

**Sarasota Oral History Project
New College of Florida, Fall 2016**

Interview with: Rob Patten

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Interviewer: Carley Culmo

Rob Patten grew up on the St. John's river in Jacksonville, Florida. He came to Sarasota in the 1970's to work as a marine biologist for the county government, forming the Coastal Zone Management Department, the Natural Resources Department, and he managed the Environmental Services Department in the 1990's. He has continued to lead environmental protection and restoration efforts in the area, and he was driving force behind the legislation to protect a third of Sarasota County's lands for public use.



Personal History

Carley Culmo: So, I read that you grew up in Jacksonville, near the St. John's River?

Rob Patten: I was born in Jacksonville. I lived just off the river before it was developed, and in my childhood I had a dog named Freckles who was a Springer Spaniel. And we would go to the river constantly against my parents' demands, and I'd get in trouble all the time because St. John's is a pretty wide river. It's got beautiful oaks on the side, it's got a beautiful wetland. I'd go down there and build, y'know palmetto forts and swing on the vines. It's actually my earliest memory of Florida and one reason I am attracted to the Myakka river, because [the St. John's river] is very much like the Myakka river except Myakka is much smaller. That kind of formulated my love for nature and for Florida.

[After growing up in Jacksonville] I moved to Miami for two years, and then to Buffalo, New York for ten years, including going to college up at Syracuse and Oswego, and University of Buffalo. I liked college a lot, it was a lot of fun. I went to law school for a while, decided I did not want to be a lawyer, and then went and talked to someone at the college of Environmental Science and Forestry at Syracuse, and he let me go to the graduate program. Out of that I was hired by the federal government as a marine specialist on the Great Lakes. I did all kinds of things on the Great Lakes, which we can go into later if you want to.

I came back to Sarasota in 1976 and worked totally out of my field as the manager of an auto-parts store and a machine shop which my dad owned, and after 3 years I got a job at Sarasota County as the first Marine Biologist in Sarasota County. Sarasota County never had any environmental staff at all. None. They had people who were in engineering, water engineering and utilities, etc, but they didn't have anyone actually reviewing any projects for any environmental impacts. That had been done previously by groups such as SOS, but there were a really active group of people that were conscientious and wanted to protect the environment. After Bird Key was filled in, in the 50's or early 60's- that was all sea grasses. It was filled in, dredged from the bay. The sea grasses were covered, and where it was dredged from became the canals and the channel that goes around Bird Key. That really made a lot of people mad and that was when the environmental groups formed in Sarasota, Florida. Then they were able to elect representatives to the City Commission, and these folks really were the foundation of Sarasota, the ethos of environmental protection for Sarasota County.

I was hired as the first marine biologist, which was kind of funny because I wasn't a marine biologist, but I had worked for the federal government doing something similar, and I knew I could set up a program for them. Then I started what was called the Coastal Zone Management Department. Then I formed the Natural Resources Department, and then I got burnt out working for government and I split and went to Africa and all kinds of places just to kind of clear my head. Then I started my own firm called Coastal Dunes, which was a habitat restoration firm that pretty much focused on the coastal zone right behind the dunes and in the dunes. So I did a lot of restoration after, maybe beach re-nourishment projects or when a condo went in and destroyed the dunes I would come in and replant them. That grew into something much bigger, doing larger landscapes all over the country. Also in the Caribbean I did environmental work for the Nature Conservancy.

Then after about 12 or 15 years I received a call from the [Sarasota] County administrator at the time, maybe in about 2000, asking if I would come back and manage this department called Environmental Services. So I went from 3 employees to 500 with utilities and stormwater and solid waste and natural resources and permitting all combined in one. I worked for 5 years doing that, 6 years. And really, I'm not suited for working for government too long, because it has its own kind of restrictions and criteria that can make you a little nutty after a while. So I had dissolved my business. So I went back and started doing more natural landscaping and restoration.

So, I'm a Floridian, and before that my great-grandfather was a Cherokee Indian and married my grandmother in Jacksonville. So of course you know the Seminoles kind of evolved from the Cherokees, but he was Cherokee, and I've always thought that my affinity and love for the land... I don't know if it's genetic or whatever, but it came from somewhere. I don't know if it's a combination of growing up by a river or an unspoiled area or just having some gene pool that somewhere said you need to be a steward of the land; you can't just show up, tear it apart and leave it worse than you found it. That really was kind of my philosophy and really has been forever.

