

Friends Of Istokpoga

NewsWire

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Lake Restoration Update

By Bill Dwinell

"The restoration of Lake Istokpoga is coming to an end soon, so I thought a review of the project was in order. I want to thank Beacham Furse and Tom Champeau, FWC, Kim O'Dell, SFWMD, Vicki Pontius and Clell Ford, Highlands County, for their help in providing information about the drawdown for this article.

In the Beginning:

On March 3, 1998, representatives from Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, FWC, then known as the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission (FGC), came to Lorida and for the first time, presented their proposal to clean up the tussock in Lake Istokpoga, as part of a public awareness campaign. At that time the estimates were that there was a serious problem with approximately 2000 acres of tussock in Lake Istokpoga that was growing at 100 acres per year. The idea of a full or partial drawdown was introduced. FWC's position was that a partial drawdown was the best of three options for Lake Istokpoga. This would lower the lake level to 36.5 feet msl. Original estimates were that it would cost from \$7 - \$10 Million. The formation of the Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association was announced at this meeting.

Friends of Istokpoga held their first public meeting on May 21, 1998, with over 50 people attending. Subsequent to this meeting, Friends of Istokpoga had numerous public meetings where details of the drawdown were given. We also published numerous articles in the Istokpoga NewsWire with details of the plans.

In July of 1998, Lake Istokpoga became a fish management area, managed by the FWC.

In August, 1998, the Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association became a Florida nonprofit corporation.

By September of 1998, the words from FGC were that if something weren't done soon, within ten years more than 10% of the lake would be covered in tussock. Tussock

estimates ran as high as 2500 acres. All alternative plans, like herbicide control or the use of mechanical harvesters were rejected by FWC for a variety of reasons, most of which were legitimate, and most were rejected because of the added expense.

Also in September, the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee (LIMC) was formed to deal with the overall management of Lake Istokpoga, and make recommendations to the Highlands Board of County Commissioners. It was formed as part of the agreement between the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners and the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission as part of the Lake Istokpoga Fish Management Area Agreement. The first meeting was held on November 20, 1998. Friends of Istokpoga is represented on this committee.

The Agreement:

On January 12, 1999, the FWC presented their "Partial Drawdown and Tussock Removal Plan". After many discussions among all of the agencies, committees, and individuals concerned or involved with the Lake Istokpoga Restoration, agreement was finally reached and a recommendation, with amendments, was presented to the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners, and subsequently adopted with all of the amendments and one of their own. The amendments approved were 1) the minimum project objective be funding to remove at least 60% of lake tussocks before the project goes forward, 2) a hydrologic study of the impacts to permitted water users be complete, and that the impact of the drawdown on permitted withdrawals be documented, and 3) that the project not go forward until funding for a pre-drawdown hydrilla treatment be secured, and 4) That the tussock on the islands be included in the restoration efforts.

Funding was the big issue for the FWC. They had originally committed \$200,000 to the project, and were looking to other government agencies to fund the rest.

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While the search for funding continued, the FWC did not sit idly by and watch the tussock grow. They took a proactive position with Lake Istokpoga and began tussock removal around the islands using mechanical harvesters. They also used burning and herbicides on the cattails that were one of the items that facilitated the growth of tussock.

The Funding:

As time went by, the FWC kept moving the target date for the restoration work out because they were unable to get funding commitments from any of the other government agencies, the scheduled drawdown was out to 2005 or 2006. In fact, South Florida Water Management District (SFWMD) refused to help in any way, including the hydrology testing, or the efforts to determine if downstream permitted users would be impacted by the drawdown.

Many of us were beginning to worry that the drawdown would never happen. But, things changed when the drought hit Florida. Without rain, the lake began to drop and the permitted users started to request additional water be released from Lake Istokpoga via the S-68 structure. Okeechobee was also stressed and water further south was also a problem. The U. S. Army Corps of Engineers' (USACE) regulation schedule for Lake Istokpoga didn't permit SFWMD to release any water for their downstream users once the level in Lake Istokpoga reached 37.5' msl., except during emergency situations. *[note: The Kissimmee Basin Water Supply Advisory Committee warned SFWMD that this was a reason why they should reduce their dependency upon Lake Istokpoga as a water supply source. They ignored this recommendation and the solutions proposed by the committee.]*

