

An Edition of
Treasure Coast
News/Press-Tribune

The Stuart News



90/70
Humidity:
70%

www.stuartnews.com

Tuesday, August 24, 2004

50 cents

WILD, SCENIC AND STRUGGLING: A LOOK AT THE LOXAHATCHEE RIVER

First in a two-part series

Unique ecosystem loses its way



MATTHEW RATAJCZAK staff photographer

Kevin Downes, left, Rachel Bobich and Zak Rakszawski, all 13, paddle up the "Wild and Scenic" Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River during Pine Jog Environmental Education Center's "Focus on Nature" summer camp. The Jupiter Inlet and a variety of urban and agricultural development are some of the things that continue to threaten the unique and diverse natural ecosystems and habitats of the river.

Scientists, activists push to stop loss of freshwater habitat

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

ABOARD THE RIVER-KEEPER — About eight miles west of the Jupiter Inlet, Jerry Metz pointed out the first cypress tree along the banks of the Loxahatchee River that wasn't just skeletal remains.

Its branches covered with Spanish moss, the tree stood alone behind thick mangroves that have grown in the increasingly salty waters of the river's Northwest Fork.

Thirteen miles upstream from the inlet, said Metz, a technician with the Loxahatchee River District's Wild Pine Laboratory, healthy freshwater cypress trees create the picturesque, shady canopy that helped

8,000 YEARS

► Loxahatchee River's waters have nurtured people for 8,000 years. **A6**

FISH KILLS

► A toxic agent is causing fish kills in the Indian River Lagoon. **B2**

the river earn its "Wild and Scenic" federal designation nearly a decade ago.

"You'll see a gradual change in the vegetation," he said, tying the boat to a palm tree in Jonathan Dickinson State Park to reel in a computerized tester the district uses to record how the once-fresh river is losing its unique feel.

See RIVER, A6



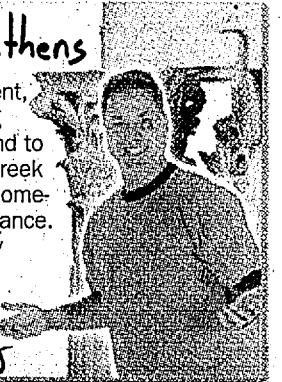
MATTHEW RATAJCZAK staff photographer

Surrounded by saltwater-dependent mangroves, dead cypress trees protrude into the sky on the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River in Jonathan Dickinson State Park. The trees are evidence of the river's transformation over the years from a healthy freshwater ecosystem to a new saltwater habitat.

Riding around Athens

The music is always different, depending on who's driving the bus. The older men tend to listen to more traditional Greek music, which sounds like something you'd hear at a folk dance. The younger drivers usually have the radio tuned to pop stations, where techno is big.

Ray



Agent in land sale instantly wealthy

As the agent for the buyer and seller, the \$35 million transaction was doubly nice for Debra Parker, who has been in real estate for less than four years.

By Carlos Galarza
staff writer

STUART — Four years ago, Debra Parker was making a living selling educational books and materials tailored to school-age children.

Those days seemed eons away for Parker on Monday as she reflected on the \$35 million real estate transaction she closed on last week, as the representative of both the buyer and seller.

"It's like winning the lottery," said Parker, who started working with Coldwell Banker Residential Real Estate in Stuart 3½ years ago, not long after getting her license to deal in real estate.

Parker is convinced that if the deal is not the largest, it has to rank as one of the largest in Martin and St. Lucie counties.

"It's very unusual," she said. "It just doesn't happen."

Parker said she was selected by Treasure Cay LLC, a company based in Myrtle Beach, S.C., to market 45 lots on 30 oceanside acres on Hutchinson Island, about two miles south of the St. Lucie Nuclear Plant in St. Lucie County.

The entire parcel was purchased by Hutchinson Island 45, Inc. According to state records, the company was incorporated in February and lists Alan L. Armon II of West Palm Beach as the registered agent.

Parker declined to say exactly what her commission on the \$35 million deal was, but the customary commission is 6 percent. The realty company also will get a portion.



Parker: "It's like winning the lottery."

WILD, SCENIC AND STRUGGLING: A LOOK AT THE LOXAHATCHEE RIVER

RIVER

FROM A1

"It'll go from all mangroves and palms to cypress and big ferns on the banks," he said, explaining the habitat change from salty to fresh.

It's the loss of Loxahatchee's natural, freshwater habitat — nearly extinct in rapidly developing South Florida — that has brought the river an unprecedented level of attention.

