

# ***That Old Black Water***

## The Great Suwannee River Cleanup

BY COURTNEY LINDWALL

**F**lorida is famous for its rivers. There is the St. Johns River, brimming with gators, and the Withlacoochee, which flows from the swamp. There is the Homosassa River, home to the manatees, and the Apalachicola, which stretches to Georgia.

But there is nothing quite like the Suwannee.

Strong, wide and dark, the Suwannee is a picture of Florida itself. Flowing from Georgia, it twists and turns for around 250 miles through North Florida. Woven in history, it first supported American Indian tribes who lived on its banks and later was the site of Civil War forts.

But these days it needs help.

Current Problems, a local environmental organization, is back for its fourth annual Great Suwannee River Cleanup, which will include the Suwannee tributaries this year.

"You get your message out far better by dragging people out to see it," said Fritz Olson, Current Problems executive director.

The cleanup is a three-month project running from September to November, spilling a bit into August and December if necessary. Volunteers will sign up for different portions of the river and then bring their own equipment and manpower out to clean.

The work is done out on the water.

Groups bring canoes, kayaks or even powerboats, combing slowly to

weed out the hundreds of pounds of garbage polluting the river. Everything from tires to Band-Aids to empty and rusted metal drums are dredged out and hauled away.

Current Problems encourages volunteers to work on the Suwannee or any other river in the basin, including the tributaries — the Withlacoochee, Santa Fe, Ichetucknee or Alapaha. The organization also stated that it is looking to focus on "hot spots" of contamination and needs help finding them.

Taking on the added mileage of the tributaries has made it more challenging.

When Current Problems was asked by the water management district and the volunteers of the





#### PHOTOS COURTESY OF CURRENT PROBLEMS

In the Great Suwannee River Cleanup's first year, 576 volunteers removed 29,153 pounds of garbage in just one season — nearly 15 tons of trash. Fifteen community sponsors supported the efforts, such as Save our Suwannee and American Rivers. While most are in boats or on foot scouring the shore, certified cave divers, such as organizer Debbie Meeks, also help clean below the surface.







PHOTOS COURTESY OF CURRENT PROBLEMS

The final amount of waste removed is weighed and the numbers are reported to other environmental organizations.

### GREAT SUWANNEE RIVER CLEANUP 2013

*Kickoff — 9:00 a.m.*

*Saturday, September 21*

*at Ivey Memorial Park  
in Branford.*

The cleanup will consist of many small cleanups all along the rivers during a 3-month window from September through November.

**When you are spending a day out on the river just for fun, you may not notice the pollution, “but when you go out looking for the trash, you’re amazed.”**

Suwannee River Wilderness Trail to take it on, they were not sure it was possible, Olson said.

But with a little more support and time, they decided to try.

In previous years, hundreds of volunteers have come out. In 2011, Olson estimated the numbers around 500. And although 2012’s flooding caused certain sections of the river to be off-limits, the cleanup still brought around 300 volunteers.

This year, they hope for even more.

The issue of water pollution is personal for avid cave diver and Florida nature enthusiast, Debbie Meeks. She has helped organize the Suwannee cleanup all four years.

“It’s important to keep the water looking natural,” she said. “This is supposed to be a natural recreational area and bring natural tourism.”

People are out on the river to enjoy its beauty, she said, but can’t when there is trash. But the issue of contamination is one that goes beyond just aesthetics.

“Tires and plastics break down and leach chemicals,” Meeks said. “These are then taken up by fish and wildlife.”

Chemicals such as PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyls) are sometimes detected in water, even though the chemicals have been banned from use since the 1970s. Many products that contain them are still in use today or are ending up in landfills and rivers. Another controversial chemical that is regularly reported in water supplies is BPA, often associated with plastic water bottles.

These contaminants affect wildlife, but also the drinking water.

As Current Problems’ website states, “Although you may not live near water, you are actually closer





#### PHOTO COURTESY OF CURRENT PROBLEMS

All in a day's work. Volunteers stand by the their haul after a previous cleanup. Current Problems has opportunities for action, but also education. Its website, [www.currentproblems.org](http://www.currentproblems.org), offers resources for those wanting to learn more. It provides links to other community supporters, environmental action groups and informational sites.

to it than you think! Florida's karst topography has only a thin veneer of soil over a porous, Swiss-cheese layer of limestone separating us from our drinking water."

Meaning, problems with the water are everyone's business.

With each project, Current Problems aims to deal with more than just this year's trash. It raises consciousness in the community about water health in general.

As Meeks said, when you are spending a day out on the river just for fun, you may not notice the pollution, "but when you go out looking for the trash, you're amazed."

Current Problems takes on other projects, as well.

Restore a Shore is its program that improves waterfront vegetation, protecting habitat and creating a buffer to absorb contaminants. Instead of a heavily fertilized lawn

growing right to the edge of a pond, volunteers will rebuild a well-vegetated shoreline of native plants.

Other water health projects are Plant a Pond and Adopt a River.

But the Great Suwannee River Cleanup is one of the year's biggest events.

A cleanup kickoff was scheduled for September 21 at the Ivey Memorial Park in Branford, with food for the volunteers.

"We're a small organization, but we have a big volunteer base," Olson said.

So many come out because a day on the river can be fun, Meeks said — even when picking up trash. Volunteer groups like the Boy Scouts are especially perfect for tackling the project, she said.

At the end of the three months, Current Problems forwards its results to the larger environmental

organizations Ocean Conservancy and American Rivers so that its totals are included in theirs, as well. Their annual cleanup projects, respectively called the International Coastal Cleanup and the National River Cleanup, yield impressive results.

In 2012, the National River Cleanup reported 3.5 million pounds of trash removed from America's waterways.

Hundreds of those pounds were from Florida's treasured Suwannee.

Even if someone cannot go out on the river, he or she can be a sponsor and provide funding or equipment for the cleanup, such as canoes.

It is about pitching in and lending a hand, doing what is best to solve a problem that was no one person's fault. It is about health and community. And most clearly, it is about cherishing the beauty and history of Florida's winding waters. ■

For more information, call 352-264-6827 or visit [www.currentproblems.org](http://www.currentproblems.org).