Can you guess what happened next? On October 23, 2000, SFWMD suddenly got interested in the drawdown. In fact, they wanted to accelerate the drawdown and take advantage of the drought. They called several of the government agencies and public interest groups, like Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc., and the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee, together at a special meeting in Okeechobee to discuss this. They had lots of good ideas, but no solution and no money. Lothian Ager, FWC, told them that without funding and permits there was no way it could happen. But, SFWMD needed the water, so they committed to help find some funding. They also held a public meeting in Lorida on December 11, 2000, to increase

public sentiment in hopes that the public would help push this accelerated drawdown plan. The SFWMD Governing board passed the "Accelerated Drawdown" resolution on December 14. There was even an effort to divert funds allocated for the hydrilla treatment of Lake Istokpoga to cover the drawdown. DEP refused to divert these funds because failure to do the hydrilla treatment could result in a large fish kill. With the low water and excellent growing conditions for hydrilla there would be little oxygen for the fish if the hydrilla wasn't treated prior to the draw down.

With the help of the Highlands County Board of County Commissioners, the Lake Istokpoga Management Committee, Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association, Inc. and others who wrote letters to our congressmen, and some creative accounting, \$3 million dollars was loaned to the FWC by the SFWMD from funds that were allocated for future use on the Everglades Restoration. The FWC will repay the loan after July 1, 2002.

With funding now available and little to no implementation time available the FWC had to scramble to get everything in place so they wouldn't miss the window of the dry season which was critical to the success of the project. The plans called for the lake to be lowered to 36.5 feet msl. and remain at this level for a minimum of 100 days. They also had to figure out what portion of the plan they could afford to do, since they only had about half the funds they had estimated it would cost.

The Hydrilla Treatment:

One of the prerequisites placed on FWC was to have a full lake hydrilla treatment before drawing the lake down. If this were not to happen, the hydrilla would flourish with the warmer weather and low water levels. Fish kills would be likely, according to Jeff Schardt, Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). The Hydrilla treatment began in early March, at a cost of approximately \$1.8 million and consisted of four treatments 2 weeks apart, with the final treatment on April 3. The sites for the treatments were carefully selected by DEP and spread about the lake in a checkerboard fashion. The treatment consisted of dropping Floradone tablets (SONAR) into the selected locations using a helicopter.

After the treatments were completed samples were taken and tested to determine the concentrations of the Sonar at each site. These samples were taken every other week for fourteen weeks. You can see the results of these samples on our web site.

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Two of the treatment test sites did not show concentration levels high enough to kill the hydrilla, so Highlands County Weed Control department made an additional application of Sonar at sites 7 and 8, just off Windy Point and out and just south of Rutledge Canal, according to Vicki Pontius, Highlands County Director of Recreation and Parks. Any areas still showing significant hydrilla after the water levels rise will have navigation trails cut using Aquathol, by the county. In fact, boat trails have already been cut near Eagle's Nest using Aquathol-K.

The Contractors:

The process for obtaining contractors to do the actual work on the shoreline was one hurdle, complicated by significant levels of bureaucracy. In my opinion, this was where the FWC made a major mistake that would later bite them in the butt and jeopardize the success of the project. The mistake was not requiring a Bid Bond by the contractors. This meant that anyone could bid the nine areas, regardless of their capability to perform the work they were bidding. This is exactly what happened. Over forty contractors showed up to bid on the nine sites. In one case, Optimum Services made the low bid for the two biggest areas on the lake. They were later disqualified because they couldn't obtain a Performance Bond (in other words, they couldn't convince their insurance company that they could do the job they bid for the price they committed). The problem was that they were allowed two weeks to obtain the bond and there were other delays imposed by the bid process. After Optimum was disqualified, the bid went to the next lowest bidder, Perry Construction, and the process had to start all over again. During all this time no work was being done on the two areas of Lake Istokpoga that account for more than half of the tussock that was to be removed, approximately 1,468,513 cubic yards. Perry Construction was finally able to obtain their Performance Bond and was awarded the contract. Area 2 work started about April 1, and Area 1 was started after April 17.

Mack Construction, who won the bid for all the other areas was making great progress on all of these sites except Area 7, where access was a problem; meanwhile Perry was just getting started some five or six weeks later. I feel it is worth stating again, if the FWC had required each contractor to obtain a Bid Bond, all of the contractors who

won the bids would have been able to get a performance bond and start on time, i.e., early March.

The Permit:

The FWC had to work fast to obtain the permits because of the short time between the approval of the funds and the start date set 100 days before the rainy season. They had to apply for an Aquatic Plant Management permit from the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and a Federal Dredge and Fill Permit from the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE). They had to supply information regarding the types of plants and the amount of material to be removed, along with the reasons for doing the work, where the material removed would be stored. They also had to explain the effects and mitigation for impacts on water quality and wildlife, especially wading birds and endangered animals, as well as archaeological artifacts.

