NEWS FROM THE WATERSHED

Wetlands, what they are and why we need them.

In these days of water restrictions and the critical need to conserve our natural resources, it is important to understand Florida's wetlands and how important they are to us.

So, you may ask, what exactly is a wetland? According to the University of Florida, wetlands are defined as "ecosystems typically found on the transition between terrestrial and aquatic systems. In order to be classified as a wetland, an area typically has at least one of the following characteristics:

1. a water table at or near the ground's surface during the growing season
2. poorly drained or hydric soils
3. be home to a unique diversity of wildlife and vegetation specifically adapted to thrive in wet environments."

It is important to know that wetlands assist society in many ways. Some of the vital ways they help us is by storing water, helping to prevent flooding, stabilizing shorelines, protecting against erosion and housing many varieties of plants and animals. Since much of our water run-off travels to the wetlands, we, as conservation minded citizens, must do all we can to keep our groundwater free of pollutants and toxins.

Florida's wetlands are made up primarily of swamps and marshes. Swamps are often thought of as wasted land; a frightening, dark place where no one dares to roam. Unfortunately, these unfounded beliefs have led to the destruction of many of these valuable areas in the past. The reality is that swamps are very important to our environment.

A swamp is actually any wetland which is dominated by woody plants. Their soils are generally saturated with water and much of the year may have standing water. Many species of plants and wildlife depend on these plant communities to survive. Plants that live in the swamp include Bald Cypress, Water Tupelo, Swamp Blackgum, and mangroves. Some of the critters that we find in swamps include river otters, frogs, salamanders, egrets, Great Blue Herons, Red-tailed Hawks, wood ducks, dragonflies, turtles and alligators. So we can see that swamps house many types of plants and animals that couldn't live anywhere else, but what other functions do they provide?

When flooding conditions exist, swamps help to control the overflow by holding water. In addition, they assist in the filtration of water. As the water flows through the swamp, the roots of the plants trap many pollutants and sediments which may then sink and settle to the bottom of the swamp rather than travel to their original destination. As a result, cleaner water is flowing out of the swamps. As it is with every ecosystem, swamps are an important part of the food chain; plants in swamps process nutrients which help to feed wildlife down stream.

In contrast to swamps, marshes are generally treeless and open areas housing different varieties of grasses, sedges and other soft-stemmed vegetation. Marshes, like swamps, include varieties of plants and wildlife that could not exist elsewhere. In addition, marshes recharge groundwater supplies and moderate streamflow by providing water to streams. This is an especially important function during periods of drought. In addition, marshes act as nature's filter. As water passes over the marsh, water flow is slowed down, and suspended particles settle to the bottom. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, marshes are so good at cleaning polluted waters that they are now being replicated to treat wastewater from farms, parking lots and small sewage plants.

These are just a few of the benefits we receive from our wetlands. Hopefully you understand how vital these ecosystems are to our water resources and our survival.

You can do much to protect these precious water sources. Conserve water whenever you can. Make sure to use environmentally friendly products and recycle. Take the time to learn about the wetlands near you and get involved in volunteer organizations that work to protect these areas. You can make a difference.

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