

THE GREAT FLORIDA RIVERWAY: HOW ECONOMICS, RECREATION AND SOCIAL MARKETING SHIFTED PUBLIC OPINION

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Ever since the Rodman Kirkpatrick Dam was built in 1968, part of the failed Cross Florida Barge Canal, conservationists have worked to remove the dam and restore the Ocklawaha River. The canal project was halted in 1971 by President Nixon due to the leadership and work of Marjorie Harris Carr, founder of Florida Defenders of the Environment, and other conservation organizations. It blocked fish and wildlife migration from the Atlantic Ocean to Silver Springs, destroyed 7,500 acres of forested wetlands, inundated 20 springs, and continues to damage Silver Springs and the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers. A coalition of sixty conservation, user groups and small businesses, formed in fall of 2019, has helped dramatically shift public awareness and support for restoration of this Great Florida Riverway, an internationally significant 217-mile system involving four ecosystems.

Using documented economic and environmental benefits, integrating outdoor recreation opportunities, broadening the constituency of support, toning down the rhetoric, and deploying social marketing strategies has helped change public opinion particularly in Putnam and Marion counties. This shift is evidenced by scientific polls of active voters in Putnam and Marion Counties by Barcelo & Company and a St. Johns River Water Management survey with almost 10,000 responses from across that state and nation. Florida TaxWatch has also endorsed the project in a briefing paper entitled *A River (No Longer) Runs Through It*, 2020.

Subject matter experts from universities, state agencies (retired employees), national conservation organizations, and private consulting groups have contributed data and analysis to assure coalition strategies and messaging are accurate and well documented. The work of IFAS economist emeritus Alan Hodges, PhD, *Economic Benefits of Ocklawaha River Restoration*, 2020, and *Economic Importance and Public Preferences for Water Resource Management of the Ocklawaha River*, 2017, authored with Tatiana Borisova, PhD, Xiang Bi, PhD, Alan Hodges, PhD and Stephen Holland, PhD provided much of the data on the economic benefits of a restored Ocklawaha River. Dr. Tom Hocht's foundational work on the Florida Ecological Greenway Network and innovative new student design concepts for recreation along the riverway opened doors and discussions in unique and successful ways. Teachings and workshops of Cynthia Barnett, Ann Christiano and Annie Neimand from University of Florida informed communication advocates on how to use effective messaging and outreach approaches to bring citizens closer together on an issue that has been contentious for more than fifty years.

Strategies and tools used by the coalition include deploying online focus groups, integration of recreation concepts in public settings, using change management techniques, and making the economics and science understandable and embraceable over social, print media and key leader presentations. This session explores successful strategies and additional work needed in the areas of science, economics, recreation, marketing and community engagement to bring America's next great restoration project to fruition.

PRESENTER BIO: Margaret Hankinson Spontak is president of the Great Florida Riverway Trust. Her related career experiences include director of development Audubon Florida, director of policy and planning SJRWMD, assistant director UF Leadership Institute, executive director for corporate and continuing education Central Florida College, and stakeholder philanthropy manager Duke Energy Foundation.