According to Tom Champeau, "The DEP permit was no problem since the FWC does these projects all over the state and the DEP people know the drill. Bill Caton from DEP Tallahassee was very helpful with permit concerns regarding wildlife islands at the sites discussed above. USACE often reacts differently to applications because you might be dealing with someone unfamiliar with this type of project. Our USACE permit was stuck for this reason and Eric Summa from the Tampa office grabbed the ball and ran it for us. We are grateful to Eric for this."

Regulation Schedule:

There was also a requirement to get a deviation from the USACE regulation schedule controlling the level the lake is at any given time, and later an extension to the deviation because of the late start on areas 1 and 2. The original deviation and extension was well received by John Zediak, USACE. He dealt with this issue quickly and effectively. The request for the deviation was made by Ron Miroeau and Tommy Stroud with SFWMD.

The work:

Simply put, the work done on the lake was to use bulldozers to push the tussock and muck into windrows, then load the material into trucks with track hoes and haul it a short distance to upland storage sites or to in lake islands, called "wildlife islands" by the FWC, where it is placed in piles of varying size. These piles, or islands vary in height from about 3 ½ feet to 18 feet. The depth and width also varies considerably based on the amount of

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material in the immediate area and the distance to the next pile, the largest covering about two acres.

Upland storage is the preferred method, but where sites for this storage are not available, in lake storage is the only other option because hauling it away is much too expensive. Early estimates were that 24 wildlife islands would be required. FWC tried to place these in-lake islands so they would not be directly in front of any residences, and in most cases they were successful. This did turn out to be the biggest headache for Beacham Furse, the Project Director of the Restoration for FWC. It seems that everyone wants the area in front of their house clean, but many do not understand that if you remove the material, it has to go somewhere, and if no one in their immediate area volunteered an upland storage site, then it has to stay in the lake.... In order to keep this article at a reasonable size I will not include the many negotiations that the FWC was put through by homeowners around the lake. There were even some individuals who tried to take advantage of the FWC and have them remove trees from land that did not fall within the lake, or the area covered by the permit FWC was working under. According to a FWC spokesman one individual volunteered their land for upland storage and lake access. This individual also submitted a bid for one or more of the areas. When they failed to obtain the bid, they withdrew their offer for access and upland storage. This cost the FWC an additional \$13,000 to build twenty-four oak mats (each mat was 4 ft. wide and twenty ft. long) to cross a canal to gain access to the shoreline in that area.

Beacham Furse, Tom Champeau, Larry Davis and a few other FWC representatives deserve a lot of thanks and credit for putting up with all the calls, negotiations and meetings they had to endure in addition to the actual work of managing the restoration project. The FWC used their own funds to move a pile in front of properties at Sebring Park Estates. This material was scraped from in front of this development and due to deep canals on both sides, trucks could not haul to designated wildlife islands. According to DEP, wildlife islands that interfere with the "direct view" of a riparian landowner would violate our permit. DEP advised that if possible, move this pile or build it low and as close to the east canal as possible as to lessen visual interference with lot #37. "Since we had time, we used \$10,000 of our money to move it" stated Tom Champeau.

There were similar problems at Istokpoga Shores where the canals did not allow the use of the heavy trucks.

The solution was to create some low islands in front of shoreline trees or on property lines.

Some other complications that the contractors and the FWC ran into was the shoreline soil. Many areas were wetter than expected, and many areas had deep muck holes. Numerous pieces of equipment were sunk in the "mud" slowing the work down. One story I heard was that a track-hoe was sunk up to the top of the cab. Area two and area eight were areas where a lot of equipment was stuck, which caused some on-the-fly change in plans for the locations of some wildlife islands. I guess it is good that the drought kept the water level about six inches below the level the FWC requested, or it would have been even more difficult.

Other work (Private residents):

Many of us, me included, went through the process of obtaining our own permits to clean up our own areas while the lake was low. I believe we should all thank Annette Nielson, Dave Demmi and their staffs at DEP for expediting the permit process for us. In case you haven't been out on the lake to see any of this work, there were canals dug out, shorelines cleaned, weeds removed, and probably a lot more.

Follow up by Highlands County:

In two years, Highlands County will spread the material on the upland storage sites that FWC have signed agreements with the landowners. The material should have decomposed enough by then to allow for the material to be spread evenly around the landowners property.

