is never done. The health of Lake Apopka is significantly improved and the restoration is on a path toward ecological health. Our system can work, and sometimes it works without large amounts of money if it is driven by dedicated volunteers.

*Jack Amon, Past President 1994-1996*

## Restoration Update

Keeping up with and understanding the data from the restoration of the lake and north shore restoration area is a critical role for FOLA and our supporters. A restoration project of this magnitude is new science and although there are many intricate formulas, focus on the 'big picture' shows continued success and good reason to keep faith with the staff of SJRWMD as our goals for a restored system evolve.

FOLA makes it a point to set up education booths at available public events throughout the year as well as the use of our website to share learned knowledge with the public. Misinterpretation of scientific data is often a stumbling block scientists and researchers have to debate to stay on track, which is why we maintain our commitment to learn, teach and follow the science. We believe good data will prevail, given time.

### Marsh Flow-way:

From Lake Apopka project manager David Walker's monthly report, we know that the average flows through the marsh flow-way system have increased over the last month to about 90 cubic feet per second (cfs). Both C cells are now operating at low flow conditions (20cfs) and alum is being used in some cells to mitigate release of soluble phosphorus due to cell drawdown, cell maintenance and vegetation senescence during fall periods. Because the incoming lake water quality has improved in the previous months, at present the general performance of the flow-way is decreased. When lake total phosphorus (TP) is low, the performance of the marsh flow-way is low, as mass loading of the flow-way is reduced.

Data from September to October show that the operating cells retained 4.7 metric tons of suspended solids a day but released 47 kilograms of total nitrogen (TN) per day and 4.2 kilograms TP a day. (Damage done by phosphorous and nitrogen is accelerated algae growth as fertilizer.) In October, the lake concentration of total phosphorus averaged 76 parts per billion (our long-term goal is 55 ppb)! When the farms were active it frequently averaged over 200 ppb!

### Shad Harvesting on Lake Apopka:

Shad harvesting on Lake Apopka began this year on October 1st. To date, the fisherman have caught about 350,000 pounds of shad this season. The catch has dropped substantially and SJRWMD planned to stop harvesting at the end of November. There are not enough shad to catch, which is a good thing. In February, SJRWMD plans to shift the harvest to Newnans Lake to complete the research effort designed to document the effectiveness of shad harvesting on improving lake water quality.

Sunshine bass have been released into the lake and will feed on the smaller shad, which is a major part of their normal food chain.

### North Shore Restoration Area (NSRA):

Restoration of wetlands on the NSRA reduces stormwater discharges to Lake Apopka and related nutrient loading, accelerating the restoration of the lake. Counting the Duda property, SJRWMD has re-flooded about 5,000 acres. An additional four thousand acres of soil remediation in the NSRA was completed with deep plowing in May of 2009. Infrastructure construction has begun on the next phase and additional infrastructure is planned to begin as soon as permits are received. Once all necessary permits are received this will allow completion of the infrastructure this fiscal year. This stage is very important because

a biological assessment must be completed and, with U.S. Fish and Wildlife agreement, saturation and restoration flooding may begin creating a wide range of water levels.

Re-flooding began in approved areas in May 2009. Initial testing of fish tissue indicates low levels of pesticides. This is important because if this holds for the necessary time period, it confirms that the deep plowing as soil inversion was successful in that area. The data from the re-flooded area become part of the next biological assessment to flood additional acres. Monitoring of soil pesticide concentrations will be ongoing to ensure that pesticide levels are below the target levels. A future goal of the re-flooding is plant coverage and creation of habitat.

### Other Restoration News:

The Lake County Water Authority is planning to dredge in Lake Beauclair and some canals off the lake for restoration purposes (plan is to dredge about 1.5 million cubic yards of material). They plan to dispose of the spoil on Cells F & G, north of the flow-way. This will help the ultimate restoration of these parcels by capping the pesticide contaminated sediments with cleaner material and reducing the depth to create a shallow marsh. LCWA is in the permitting phase and do not anticipate beginning the project until October 2010 if everything goes as proposed.

A recent study of mercury contamination in Florida, reported in the Orlando Sentinel, shows mercury levels in Lake Apopka fish significantly lower than other water bodies in the state, including the Suwannee River and Lake Toho. Interesting....