With the watershed being reduced by more than a third during the past 50 years, state and local scientists who have been analyzing the ecosystem fear the river's natural beauty might be lost forever.

A stable, manmade inlet to the Atlantic Ocean, a massive canal system diverting freshwater from the sections of the river that need it the most, and competition for freshwater with urban and agricultural development are all working against the Loxahatchee.

Only recently, activists, scientists and elected officials began working together on behalf of the river and its environment.

Programs to protect lands in its watershed will be on the ballot in Jupiter on Aug. 31 and Martin County later this year. Research documenting the water quality, soil and vegetation changes is underway by state and local agencies.

With dry conditions continuing to challenge goals to keep a constant minimum flow to the river, state water managers plan to decide by the end of this year exactly how much water — and when and from where — is needed to restore the freshwater habitat. An update on that project is tentatively scheduled for a water advisory panel Sept. 2.

Some wonder if it's enough to save the Loxahatchee River.

"The quality was the worst about 50 years ago, but it's better than it was 10 years ago," said Rick Dent, the executive director of the river district. "But the man-induced stress is taking its toll."

'One-two punch'

Even as the river's plight is gaining attention, land in northern Palm Beach and southern Martin counties is becoming some of the most attractive real estate south of Lake Okeechobee.

Activists point to development — and its accompanying roads, flood protection and stormwater runoff — as an obstacle for the river second only to the salty water coming in from the Jupiter Inlet.

The combination of the two has resulted in saltwater intrusion in the historically fresh Northwest fork during the dry season and a constant flush of untreated, polluted stormwater during wet times.

But it is the ocean water creeping up from the inlet, which opened permanently in 1947, and a lack of freshwater available for the river that is causing the cypress trees and the rest of the rare freshwater habitat to die.

"The river was dealt a one-two punch with the diversion of freshwater during the wet season and the addition of more saltwater," said Ernie Barnett, the ecosystem project director for the state Department of Environmental Protection.

3. TRANSITION ZONE

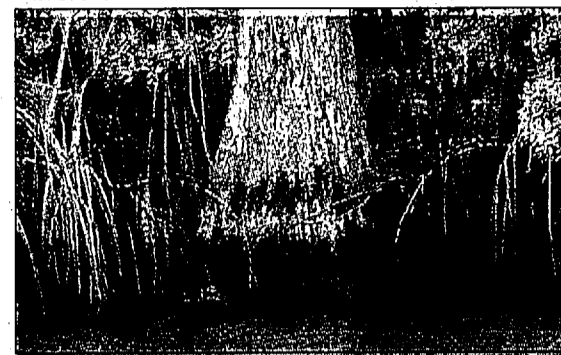
- **Location:** 8 to 10 river miles
- **Salinity range at Kitching Creek, river mile 8.1:** between 10 and 18.6 parts per thousand
- The zone, where salt water from the Jupiter Inlet meets fresh water from the Loxahatchee headwaters, accommodates freshwater-dependent cypress trees and salt water-tolerant mangrove and palm trees.



