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## Most Changes to Marion Creek Have Been for Worse

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THE LEDGER

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HAINES CITY | Marion Creek winds for 11 miles through what was once one of the last wild places in Polk County.

It flows from Lake Marion east of Haines City near Grenelefe to Lake Hatchineha in the Kissimmee Chain of Lakes in Osceola County.

Along its course, the stream gradually drops 15 feet.



ERNST PETERS | THE LEDGER  
Marion Creek near its mouth is still a tranquil place at the Stoke Preserve in Haines City.

Environmentalists began focusing efforts to protect the creek and the land around it as early as 1982 when they organized a canoe trip.

The forests along the waterway remain intact, but much of the landscape within the creek's 17,300-acre drainage basin is no longer as wild as it once was.

That's because Marion Creek bisects part of a 47,000-acre megadevelopment called Poinciana that also includes a portion of the Reedy Creek Basin to the north of Marion Creek.

Poinciana was laid out in the early 1970s before modern growth controls were in place. It lay relatively dormant until the housing boom that occurred in the last decade.

Encroachment into the creek's edge would have been more extensive if the South Florida Water Management District and the Polk County Environmental Lands Program had not worked together since 1994 to carve out a little more than 7,000 acres for preservation in Polk and Osceola counties. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service owns a piece of the basin, too.

More preservation has been proposed via a 6,473-acre acquisition called the Lake Hatchineha Watershed project that includes parts of the land around the creek.

Polk County officials had been urging the water management to buy land along the creek for conservation as long ago as 1982. The push was initiated by the late Ernie Caldwell, a county commissioner who grew up in the area.

However, that wasn't the first time commissioners acted to protect the creek.

In 1967, the County Commission turned down a request by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to drain the Marion Creek swamp as part of the ill-fated Kissimmee River "flood control" project.

According to a press account at the time, the commissioners' reluctance was based on having to spend money to improve boating access after the creek was lowered and wasn't because of concerns about environmental damage the drainage would cause.

**GCCF**

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### **TRIBUTARIES SWELL CREEK**

About a mile from Lake Marion, Snell Creek joins Marion Creek.

Snell Creek drains an area that stretches north and west to somewhere near the intersection of Interstate 4 and U.S. 27. Flow in the creek ranges from 11 million to 25 million gallons a day, depending on the time of year and the location.

Where the creeks join, some houses are still visible, but any sign of development quickly disappears a short distance away as the stream winds lazily past cypress trees and then mostly maples and bays.

Sometimes the vegetation along the creek is colorful when wild azaleas, various species of wild hibiscus and other flowering shrubs and vines ranging from buttonbush to asters are in bloom.

The view is rarely interrupted since only two roads cross the creek.

Although water quality has declined (see related story), it is still untouched by the influences found in more urban systems.

For instance, clusters of apple snail eggs attached to creek-side vegetation still consists of only the native species, not any of the introduced species.

### **GROWTH CHANGES LANDSCAPE**

Preservation efforts in the Marion Creek Basin came in the mid-1990s as development was beginning to take off in Poinciana.

A one-lane wooden bridge that had been adequate since it was built in 1930 was replaced with a two-lane concrete bridge in 2006 after the County Commission approved the project to link Poinciana to Haines City.

Twenty years ago, the bridge served only local traffic.

Near the creek's mouth along the road to the new bridge sits the Sherwood L. Stokes Preserve, a 217-acre environmental refuge managed by the Polk County Environmental Lands program.

The preserve is on land where Stokes, a longtime Haines City lawyer and an ardent defender of Lake Marion, lived for many years. Stokes died in 1998. He was 80.

His son, Lynn Stokes, recalls what the creek was like when he was a boy in the 1950s.

"There were snail kites along the creek when I was a kid," he recalls, referring to a bird of prey that is rarely seen on the lake today.

He recalled swimming in the creek and that an ideal spot was near the confluence of Marion and Snell creeks downstream from his father's property.

"There was a sand bottom and lots of eel grass," Stokes said.

It was a quiet place in those days.

"There weren't many airboats, and most people had small plywood boats, and some people used oars instead of the motor," he said, explaining there was originally a fish camp along the creek that his father bought from Fritz Hebel, another Haines City man, to use as a home site.

Other environmental conditions were different, too.

Stokes recalls a 3-inch artesian well that supplied a constant supply of cold, crystal-clear water.

"That's a symbol of how the environment has gotten worse," he said, referring to the fact that free-flowing artesian wells are a thing of the past, at least in this part of Florida.

The creek and the adjoining namesake lake were popular fishing spots.

### **SCRUB TO SWAMP**

The land preserved along Marion Creek is a mosaic of flood plain forests and higher scrub and flatwoods. The area still harbors diverse plant and animal life.

The higher areas along the creek feature blinding-white sand typical of scrub habitat, and it reveals the cryptic tracks of sand skinks and offers the chance to catch sight of a rare Highlands tiger beetle.

Florida scrub-jays move among the scrub oaks.

Pygmy fringe trees, named for their showy, creamy-white blossoms stand out among the oaks.

Several years ago, Davenport botanist Nancy Bissett discovered a new variety of scrub mint.

As the scrub habitat gives way to lush areas, the vegetation changes to trees and shrubs that prefer a damper habitat. Those include rarities such as star anise.

The 736 species on the official Marion Creek Wildlife Management Area plant list includes endangered and threatened species, such as pygmy fringe tree, Britton's bear grass and scrub buckwheat.

Wildlife includes more than 343 species of animals, including bald eagles, swallow-tailed kites, Eastern bluebirds and great crested flycatchers.

There are also alligators, white-tailed deer, bobcats and wild hogs.

Florida black bears were once seen occasionally, but they have vanished from the area.

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