

Landscape Design Students Create Recreational Concepts for a Restored Ocklawaha River

For over 50 years, University of Florida (UF) faculty and students have been on the leading edge of teaching, research, writing and planning around the Ocklawaha River and the impacts of the Rodman/Kirkpatrick Dam. It is not surprising on this 50th anniversary year of the halting of the Cross Florida Barge Canal that students from the UF Environmental Planning and Design Studio in the College of Landscape Architecture created nine conceptual recreation projects focused on the possibility of a partially restored and free-flowing Ocklawaha River.

During the 2020 fall semester, UF students received input from a distinguished faculty team, subject matter experts, and focus groups with anglers, paddlers, and community leaders. The projects provided a way for people of differing views to share thoughts about partial restoration and desired recreational amenities for all. The complex restoration project now has vivid maps, graphics, and renderings to show citizens and leaders a variety of conceptual possibilities for the Ocklawaha River.

Students were challenged to factor in the unique natural ecosystems of the Ocklawaha River watershed and the environmental suitability of their recreation projects. In addition, the faculty team and students discussed how to assure boat and shore anglers would have more recreational opportunities as the Rodman Reservoir transitioned back to its natural Ocklawaha River channel under a restoration scenario.

One of the most detailed designs addressing angler needs is the Bartram Outpost. It creates an epicenter for anglers, hunters, and their families with access to the St. Johns River. The St. Johns is now a higher ranked bass fishery than the artificial Rodman Reservoir. Bank fisher needs were addressed with the addition of new fishing platforms along the restored River and ponds and fishing docks near the now Buckman Lock. One student envisioned a standalone reservoir or Lake Rodman Fish Management Area, an expensive and environmental challenging, yet unique option. The Fish Habitat Conservation Project student team mapped out the return of migratory fish populations such as the striped bass and American shad, sought after sports fish.

Student concepts included improved paddling trails, hiking trail connections, driving tours, manatee refuges, historic fish migration paths, wildlife corridors, and more. Diversifying the recreational users to increase visitation and improve economic benefits were included in the student goals.

The landscape design studio successfully introduced students to decision making on a regional scale, emphasizing green conservation and recreation infrastructure planning and design. The experiential student design studio was created and led by Tom Hoctor, director of the UF Center for Landscape Conservation Planning along with David Barth, president of Barth Associates LLC, a developer of parks and recreation master plans for over 80 U.S. communities. Dan Farrah and doctoral students Sarah Lockhart and Widyastri Atsary Rahmy instructed and coached students on GIS mapping work. Margaret Spontak, Free the Ocklawaha River Coalition, coordinated guest lecturers and created a portal of student resources including existing studies, maps, plans, photos, and drone footage.

Final student projects were shared virtually to an audience of almost 30 leaders, including representatives from St. Johns River Water Management, FDEP Office of Greenways and Trails, Putnam County Waterways and Trails Committee, leading conservation organizations and UF faculty. The student work is also being utilized in a future Putnam County Open House and a leader viewbook.

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