

"Our hearts are deeper than their pockets . . . "

by John Moran
Speak Up for Florida's Waters
Silver River State Park
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My fellow Floridians,
We gather here today to celebrate, to commiserate and to invigorate.

We gather here on the banks of the great Silver River, fed by what once was the world's biggest spring, a cold and quenching wonder known as the Niagara Falls of the South.

We gather to speak up for Florida's Waters.

We invoke the sky above, which blesses us with rain, and the aquifer below, which nurtures us with an abundance of life-giving water.

We honor the spirits of those who have come before, those nameless natives whose memory lives on in the names of our sacred waters--Ichetucknee and Wakulla, Withlacoochee and Aucilla, Ocklawaha and Pithlachocco.

And we acknowledge those who will follow, whom we pray will remember us for our wisdom, and not judge us for our folly.

Florida, we need to talk, and though it pains me to see what's happening to our beloved waters, I love it that the conversation we are having about water and Florida's future has finally moved to its rightful place at center stage.

In the beginning, there was water. Lots of water. And the peninsula we call home emerged, blessed with an abundance of rivers and lakes and springs, and it was good.

And for the next 10,000 years, a stunning constellation of freshwater springs, all fed by the mighty Floridan Aquifer and its caverns measureless to man, flowed freely to the sea.

And then, there was us.

In the early days of our statehood, there was water, water everywhere, and the prevailing view of those in power became "how are we going to get rid of this stuff so we can develop the place," and thus was born an era of technological mastery in which water in Florida was seen more as scourge than stuff of life.

Fast forward a century and a half and the conversation has taken a decidedly different turn. We have reached the point beyond which our waters can no longer bear the impact of our pollutants and remain healthy.

Compounding the situation is the reality of our water budget deficit. We are living beyond our means, and our withdrawals are exceeding deposits in our bank of liquid assets.

As the death of our springs and the sliming of our rivers have made clear, we have reached a tipping point and Mother Earth is telling us loud and clear that she's had quite enough of cleaning up our mess.

There was a time in Florida when it seemed that the promise of eternally clean and abundant

water stretched on like the endless summer, but that era ended long ago.

And there was a time when we connected more to the pulsing of the planet and the cycle of the seasons than to our mobile devices. But that era has ended too.

And what we're left with now is a world in which our technology has outpaced our wisdom, and consumption is the new religion.

Yes, my fellow Floridians, we are the people who consume, on average, 160 gallons of water per person per day; our enormous water footprint spurred on by an economy that profits greatly when we conflate our wants with our needs.

Aah yes, the economy. The source, it seems, of that which matters most, to most in the halls of power.

But consider that ecology precedes economy, and not just in the dictionary.

Here in Florida, there can be no healthy economy without a healthy environment, a truism that seems to have escaped our political leadership.

I know that our current crop of legislators didn't cause Florida's water problems. They've just made them worse. Our watered-down water laws are the result of 40 years of lax enforcement and "reasonable" people arguing that there's either not a problem or that we can't afford to fix it.

And I grant you that Rick Scott isn't responsible for the sliming of our waters, but as governor he is the lead official responsible for the cleanup.

The reality is that many of our rivers and lakes and springs are dying. The further reality is that "dying" is too soft a word. Dying is what happens when trees grow old and fall down.

No, the reality is that we are killing our rivers and lakes and springs. And while we may avoid accepting that reality, we cannot escape the consequences of our crimes against nature. None of us wanted this to happen. And nobody here is saying that Rick Scott has declared war on clean water in Florida.

But if a foreign power had done to Florida's waters what we've managed to do by ourselves, we'd literally be up in arms, ready to do battle to defend our precious waters.

Our rivers and lakes and springs are a mess and we can't blame our problems on the EPA or an act of God and point at the drought as we cross our fingers and pray for rain.

It wasn't God who overpumped the aquifer. It wasn't God who dumped all that poop and fertilizer into our groundwater. And it sure as hell wasn't God who politicized and eviscerated the agencies charged with protecting our priceless natural legacy.