## We Have a Winning Ticket!



Raffle winner's Richard and Barbara Bricker show off their new bikes after winning the raffle Saturday, October 24 at the Oakland Heritage Arts and Crafts Festival. The raffle was held by the Friends of Lake Apopka to benefit the Oakland Nature Preserve. FOLA purchased one of the bikes and Dennis Jones, owner of Wheel Works in Winter Garden donated the second bike. It was the first time the Bricker's had been to Oakland, "We came over to rent bikes and ride the trail and ended up spending the day at the festival instead," said Richard, "now we can come out and ride the trail as often as we like." FOLA was able to donate \$1,100 to ONP, \$600 of which is ear marked for the intern program for the continued archiving of the FOLA records. Once the documentation is completed the records will be made available on the FOLA and ONP websites as well as hard copies in the ONP classroom.

## Keeping you in the Loop

### A call for Support

Sometimes it feels like we are moving along inch by inch as we work to complete the Lake Apopka Loop Trail. We began in 1999 with a goal, a grant, the professional help of Land Design Innovations and determination. Well, the plan is complete, the money well spent, goal in sight and the determination is still as firm as ever. We managed to find renewed energy as we merged common goals with the Green Mountain Scenic Byway. We are closer now than we have ever been and, as the enthusiasm mounts, a new-found determination comes to light.

To date, St. Johns River Water Management District has approved an 18 mile trail across the north shore restoration area, Orange County has approved a trailhead at Magnolia Park for entrance into the north shore area that is scheduled to be completed by December 2011, Lake County has connector trails on the books and the Green Mountain Scenic Byway has completed the engineering plan for the trailhead off of C.R. 455 (the Byway) in Lake County and will soon begin their quest for funding.

Hurdle? On December 15 Orange County parks and recreation staff will be presenting to the commission cost for land acquisition for the connection from the West Orange Trail to Magnolia Park. Help! We need support to make this happen. Please write, call or email your commissioner and let them know you are in support of acquisition of the land necessary for completion of the 4-mile trail from the West Orange Trail to Magnolia Park. Construction of the trail may be years in the future but having the land is the first step. This 4-mile stretch is the last section necessary for completion of the loop trail.

## The History of Lake Apopka

A talk, presented by Jim Thomas, will be given on the History of the Lake Apopka basin on Thursday, January 28 at 7:00 P.M. in Tanner Hall. This will be a joint meeting of Friends of Lake Apopka and the Oakland Nature Preserve and the public is invited.

This talk will be a complete history of the Lake Apopka basin, starting with the Paleo-Indian periods beginning about 13,000 years ago, covering the cultural history that included the arrival of early settlers and continuing up to today. This interesting review covers many changes that occurred in Florida, including climate changes, changing cultures and a look at how our ancestors lived.

Studies are underway currently to cover the archeological history of the Oakland Nature Preserve site as well as the cultural history of the Town of Oakland beginning with the first settlers around 1840. Many of the artifacts discovered will be on permanent display in the ONP Museum. Interested local residents are urged to attend the talk and bring any artifacts they may have to show and, perhaps, to donate to the ONP Museum.

## The Return of the Iron Bird

Fact or rumor -- are plans for a (another) airport (airpark) on the North Shore of Lake Apopka once again surfacing? FOLA's position remains firm: Birds and planes don't mix!

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## Scenes of Lake Apopka Photographs by Mike Brinkley



If you haven't made it into the Edgewater Hotel in Winter Garden yet to see this great exhibit you may want to plan to do it soon. The exhibition features the work of wildlife photographer Mike Brinkley, ONP board Member. Through these images captured along the shores of Lake Apopka, Brinkley combines his life-long passion for nature with the art of photography.

In addition to Brinkley's work, the exhibit provides a brief look at the history of Lake Apopka. The once crystal-clear lake was a source of life to the Native American Timucua tribe and the "largemouth bass capital" to anglers from around the world. Now it is among Florida's most polluted waters. Thanks in large part to dedicated citizens who advocated for its restoration, the lake is currently in the midst of a massive clean-up process.

Scenes of Lake Apopka is a collaborative project of several West Orange non-profit organizations that work to create awareness of and appreciation for the resources of the area:

- Winter Garden Heritage Foundation promotes architectural and historic preservation and cultural activities through two museums, a research library and the Garden Theatre in historic downtown Winter Garden.
- Oakland Nature Preserve, a 128-acre nature preserve located west of Oakland, promotes understanding of local natural ecosystems.
- Friends of Lake Apopka, a citizen's advocacy group formed in 1991, works to advance the restoration of the lake.

Exhibited prints are available for sale and the proceeds benefit all three organizations. I am sure there is someone on your Christmas list who would appreciate the beauty of our local ecology as captured by Brinkley. Call the Winter Garden Heritage Foundation at 407-656-3244 to inquire about purchases.