

Essay on the Santa Fe River and Springs

By Lars Anderson

Sometimes, things happen that breathe new life into goofy old sayings. The one I have in mind these days is, "You don't know who's naked until the tide goes out." With water levels at historic lows on Santa Fe and other local rivers, things are being revealed that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

In the literal sense, this current "low tide" (by which I mean low water levels) is highlighting the severity of our water crisis. Data stretching back over a century shows that our recent rainfall deficits are nowhere near historic low levels. Local rivers and springs, on the other hand, are at all-time lows. As I write this, Poe Spring is trickling at the lowest rate on record and appears close to stopping altogether. Elsewhere along the Santa Fe and in other regions, springs are all greatly diminished. Silver Spring is flowing at about 50% of the volume it was producing a few decades ago. These aren't recent trends fueled by drought. Graphs using hard data and measurements gathered for over a century on some waterways show a steady downward trend in all our spring and aquifer systems, while rainfall trends have been relatively consistent.

Researchers who gather this information and environmentalists are aware of this crisis. For the general public, it has gone largely unnoticed. Rainfall and surface water have kept rivers high enough to mask the low output from the springs. Naturally occurring algae that grows rampantly because of too much nitrates is mostly submerged. But now that the "tide" is out and the rivers are relying solely on spring water, the true magnitude of the problem is revealed.

One of the biggest tragedies revealed by the low water is the attitude of local and State officials, which ranges from denial to apathy. At a recent public information meeting regarding low water levels and the resultant algae bloom in a section of the Santa Fe, scientists and policy makers came from around the State driving from as far away as Sarasota and Tallahassee. Concerned citizens crowded the pavilion at Poe Springs Park to learn the facts and discuss strategies for dealing with these problems. They brainstormed both short and long term solutions. But, when a presenter asked the crowd if there were any local officials present, no hands went up. Elected officials from High Springs, the community proposing to manage Poe Spring Park, were totally absent. The closest thing we had to a local elected representative was candidate for the upcoming election for County Commission, Robert "Hutch" Hutchinson (vote for Hutch!).

The good news is that rains from TS Beryl will likely elevate water levels in Santa Fe River in coming days and bring some relief (albeit temporary) to our current crisis. By this time next week, the algae bloom on Santa Fe will likely be history. The restored flow will wash away the bulk of algae and diminish the conditions

that made the bloom happen in the first place in non-flowing, warm, shallow water.

In nature, rising tides are a source of rejuvenation and rebirth. They deliver nutrients to the shore that fuel a rich and complex community of species. Without tides, the coastal ecosystem would fail.

As the “tide” rises on our local waterways, the problems will again be obscured. The low spring flow will no longer be apparent to the casual viewer and the ever-present algae (a natural part of the river system) will still be there, ready to bloom next time the water gets low and slow. Back at City Hall, the spotlight on our politicians won’t be so white-hot. But the one thing that won’t be obscured is the knowledge we’ve gained. A much broader swath of the public has been made aware of the water crisis. Now, we must be wise enough to act on the lessons we’ve learned, if not for ourselves then for our grandchildren and theirs.

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