Nope, that would be we the people, and the people we elected, who are responsible for this mess.

And so I say to Gov. Scott, Florida is a special place, but we are not special people. We are no more or less special, and our needs are no more or less important, than those who have come before or those who will follow.

Governor, what makes you think that we're so special? What makes you think that we--the current crop of Florida residents who are here today but will assuredly be gone tomorrow--that

we should be the ones to deplete the aquifer and poison our rivers and lakes and springs before we ship off to the hereafter?

I reject the cultural narcissism implicit in this attitude that essentially says to the future: "It sucks being you."

I know you think you're doing us a favor, but I beseech you, Mr. Governor. Not In Our Name, Sir. Not In Our Name.

We need a new way of thinking about water here in Florida, or the Florida we say we love will no longer be a place our children's children will want to live or work or play.

And we need leadership that understands that resistance to change is no longer an option.

In short, we need a Blue Revolution, to borrow from the title of the book by water journalist Cynthia Barnett, a book that really ought to be required reading for every Floridian who uses water.

We need our conservative governor to affirm the belief, by word and by deed, that "conserve" is not a four-letter word.

Here is my challenge to you, Governor Scott. Next year, the eyes of the world will be upon us as Florida commemorates the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Ponce de Leon.

This is your moonshot moment, Governor. In 1961, President John F. Kennedy rallied the nation and in less time than it has taken for our water management districts to establish Minimum Flows and Levels, Florida was at center stage and the world watched in wonder as America succeeded in launching and landing a man on the moon.

Think big, Governor Scott. We must clean up our waters. I know it can be done. We are not just a nation of dreamers. We are a nation of doers.

Our rivers and lakes and springs are world-class treasures deserving of world-class protection. I urge you, Governor, to work with the bipartisan leadership of the Florida Conservation Coalition to create and promote a comprehensive package of legislation that will insure that Florida will one day be able to reclaim its rightful stature as a place whose natural abundance and clean waters is once again its calling card to the nation and to the world.

And I suggest that you call this visionary piece of leadership The Fountains of Youth Florida Springs Restoration Act of 2013.

Be the visionary, Governor Scott. Inspire us to embrace change, not because we are governed by law but because we are governed by conscience. We know that sacrifices must be made. Be the leader, Governor. Lead us forward.

In the meantime, a crisis is a terrible thing to waste and there's much to be done...

So what can we do? As it turns out, a lot. For starters, we can channel our inner Gandhi and be the change we wish to see in the world.

And if you've not done so already, be prepared to question a lot of old assumptions.

We're all going to need to use less water. A lot less water.

Now would be a good time to kiss your lawn sprinklers goodbye. Ditto the fertilizer and pesticides. Let's get real about being Florida friendly.

In a state where agriculture is king, horticultural products--and not food--are the number one cash crop and half the potable water delivered to households in Florida ends up being dumped on the ground.

Artificially enhanced lawns are a lifestyle choice, like smoking, and though this habit may bring you pleasure, it is seriously injurious to the environment around you. Get over it.

There has not only been a crisis in water management in Florida, there has been a crisis of civic engagement.

I salute all of you for coming to the Rally today, and I urge you to encourage your friends and neighbors and colleagues and schools and faith communities to get involved and speak up for clean water.

Water is a hot topic in the news right now, and letters to the editor remain a viable way of reaching a broader audience.

There's an impressive array of non-profit groups here, and I know that many of you will return home armed with new energy and focus.

And part of your focus may be to wonder why, if the protection of Florida's natural resources is enshrined in our state constitution, why do we need a water rally to remind those who call themselves our leaders to just do their jobs.

And maybe now is the time to begin the conversation about establishing legally enforceable inalienable rights of natural ecosystems.

And in our conversations with those who call themselves our leaders, we will need to keep up the pressure. For the forces aligned against the cause of clean and abundant water are many, and their pockets are deep.