Hydrologic Study, and The Study of permitted water users:

With the drought causing conditions much worse than the original predictions for a drawdown, SFWMD let us know that the hydrologic study and the study of effects on downstream permitted water users was not necessary since the drought was impacting them more than the drawdown would. But they did do something. They released a document to these permitted users asking them to take actions to hold as much water on their lands as possible. Many growers and cattlemen were seen digging canals and ponds on their lands to save the water that would be released from Lake Istokpoga. According to a SFWMD spokesperson 99% of the water was retained within the Istokpoga/Indian Prairie Basin. In other words, only 1%

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made it into Lake Okeechobee. Kudos to SFWMD and the downstream permitted water users for saving this water.

Also, SFWMD announced that all withdrawals from Lake Istokpoga cease until the lake returns to at least its normal minimum level.

Where do we go from here?

Well, all of the original objectives were not met with this accelerated drawdown. The islands are still thick with tussock. The area south of area 9 still has tussock that has not been removed. The south end of the lake is thick with muck. The shoreline is been exposed to the sun and has lots of grass and weeds growing. Spatterdock is expanding, especially with the low water levels, and will likely expand toward the shore as the water rises. Many of the canals are choked with weeds and algae. I am sure there will be more as we get rain and the lake begins to fill.

And, I am sure we will hear many stories from the fishermen about the poor fishing since the hydrilla is gone and the shoreline is relatively clean, that is, until they learn the new habits of the fish. With the clean shoreline the FWC assures me the fish spawns will get better. And that means the fishing will too!

We also have the commitment from FWC to monitor and treat unwanted aquatic plants to minimize the reoccurrence of the tussock problem. They committed a plan for this, which I hope to see it soon. According to Tom Champeau, the FWC has requested \$260,000 from DEP for plant work, not including hydrilla or hyacinth. Tom believes this is what is needed to treat cattails and invasive plants that we find at the cleared sites. Their five-year plan also has funding budgeted for Aquatic Enhancement and for additional work on the islands in three years. They are still working on the plans for the islands.

For now, let us all pray we get the rain to fill the lake this year.

Our Thanks:

I hope I have given you some idea of the complexity of this project. Just keep in mind that I have only touched on the many things involved in this restoration effort. All one has to do is take a ride around the shoreline to see how much better it looks, and looks were not the goal.

I believe we owe a great thanks to those responsible for pulling this off under the accelerated conditions they were under. If you see one of them be sure to tell them you appreciate the work they did.

A special thanks to Beacham Furse, Project Manager. He worked many hours with few days off, and endured many situations over the past few months; and let's not forget his efforts over the past two years. We must also thank the others, like Tom Champeau, Larry Davis and Ken Denson from FWC that helped Beacham with this project.

The Five Dollar Miracle

Since the beginning of the Friends of Istokpoga Lake Association our dues have only been five dollars. Not much to ask to have a Florida Corporation work hard to protect Lake Istokpoga from all the different things that could be happening to it, is it? In fact, you sure get a lot for your money: A newsletter, The Istokpoga Newswire, an

Internet Web Site, regular meetings with knowledgeable speakers, all of which keep you informed of events and issues related to Lake Istokpoga, and someone to call or e-mail when you have a question or spot a problem. An on top of that, a better lake. Just send in your annual dues and everything just happens. It must be a

miracle! No where can this happen in today's environment...

Well, it doesn't just happen, not from your five dollars, anyway. A very small portion of the work is actually paid for by your annual dues. Another small portion is paid by donations, and membership dues from our Associate Members. The real price is paid by the volunteers that do the work. Are you aware that at any given time, since we formed this association in 1998, there have never been more than 10 volunteers working? And usually fewer.

We really appreciate you being a member and paying your annual dues, but we need more. Not money (at least not at this time), what we need is your time. If you think our lake is worth more than five dollars to you, then maybe

A special thanks to
Beacham Furse,
FWC Project
Manager.

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you would be willing to donate a little of your time. Here is where you could help:

Membership

Committee - Visit local merchants and convince them they need to join as associate members. Canvass your neighborhood for members. Keep a business in supply of our Membership brochures.

Newsletter Committee - Write articles, or help address and fold the newsletters so they can be mailed.

Telephone Committee - Call new members and welcome them to Friends of Istokpoga. Call members who did not renew and find out why. In emergency situations call our members and alert them of our problem.

Fundraising Committee: Help plan and implement fundraising events.

Publicity Committee: Help with positive publicity for Friends of Istokpoga.

Weed Committee: Help keep watch on the lake to identify and report weed problems so they can be dealt with before they are serious problems.

