

Magical Waters

Art and Activism Come Together in the Springs Eternal Project

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

The story of Florida and its people begins and ends with water. We're the Gulf and the Everglades, the aquifer and Lake Okeechobee. We're the St. John's River and the coral reef, the Atlantic Ocean and Tampa Bay.

And finally, we're the springs — from Ichetucknee to Silver Glen, Weeki Wachee to Jackson Blue. The story of Florida is a story about water, and for the artists, activists and researchers of Gainesville, it is the story of saving the springs before they're lost.

The Springs Eternal Project, a three-part art and education project, has come to Alachua County to engage residents with the

worsening environmental damage to the springs system. It includes an exhibit at the Florida Museum of Natural History, two large-scale art installations on local RTS buses, as well as an educational website (www.springseternalproject.org) that provides resources for those looking to help. The exhibit will run through December 15, and the bus installations will run into 2014.

In partnership with the Alachua Conservation Trust, the project is largely the work of John Moran, a nature photographer; Lesley Gamble, an artist and professor at the University of Florida; and Rick Kilby, an artist and the author of "Finding the Fountain of Youth: Ponce de Leon and Florida's Magical Waters."

The museum exhibit, which

features striking side-by-side images of healthy and declining springs, is both a celebration and a warning — a celebration of the springs' importance and a warning that they could be lost. Before-and-after photographs spanning decades show the shift from crystal-clear to algae-clogged and hit home the effects of our environmental policies.

"I felt a calling to photograph the best of vanishing natural Florida," Moran said in a recent phone interview. "I need to share with people the changes I've seen — that frankly are breaking my heart."

The exhibit sits at the main entrance of the museum, with two 60-foot-wide panoramic underwater images high above the gallery. On one side, a clear-blue





spring demonstrates health, while an opposite wall of algae and muck shows the results of decades of pollution and over-pumping.

"It's about helping people understand that we're all connected with water," Gamble said in a phone interview. "Part of our challenge is educating legislators and the public

that it's in our best interest if we come together collectively to see this as a shared resource."

Until seeing these contrasting images, many people may have been unaware of the crisis entirely. For Gamble, the Springs Eternal Project is all about building awareness.

One of the more unique ways

the project has fostered awareness is through Gamble's "Urban Aquifer" installation. Full-scale underwater spring photos cover two RTS buses, creating a metaphorical flowing aquifer. These unusual and striking images answer the question: how do you get the attention of someone who



might never walk into a museum? It brings the issue out into the community, literally.

"People are very excited when they see a big aquifer bus," Gamble said. "It's kind of a surprise to be stuck in traffic and look up to see a beautiful, blue spring."

The website is connected to the

Urban Aquifer bus installation, which displays barcodes that can be activated with a smartphone to link directly to the site. Once engaged through the artwork, viewers can immediately travel to the web to learn more about the issue and how to help. Gamble uses art to engage with the cause, but wants

PHOTO BY LUCY FLETCHER

Visitors at the Florida Museum of Natural History learn about the beauty, history, and threats to Florida's water supply in the new Springs Eternal Project exhibit, which will remain at the museum until December 15.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LESLIE GAMBLE

People gather to celebrate the debut of the Urban Aquifer project, a large-scale art installation displayed on local RTS buses. The two buses feature John Moran's wildlife photography (a clear Ginnie Springs and a wild alligator) and act as a metaphor for the aquifer flowing through Gainesville.



others to get involved in any way they know how.

With a doctorate in art history, Gamble teaches the subject at UF, and specifically has taught courses about the connection between art and water. Much of the material for the Springs Eternal Project came out of teaching a class called "Art, Water, Ecology," Gamble said.

But her interest in the springs began long before this exhibit, which has been in the works for around two years. When she first came to Florida in 1980, Gamble was a busy horse trainer on the show circuit. One of her customer's grandfathers was the owner of Silver Springs, and, having never been to a spring before, Gamble decided to make a visit.

She fell in love with the crystal clear waters and took trips to Ichetucknee Springs when she had the time. However, she began to

notice between her periodic trips that the springs were changing. Gamble said she was not sure if it was a natural change, but the divers whom she talked with were noticing it, too.

"Many cave divers are really passionate about their sport and about the environment," Gamble said. "They've been seeing this degradation, and they know these springs inside and out."

Moran's interest in the Florida outdoors began when he was a child, "completely at home in orange groves and cypress swamps," he said. He fell in love with the world outside his back door.

Their shared love affair with natural Florida collided when the two met at a springs restoration workshop, creating a partnership that would combine a commitment to the cause with a gift for visual storytelling.

"She's smart, articulate,

passionate," Moran said. "We realized that the whole would be greater than the sum of its parts."

Moran, a UF graduate and past journalist with the Gainesville Sun, now travels and speaks about his experiences as a nature photographer as well as the need for environmental reform. At the Silver Springs forum in 2012, Moran touched on the challenges facing Florida.

"As you all know, budgets for DEP and water management districts have been eviscerated, Florida Forever has been effectively eliminated, the Department of Community Affairs was killed by the legislature last year, functionally, and comprehensive land-use planning in Florida is now a thing of the past," Moran said. "Tallahassee, it seems, has turned its back on natural Florida."

This issue of questionable policy



© PHOTO BY JOHN MORAN

An increasingly rare moment of natural Florida's beauty and health.

nearly 100 times as expensive as using natural water sources.

"The state that has acquired these wonderful properties is, in my opinion, falling down on the job protecting the resources they have invested in," Moran said.

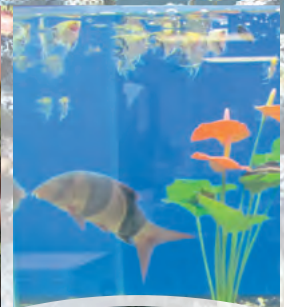
The Springs Eternal Project, at its core, reminds people of the role water plays, not just in the story of Florida, but also in the story of our own lives. It reminds us what a loss of the springs would mean for a state that begins and ends with water, that is filled to the brim with people who explore in water, who bathe in water, who make a living from water — who are, in fact, made of water.

"I would encourage people to go to the springs," Moran said, "to be reminded of why we fell in love with Florida in the first place." ■

has resulted in excess "algae slime" choking the springs, fertilizer pollution and severe over-pumping. Biodiversity is threatened, and the ratio of salt-to-fresh water in

the aquifer is shifting, throwing off delicate ecosystems. Cities like Tampa, Gamble said, have to use desalination plants to access fresh water, which can be

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