The St. Johns River Water Management District tepidly asks us to cut back, but for what? So there will be enough water for the Canadian billionaire and his 30,000 thirsty cows next door? What's wrong with this picture?

I've seen nothing in the statutes to suggest that the Water Management Districts must approve every Consumptive Use Permit application, but they act like they think they're not doing their job if they vote to conserve our resources. What's wrong with this picture?

The Suwannee River Water Management District issues a water shortage order that allows golf courses to continue irrigating seven days a week, even as a record number of springs are dead and dying and now municipal water wells in Cedar Key have gone salty and they still have no idea how much water their big ag users are actually pumping.

What's wrong with this picture?

They hand out Consumptive Use Permits like there's no tomorrow but in fact there will be a tomorrow, and if tomorrow is to be a better day for Florida's waters, we need water managers who will grow a spine before sunrise.

So let us pick up the phone and encourage them on their path to wisdom.

And then there are our state legislators, too many of whom have been repeat offenders in

violating the public trust we have invested in them to serve as stewards of our natural legacy. Their silence during our water crisis has been deafening.

The best advice I've heard is that we should all adopt and educate a legislator, and to do so when the legislature is not in session and lawmakers are back in their home districts.

Explain to your legislators, and to your local officials, that this is a new age, and that we need leadership grounded in the reality of life on a finite planet.

Challenge our elected leaders to be clean water champions. Tell them they can either get out in front of this parade or prepare to be run over by it.

I don't claim to be an expert, but I do make a living as an artist who sees, deeply. And from where I stand, what I see is that the mightiest river in Florida is now the river of denial that runs through Tallahassee.

What I see is a stunning abdication of responsible oversight of our priceless rivers and lakes and springs.

The party's over, folks. We simply can't sustain the old way of thinking. Our children deserve better. The planet deserves better.

But if we wake up and end the denial, and if we're smart and disciplined, we can create a future in which mindful Floridians are joined in our common resolve to protect the water we have and waste not one precious drop.

We know that water is at the heart of the Florida experience. And even though water is what connects us and defines us, we've been told that decisions about our water future should be based on reason and not on emotion.

We know that the scientific and technical reasons for denying the Adena Springs Ranch permit application are sound, and the threat to Silver Springs and by extension, to all of our sacred waters, is frightening and real.

But let me speak for a moment about the role of emotion in this debate, for I believe this point is central to sustaining us for the long haul ahead.

It's my job as an artist not just to see but to feel, and I believe that "feeling" has largely been missing from the discussion about water and Florida's future.

When I fell in love with Ichetucknee Springs all those many years ago, I was blown away by this gift of beauty beyond measure, and I kid you not when I tell you that my tears of joy mixed freely with this endless bounty of life-giving water flowing onward to the sea.

But in recent years, my tears of wonder and gratitude have given way to tears of anguish and confusion.

Where once I swam through crystalline waters of impossible beauty, carried along on an emerald carpet of dancing eelgrass, those same grasses are now either dead and gone or covered with a thick sludge of disgusting algae, and the diminished flow of water is cloudy and dull.

I have stood on the banks of the Ichetucknee and I have grieved for my loss--our loss--as I consider with each passing year that my collection of springs photographs has become less a reflection of the real Florida than a catalog of what once was.

I stand before you a man on fire, but I tell you that my tears have not doused the flames of my passion, but rather they have fired the strength of my resolve.

Embrace your pain. This is my advice to you. Trust that your pain is an accurate barometer of the pain of the Earth.

We are creatures of spirit and we crave spirit connection with these sacred waters that sustain us body and soul.

In the world according to those who neither speak nor understand this language of the heart, spirit connection with place is an externality that has no value in their economic equation.

But you must remember this: our hearts are deeper than their pockets. I repeat, Our hearts are deeper than their pockets...

I want to thank all of you for coming, and for caring, today. I am honored to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with you in this battle for the soul of Florida