



Press Release

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Ocklawaha River Coalition Launches New Regional Campaign

As part of an effort to educate the community about the vital ecological and environmental connection between the Ocklawaha River, Silver Springs and the St. Johns River, the Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition is launching **the Great Florida Riverway campaign**.

The coalition includes more than 40 environmental organizations working to restore the Ocklawaha River, which was dammed in 1968 as part of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal project. Although the canal project was discontinued several years later, the Rodman Dam near Palatka has remained, flooding thousands of acres of forested wetlands, 20 springs and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River. A long, steady decline in water quality, spring flow, wetland forests, fish, wildlife and recreation has led American Rivers to designate the Ocklawaha River as one of American's Most Endangered Rivers ® of 2020.

The Great Florida Riverway campaign highlights the vital ecological, environmental and economic connection between the Ocklawaha River, Silver Springs and the lower St. Johns River. Scientists and economists have shared that restoring this vast 217-mile river system reaching from the Green Swamp in Central Florida all the way to the Atlantic Ocean via the Ocklawaha and St. Johns Rivers is vital to improving this river system and the economic health of North and Central Florida.

“Breaching the dam and restoring the riverway from the Atlantic Ocean to the Harris Chain of Lakes for anglers, boaters and paddlers will increase tourism and jobs, expand recreational opportunities, and bring migratory fish and manatees to the system,” said Margaret Spontak, chair of the Ocklawaha River Coalition. “The Great Florida Riverway campaign seeks to link communities together to inspire collaborative restoration and recreation planning, tourist development and marketing. We have to move beyond the divisiveness of the past and look to inspiring recreation, conservation and economic plans for the future that unite our river communities.”

The campaign includes a new documentary about the river system, interviews with diverse users and area leaders, a new website and logo, recreational concepts from University of Florida landscape design faculty and students and map tools for citizens wanting to explore the three-river system.

“Restoration of the Ocklawaha River is not just a Putnam County issue or a Marion County issue,” said Ed Lowe retired director of environmental sciences for the St. Johns River Water Management District (SJRWMD). “Breaching the Rodman Dam near Palatka would reunite four ecosystems: Silver Springs, the Ocklawaha River, the Lower St. Johns River, and the coastal Atlantic Ocean.”

“Silver Springs will never be fully restored without the breaching of the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam on the Ocklawaha River,” added Robert Knight, executive director of the Florida Springs Institute. “Migratory fish from the Atlantic Ocean and St. Johns River, including striped bass, channel catfish, striped mullet, American shad, American eels, and Atlantic sturgeon, are critical to a productive Silver Springs ecosystem.”

University of Florida landscape design students recently presented nine compelling recreation and restoration concepts to more than 25 local and state leaders and conservation organization members.

From a state-of-the art angler and outdoor center near the Buckman Locks to a redesign of the Rodman Recreation Area to themed driving and boating tours, the students shared renderings, images and maps that portrayed recreation opportunities in a restored Ocklawaha River environment. The concepts are being used as a springboard for discussions with citizens and leaders.

The Great Florida Riverway Documentary and additional interactive resources are now available online at GreatFloridaRiverway.com. The documentary shares the history, stories, science and economics of this system and includes interviews with more than two dozen anglers, historians, elected officials, scientists, business owners, conservationists and economists.

The Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition includes more than 40 organizations representing millions of members from across United States. The Coalition's mission is to restore the Ocklawaha as a free-flowing River, reconnecting the Ocklawaha, Silver and St. Johns Rivers, and elevating the regional benefits for all. <https://FreetheOcklawaha.com>