I went into environmental protection and ecology because I had some skills relative to law and communication etc. that I could have applied and made a lot of money, honestly, but I really did it because I wanted to use those skills for animals and plants and things that have no voice because I think I could be an effective voice for protection. Again, that sounds kind of corny, but that's really how I felt. That's why I do what I do and my background, the history of college and all, was all about backpacking and camping and wilderness and protection. Then it brought me to Sarasota, evolved a lot of things since then- volunteer work, boards I've served on, showed up for different projects and tried to help out.

Growth of Environmental Protection and Policy in Sarasota County

Patten: I've seen this town change a lot. The history of Sarasota has evolved very rapidly; not the history but the development of Sarasota has evolved the last 8 years at almost a geometric pace. It's not even arithmetic anymore, it's just exploding. I think that we have lost, in Sarasota, at least at the decision making level, they've lost their focus on environmental protection. It's all about something else, and I think it's short-sighted. Most of Florida had tried that before, on the East Coast, and found out it didn't work. You can't build your way out of debt. You can increase revenues, but the infrastructure never pays for itself, the schools never pay for themselves.

So we're kind of taking a step backwards, and we're doing everything wrong that we kind of did 30 years ago, and much of the environmental protection and laws and directives and initiatives are just being chewed up and eliminated. And that's unfortunate. Not only at a county level and a state level, at a national level, it just doesn't seem to be the number 1, 2 or 3 thing to think about. You make a decision on some sort of action development or otherwise, or protection of a species- there just doesn't seem to be that much going for it. Iron development or otherwise, or protection of a species- there just doesn't seem to be that much going for it.

Ironically, the people, the normal everyday guy will want to protect his resources, will want to protect his environment. The number one reason people come to Sarasota is because of the natural environment: the beaches, the bays, the fresh air. That's number 1, 2 and 3 why people move here. They don't move here because of the condos at 16 stories and has a beautiful balcony; that's not why they move here. So they come with an ethos, be they Conservative or liberal or Republican or Democrat or Libertarian, it doesn't really matter. They come with that ethos, and they don't lose it, except when they start...well I don't know what happens exactly, but that is there.

We tapped into that in 1999 for people to tax themselves .25 million, which is \$250 per \$100,000 to buy environmentally sensitive lands in the county. We raised over two hundred million dollars, maybe three hundred million dollars in money and bonding, which is still

going on, to buy lands, mostly on the Myakka River, but also in other places. So Sarasota—this conservative Republican county, they tax themselves to buy lands. It passed by 67 percent. We had to go back to the electorate three or four years later to increase the bonding capacity because it was only 93 million the first time around, and we had bonding capacity way past that. They voted for it again, and it passed by over 70 percent. So 7 out of 10 people said I will tax myself, I will pay for a program to save lands.

The state had the latest referendum about purchasing lands which they then mutilated. After they passed the referendum, they just took the intent of the referendum and threw it out the window and started paying for salaries for departments in the state. They did not buy land. So the public says, hey go do this, and lately the decision makers have said, well it's not really our priority, we're not going to worry too much about that. We taxed ourselves, we bought the property. That land is part of a vast number of acres that are publicly owned in Sarasota County. Almost a third of Sarasota County is publicly owned and protected, which is huge in Florida. So I'm glad I was a part of some of that, and I'm glad that the people said, “yeah let's go do it,” and I can walk on those lands. In fact, I own a piece of property right now on the Myakka River that's adjacent to 25 thousand acres of protected lands. And we have bobcats, we have panthers, we have deers, owls, hawks, that have a huge amount of land that will support their populations, so that's positive. So downtown Sarasota, they're pretty much destroying, turning it over to a concrete jungle, but that's a small part of what Sarasota County is all about.

Culmo: So development and an erosion of the environment in Sarasota County really began in the 1960's?

