

Protection being studied for Loxahatchee River

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Perhaps the most unique thing about the Loxahatchee River is that it exists.

That remark came from a member of a team of National Park Service planners, naturalists, foresters, and recreationists who paddled down

Color Photo A1

the river this week to begin a study which could lead to protection of the waterway as a National Wild and Scenic River.

"The fact that this river exists and has not been channelized in South Florida is really remarkable," said Bob Bergen, who is representing the Palm Beach County Pack and Paddle Club on the study team.

To Lt. Dick Roberts, district naturalist for Florida State Parks, the

high cypress canopy stretching above the river as it winds and twists its way from Indiantown Road to Jonathan Dickinson State Park makes it unique along with the combination of fresh and saltwater habitat and the remarkably diverse vegetation found along the mostly undeveloped northwest fork.

During the next few months, representatives from the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Palm Beach County and Martin County planning departments, the South Florida Water Management District, the Florida Division of the U.S. Forestry Service, Florida State Parks and interested private citizens will also tell the National Park Service why they think the river is unique and must be saved.

These people will convey to the National Park Service in stacks of written reports and technical data

what can only truly be known by silently slipping down this stream, a pristine piece of our past.

Putting in at the Indiantown Road bridge and traveling downstream along the northwest fork of the river provides a view of lush vegetation and wildlife habitat seldom seen in these days of condo canyons and manicured landscapes.

Softened sunlight filters through the thick canopy of cypress trees, creating a perfect reflection on the quietly rippling tea-colored river. Literally thousands of stiff-leaved wild pine bromeliads abound on the trunks and branches of the ample maple, cabbage palm, pond apple and water oak trees lining the riverbed.

As you float farther downstream, past Trapper Nelson's, the compound of the legendary riverman who called this habitat home, the in-

fluence of saltwater intrusion is noticed.

Salt-tolerant mangrove trees line the shore as schools of mullet swim by and leap for the sky. Countless dead cypress trees outline a ghostly silhouette above, a testimony to times when development and drainage had not yet pulled the salt from the ocean into this free-flowing river.

It is just this type of man-made change to the environment and pressures for further development along the headwaters that worry those trying to save this river.

"I think it's quite significant that the owners (of the river land) have kept it as they have for so long," Don Lockhart of the Palm Beach County Planning Department, said. "They have done a hell of a job of stewardship, but I'm worried about the future owners. That's really going to be the key to this."

Luther Winsor, chief of the Division of Resource Area Studies for the Southeast Region of the National Park Service, said the ultimate recommendation made by his department will depend upon the impact the protection of the river would have on the immediate area, the state and even the nation.

Winsor, along with NPS Outdoor Recreation Planners James Rousseau and Fred Van Vonno, is conducting the Loxahatchee River National Wild and Scenic River Study.

"Most of the attention on this river is focused on the stretch from Indiantown Road to Trapper Nelson's," Winsor said, "but we have to look at where that water is coming from, what effect development of the area above the river will have on that water supply, and how we can best manage this whole system."

The economics of the area will also be a critical factor in the evaluation, Winsor said.

"Economic effects will be a major stumbling block in this study," he said. "It will be particularly complex because land development of the area above the river has a direct effect on the quality of the water in the river."

"It's going to be a hairy one and one we're going to need a lot of help to make a fair evaluation," he added.

The National Park Service study team will return to the area for a public meeting in late March or early April, Van Vonno said.

After compilation and evaluation of data from the various local and state agencies and organizations, a number of alternative management plans will be presented to the public and cooperating agencies for review, Rousseau said.