

In the dark with gators and crocs

Alan Farago
Special to the Sentinel

August 30, 2006

If you went to sleep and dreamt that environmentalists were being hounded and chased by the FBI because they advocated the conversion of lands owned by Big Sugar to Everglades restoration, you might call that a nightmare.

But you might not.

Just a few weeks ago, an environmentalist concerned with Mississippi River restoration, Jim Bensman, was reported to the FBI by someone at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, for suggesting "blowing up" barriers on the river in spite of the fact that the agency's own public Power Point presentations on alternatives for the Mississippi included a slide of a dam being blown up.

In point of fact, there is not a whit of difference between restoring natural river flows in the Mississippi or the Everglades, and, in both cases, there may not be much more difference in the power and influence of interests fiercely defending their private profits.

As far as I know, no one at the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the principal federal partner in Florida's Everglades restoration plan, is calling the FBI on Florida environmentalists, but the abuse of power in Florida is a real threat and one to which environmentalists are especially sensitive.

Consider how Big Sugar's political influence is now playing out again, through a "527" political group that is trying to "swiftboat" the campaign of Congressman Jim Davis to be the Democratic candidate for governor.

Sugar supports his opponent, state Sen. Rod Smith, who, as a legislator, voted for the erosion of protections for the Everglades.

In 2004, Big Sugar put more lobbyists than legislators in the Florida Senate to ensure that state law governing its pollution was weakened.

And how was it weakened?

By smudging the location, measurement and reporting of data related to its phosphorous pollution.

Special interests may count on the public being on the same side as alligators and crocodiles -- that is to say, in the dark. But in Florida, nothing so overt as chasing down environmentalists by law enforcement, goaded by government agencies, needs to happen for alarm bells to ring.

There is devil enough in details, how exactly political pressure shivers straight through state agencies charged with protecting the public health and environment.

This is the point of a recent report by Clean Water Fund, *Are We Still Wading in Waste?*

Clean Water reports that the state warning-point database for sewage spills is incomplete, lacks standardized formatting and is practically impossible for a citizen to make sense of. Well, OK. It's just numbers, right?

In Brevard County, "Titusville/Osprey Plant reported a spill of 35,000 to 3.5 million gallons of sewage into the Indian River."

In Pasco County, Zephyrhills, widely known for bottled water more expensive than gasoline, had a 21 million-gallon wastewater release that "drained into a nearby lake."

Like most lakes in Florida, surface water seeps into ground water.

Ground water is what we drink from, bathe in, and even where we swim when it returns to springs and surface waters.

My memory flickered back to the 2003 report by Sierra Club on the mess by Florida of public disclosures on its other ticking effluent time bomb: the underground disposal of scarcely treated municipal waste through injection "control" wells.

Special interests don't have to call the FBI on environmentalists. So far they've gotten their way with a passive and compliant Legislature and a chief executive who is on their side more often than not.

Last week, The Associated Press reported an outbreak of swimmer rashes in Florida's most revered freshwater springs. A state spokesperson said it's "just irresponsible" to conclude that toxic algae is the cause.

Let me tell you about irresponsible.

When in 2003 and 2004 two state legislators, Sen. Dan Gelber and then Rep. Tony Hill, responded to the Sierra Club report by proposing legislation that simply would have required the state to disclose information to the public in a clear and understandable form on the extent of aquifer manipulation in the state of Florida, the state's leading environmental agency objected.

The bill never made it out of committee.

Like Clean Water Fund in 2006, Sierra Club pointed to the lack of standardized information, information gaps and plain errors in public notices required by federal regulations administered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Of the recent complaints of bathers in Florida's springs, state health department spokesman Fernando Senra said, "There are so many variables that could contribute to a rash."

But what if it was a cancer cluster and not a rash? What if the response was just a shrug?

Indifference is a killer even more lethal than the power and influence of special interests. No one should be surprised by the results.

Alan Farago of Coral Gables, who writes about the environment, can be reached at alanfarago@yahoo.com.