Historian: Collect facts and pictures about Lake Istokpoga for the association. Work with newsletter committee to develop articles.

Others: If you have the time to volunteer, and the committees above don't interest you, we can find a place where you can help.

Give us a call, and help make this a better association than it has ever been.

If you can spare a little of you time for Your lake, please call Bill at 863-465-6903.

Our Next Meeting

Our next meeting will be held on Thursday, November 8, 2001, at 7:00 PM. Our guest speaker will be Jeff Schardt,

Our next general meeting will be held on November 8, 2001, at the Lorida Community Center. We hope you will mark your calendar, and joins us for refreshments before the meeting.

DEP. He will discuss the results of the recent hydrilla treatment, as well as the plans for Lake Istokpoga in 2002.

We will also have representatives from FWC to talk about the restoration work that was done on the lake.

Refreshments will be served prior to the meeting, beginning at 6:45 PM.

Arbuckle Creek

If you haven't been up Arbuckle Creek in a while because of the sandbar blocking the entrance, then there is good news. Highlands County has overcome the obstacles with getting the permit and has completed the work. Now you can cruise up the creek in your boat. For those that still can't get your boat in the water you can enjoy the cruise by viewing the Arbuckle Creek pictures on our web site.

Istokpoga Park

The work at Istokpoga Park is proceeding nicely. The plan is to widen and deepen the canal all the way to the lake. They are also widening the existing boat ramp and adding another boat ramp. This will allow four boats to be launched at the same time. They are also adding a boardwalk to the other side of the canal. According to Vicki Pontius, Director of Parks and Recreation for Highlands

County, "The Istokpoga Park dredging was complete this weekend and is progressing on schedule. We will be planting 57,000 plants in the 3.08 acre site in which we are currently stacking the dredged spoil

material to create a wetland area."

For those that have not visited the park, it is located on U. S. 98 just north of Arbuckle Creek. In addition to the boat ramps, there is a nice parking area, a picnic area, rest rooms and a scenic walk. The construction is going on as I write this, but it could be completed soon. Vicki said "The dock and boardwalk plans are going out to bid this week. Upon completion, these improvements will make the park take on an entire new look."

"...we will have a beautiful park for everyone to enjoy."

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Highlands County is trying to buy some land adjacent to Istokpoga Park. If they are successful in purchasing the Winding Waters property adjacent to the park and Arbuckle Creek, we will have a beautiful park, approximately 180 acres, for everyone to enjoy in the future.

Fish Hoarding

Ever heard that some of the people who come to Lake Istokpoga stock up their coolers and haul them back north for many, many fish fries, or to sell them? Do you think this is a rare occurrence? How many pounds of fish, mainly Crappie and Blue Gill, do you think leave Lake Istokpoga each year?

The number of times I hear about this kind of thing, leads me to believe it is a lot bigger number than any of us want to believe. I always hear it third or fourth person, so I never hear exactly who it is that does this, but I am always assured that it is true. My problem is that instead of telling me, they should be telling Lt. Dale Knapp, or another FWC Wildlife Enforcement Officer. The law allows possession of two day's bag limit per person, which would be 100 pan fish per person. This doesn't just mean in your boat. It states in your possession. That means your boat, your cooler, and your freezer, or any other place one could put them.

In my opinion, if you sit by and watch someone do this, day-after-day, week-after-week, then you are just as

harmful to the lake as they are! You are not doing your part to protect this precious resource! **In other words, you are part of the problem.**

You might say that the fish reproduce and that they really aren't hurting anything. You are wrong! The fishing laws that govern how many fish you can take are there to protect the fish, and the lakes from being over-fished. The laws also take into account the breeding and reproduction habits of the fish. If you disagree, then change the law,

otherwise, help us protect our lake.

This is a difficult problem because the wildlife officers have to catch the violators "in the act", and they are not likely to see the inside of the culprit's freezers. That is why it is important for you to help curtail this activity. You see the violations and they don't. **Only you can stop it.**

If you see any violations of our wildlife laws, report it by calling

**Report any violations of
our wildlife laws, by
calling 1-800-282-8002**

1-800-282-8002. ***Do not take action against the perpetrator yourself as it could turn out to be dangerous.***

Let the law enforcement folks do their job. You can also call in anonymously and still be eligible for a cash reward. Be sure to provide as much information as possible to assist the wildlife officers with their investigation, and you will not have to testify if an arrest is made.

The penalty, upon conviction, for this type of violation is up to a \$500.00 fine, up to 60 days in the county jail or both.

We hope you will volunteer to help on one of our committees...