

Byron Stout: Outdoors

Politics need to stay out of environment

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An environmentally dangerous bill in the Florida Legislature should be roundly quashed by the citizens who fought against such politics only eight years ago.

That is when we exorcised politics from fish and wildlife management by passing the Unification Amendment to the state constitution. The amendment combined the old Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission with the Marine Fisheries Commission and the Marine Patrol, putting management of the state's marine and freshwater resources under one roof.

More importantly, the amendment gave constitutional authority to the newly created Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. That meant increasingly pressured saltwater fish and other marine life no longer was subject to the political whims of the governor and Cabinet.

Before then, days and weeks of testimony and decision making by marine fisheries commissioners frequently would be summarily overturned in Cabinet meetings lasting mere minutes. Conservation principles often were subverted with emotional appeals and the politics of vested interests in the distant Cabinet meeting room.

Now a bill by a former state Marine Patrol officer, Rep. Mitch Needelman, R-Melbourne, would bring back the politics in the form of an elected official who would fill a newly created Cabinet seat — Commissioner of the Interior. The new environment czar would preside over a new Department of the Interior.

And the Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission would lose its constitutional authority.

I suspect special interests — like Big Sugar, which already wields great influence over killing freshwater flows to the Caloosahatchee; and the phosphate mining industry, which is insidiously drying up Charlotte Harbor tributaries, including the Peace River — are licking their chops at the prospect.

How much easier it is to sway one person, rather than a commission that has to operate in the Sunshine? How much easier it is to compromise a position held by a person seeking votes, rather than appointed officials working largely out of civic duty?

To oppose a new Director of the Interior, contact your legislators about House Bill 7129 or the similar Senate Bill 2680.

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