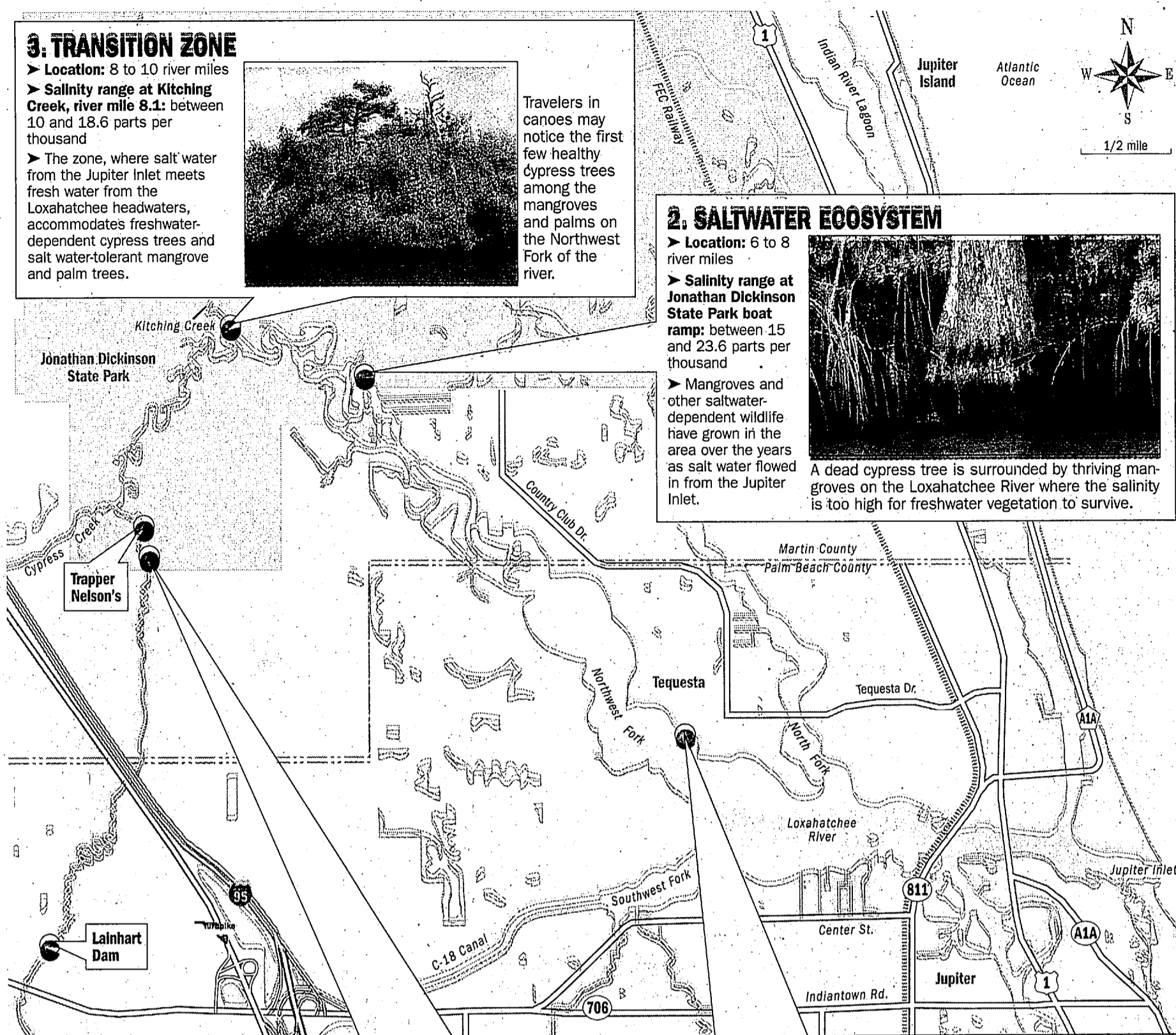
Travelers in canoes may notice the first few healthy cypress trees among the mangroves and palms on the Northwest Fork of the river.

2. SALTWATER ECOSYSTEM

- **Location:** 6 to 8 river miles
- **Salinity range at Jonathan Dickinson State Park boat ramp:** between 15 and 23.6 parts per thousand
- Mangroves and other saltwater-dependent wildlife have grown in the area over the years as salt water flowed in from the Jupiter Inlet.



A dead cypress tree is surrounded by thriving mangroves on the Loxahatchee River where the salinity is too high for freshwater vegetation to survive.



4. RARE FRESHWATER ENVIRONMENT

- **Location:** around river mile 10 until the river is channelized south of Indiantown Road
- **Salinity range:** never more than 2 parts per thousand
- The natural freshwater habitat includes water lilies, leather ferns and other wildlife now found sparingly in South Florida.



Healthy cypress trees thrive in the fresh water of the Wild and Scenic section of the river's Northwest Fork.

1. DEVELOPMENT ON THE RIVER

- **Location:** Up to 6 miles from the Jupiter Inlet.
- **Salinity range at northern estuary site, approximately river mile 1.5:** between 34 and 36 parts per thousand
- Development is contributing to the river's problems by displacing native habitat and contributing to the flow of fresh water away from the natural watershed.



Mansions and sea walls designed to stop erosion line the Loxahatchee's Northwest Fork.

Photos by: **MATTHEW RATAJCZAK** staff photographer
 Graphic by: **ROBERT LANE** staff artist
 SOURCE: Loxahatchee River Environmental Control District

Once the river was added to the statewide \$8.4 billion Everglades restoration effort in October 2002, water managers recognized a need to protect the "salinity wedge" — where fresh river water meets the saltwater moving upstream.

And that wedge has moved significantly. Historically, a freshwater ecosystem could be found around the boat ramp at the state park, around river mile 6.

Now, the salty conditions reach as far north as river mile 9.2, about a mile upstream from where Kitching Creek spills into the Northwest Fork.

River mile 9.2 is where officials with the South Florida Water Management District agreed to keep it when, last year, they voted for a constant minimum flow of freshwater.

