

Fifty Year Losing Streak

By KARL WICKSTROM

Florida Sportsman Magazine

February 2008

Here's fascinating news from the well-I'll-be-danged department:

Top state and federal engineers agreed in a series of meetings that a major new south outlet from Lake Okeechobee must be constructed in order to save the Caloosahatchee and St. Lucie estuaries.

Really, that's true.

But it's also true, I'm afraid, that these meetings happened 50 years ago.

Nowadays, it's basically unknown but policy makers, citizen groups and county commissions all agreed—in 1958—that the newly built drainage schemes in post-war Florida resulted in disastrous releases.

River advocates and officials expressed outrage over huge buildups of muck and the destruction of estuarine life.

The Army Corps of Engineers brought seven big guns from Washington and Atlanta and Jacksonville to address the crisis with coastal interests.

Aging issues of the Stuart News tell how local officials and residents thought that a new south outlet would be a done deal.

Even the agriculturally influenced Flood Control District came up with a south-outlet plan, though it called for running the water southwest from the Lake Hipochee basin to the Ten Thousand Islands area.

All that was a half-century ago. The new outlet could have kept the estuaries pristine and full of life. Victory seemed assured.

So what in the world happened?

Why do we now face the exact same discharge mess in '08?

Well, it's still shrouded in mystery as to just who exerted what influence, but out of the blue some months after the positive meetings came a jarring letter from the Corps stating that a south outlet was not needed after all.

Thus, the destructive discharges continued.

Then, in 1995, a new wet cycle began, as tracked by scientists. In most years since, the estuaries have suffered as never before. Fish and plant life are periodically devastated for many miles up and down both coasts.

And yet government-aided polluters continue to dazzle the public with claims that current projects will save the day. Expert hydrologists and non-government scientists know full well that the estuary has as much chance for recovery now as it did those 50 years ago.

Our society's drainage follies were exposed in an important but out of print book titled *The River Killers*. The author, Stuart citizen Martin Heuvelmans, who passed away in the '70s after a brilliant campaign against the despoilers, deserves hero's status, notwithstanding government's failures.

His daughter, Rene Capas, now 80 and living in Key West, told us she'll be happy to have citizens read her dad's work. We've found a web link that will take you right to the full text: www.news.caloosahatchee.org/docs/River_Killers_1974.pdf

Or, visit RiversCoalition.org and make a quick click to the book.

And join me in saying thanks to Marty for a job well done.

His words reverberate through a current lawsuit against today's river killers. Wickstrom, founder of the Stuart-based *Florida Sportsman* magazine, is coordinator of the Rivers Coalition Defense Fund and may be reached via email at kywickstrom@yahoo.com