Scientists recommended a volume of 35 cubic feet — or 262 gallons — per second over the Lainhart Dam near Indiantown Road. That amount, they said, would avoid "significant harm" to the river, but would not be enough to begin restoration efforts.

But with the dry summer conditions and without any means of storing water for later use, water managers were unable to meet that minimum level from March to the beginning of August.

"We are not currently meeting that specified minimum flow and level. That was to be expected," said Ken Ammon, the director of ecosystem restoration for the water management district.

That was unacceptable to the activists who had lobbied water managers for even more water guaranteed in the rule.

"We've been in violation of the rule for weeks. We're not in any kind of water shortage," said Susan Kennedy, the president of the Jupiter Farms Environmental Council.

While Kennedy maintains that politics has impeded the freshwater flows to the Loxahatchee, Ammon said it's just a matter of logistics amid increased development.

An update on a plan to restore the Loxahatchee River with an adequate volume of freshwater is scheduled for the water management district's Water Resources Advisory Council when they meet in Fort Myers on Sept. 2, Am-

mon said.

Questionable future

Finding the proper salinity balance isn't the only problem facing the Loxahatchee.

Thanks to the increase in scientific research on the river and its watershed over the past few months, state and local officials have documented an increase in muck sediment flowing in from the inlet and washing from the banks of the canals that drain into the river.

Pollution — such as nitrogen and phosphorous that comes from fertilizers and roadways — continues to affect the river from all the homes, farms and industrial areas in Hobe Sound, Jupiter Farms and Tequesta.

Dissolved oxygen, which is

what fish breathe, can also be quite low, Dent said.

Still, the Loxahatchee River — dubbed the first federal "Wild and Scenic" river as well as a state Aquatic Preserve, an Outstanding Florida Waters with the protection of being in a state park — faces a questionable future.

Activists hope the new focus on the river will continue until it is restored.

"We're fighting to preserve one of the last remnants of a freshwater ecosystem while all these other rivers have been channelized and called off," said Patrick Hayes, executive director of the Loxahatchee River Watershed Coalition.

-suzanne.wentley@scripps.com

Loxahatchee River's waters have nurtured men for 8,000 years

By Suzanne Wentley
 staff writer

AT THE MASTEN DAM — With his bathing suit still dripping from a swim in the Loxahatchee River, 13-year-old Chris Moore leaned over gnarly roots of a cypress tree to dip a water-testing strip into the clear, tannin-tinted water.

With the other campers from Pine Jog Environmental Education Center in West Palm Beach, Moore thanked the summer dry spell as he recorded the healthy river conditions — low nitrogen, fairly high dissolved oxygen and a visible sandy bottom.

The lesson was only a quick stop during the group's morning canoe trip down the winding "Wild and Scenic" portion of the Northwest Fork, and Moore was eager to continue splashing around near the dam.

"It's the only kind of Florida

like this that's left," he said, rushing back into the warm waters.

It's a realization that many kayakers, swimmers and anglers who enjoy the Loxahatchee River know well — the freshwater fish, water lilies and pond apples create an environment that has attracted visitors and residents for 8,000 years.

American Indians lived along the banks until the Seminole wars of the mid-1800s. As European pioneers moved into the area, the river remained the heart of the area that is now southern Martin and northern Palm Beach counties.

"Having the origin of a community based so specifically on a river makes it have its own, unique personality," said Jamie Stuve, the executive director of the Loxahatchee River Historical Society.

"That's what makes us different than anywhere else in Florida."

Like the Seminoles, pioneers used the river for food and trans-

portation because the hundreds of acres of wetlands that fed the river made building roads difficult.

There was even a school boat, and the settlers' children would get picked up on their docks for a ride to class. On the way home, Stuve said, the students would cast a line into the fresh water for dinner.

Now, the river — with its Northwest Fork winding into the 54-year-old state park — is used mostly for eco-tourism and recreation.

Jupiter Farms resident Bill Jones takes his yellow kayak on the river a couple times of week.

"It's good exercise," said Jones, 69, before riding over the Masten Dam, plunging into the water and receiving a round of applause from the Pine Jog campers.

"A lot of it is in the shade. When the river's high, it's great."

-suzanne.wentley@scripps.com



MATTHEW RATAJCZAK staff photographer

Dan Lopater, 14, left, and Kevin Baumiller, 13, campers in the weeklong "Focus on Nature" summer camp at Pine Jog Environmental Education Center, test the pH of the water from the "Wild and Scenic" section of the Northwest Fork of the Loxahatchee River at Masten Dam. Educational programs are helping bring insight and awareness to the threatened watershed.