Patten: The population of Sarasota really had not expanded too much up until about 1950. Slowly it grew, and people realized it was a beautiful place and they want to be here, but there never was any institutionalized protection. When I was hired as a marine biologist the first time, I had a big project [it was in] in North Creek, in North Port at this mobile home park. [They] wanted to dredge this really shallow creek where a lot of manatees swim up to Warm Mineral Springs to put a marina in, and I denied it. They go, "What are you doing? You better be able to back this up." Well, I had a biologist working for me, in fact from New College, who I had just hired. I trusted his analysis, and I trusted his ability to defend that denial, and it went through. That was kind of the first time we really had said no to any kind of major environmentally harmful development project that I'm aware of.

Then we started being tough about seawalls. We said less seawalls, more revetments. If we can get them, we'll plant in them—something less harsh. Just little things, like stormwater is caught in these ponds next to the roads. Retention ponds. The idea is that you hold the water before it runs out to the bay, 'cause some of the sediment settles out and you don't have a rush of nutrients and a rush of sediments into the bay, which is good. So we're looking at all these ponds, and someone that worked for me said, “Why don't we create

littoral zones in these ponds? Why don't we make them so that a third is shallow, and we'll plant emergent vegetation, wetland vegetation?" When you see birds in a wetland, they aren't swimming around. They're walking in shallow water, and why don't we create that? There wasn't too much pushback because no one really cared if we had to build them a little differently.

So we just started making some changes that focused on protecting some elements, protecting and enhancing, if we could, environmental quality. Mitigation. If you wanted to go in and do something destructive in an area how are you going to offset that? This was all fairly new in the 60's. It just wasn't done. I came along in the mid-70's, and I think people by that time said, "We've had it. You're killing the goose that's laying the golden egg." And we were. So Florida then, and Sarasota County, came up with long-range planning. We had things like traffic concurrency. Which means, for example: you want to build something on Ringling Avenue and it's big and Ringling already has tons of traffic. Well unless you can show you're not going to degrade that traffic to a certain level, then you're not going to build it because you're not concurrent with the traffic plan. That's the first thing that's going out the window when we changed the political direction. So a small thing it seems like, it seems like a bureaucratic kind of thing, but it has huge impacts. It prevents over-development in areas, might save some trees. It's gonna have less pollution from cars just idling all the way over the bridge the way they are now, all the way over the bridge though to St. Armands.

The late 70's, 80's, 90's and the early 2000's were great decades for environmental protection in Sarasota County. Now it's being undone at a rate you can't believe and subtly, quietly. It's done in ways that most people don't even see. Changes are made at [the levels of] organizations, governments. Focuses, long-range plans are being thrown out the window. So we're really going backwards quickly. Which is one reason I'm really proud and happy we bought these lands. I mean, they're protected, but we have a third of Sarasota county in public use. A friend of mine who's an attorney, he said, "Something cool about what we've done in Sarasota County is that, you know if you're in a space shuttle you can see it from space. I saw a picture; it actually shows out as a green dot in all this area of development and roads in Sarasota, Florida. It's an actual green space." I go, "that's pretty cool, you can see it from space!" So, like anything else, it ebbs and flows. We had a strong period and now it's ebbing. So we really need to fight, to maintain some of the things that have already been fought once so we don't slip too far backwards.

Policy changes in Florida and Sarasota County and Getting Involved in Environmental Protection

Culmo: How would you advise people who do not have access to or influence over decision making at the bureaucratic level to get involved and have an impact with environmental

protection? Especially when things are being subtly shifted in a direction that opposes environmental protection at the bureaucratic level?

Patten: How do you get involved if you really believe in environmental protection but you see it slipping away? What do you do? There are a couple things you can do. One, you can vote the right people in office, but that's a hard thing to do because you can't really figure out where someone stands because they're going to talk all around it. You can get involved in groups that are dedicated to protection: the DCR Club, the Audubon Society. There are private groups like the Conservation Foundation that like-minded people are drawn to, and they can have some impact as a group.

The biggest thing you can do is elect the right people because they're the ones that set the stage, they're the ones that set the direction. It's hard to find out where those people stand if they don't talk about it. And if the press doesn't ask them, "What do you feel about this?" then you're not going to find out. Like much of the political system today, it's hard to tell when someone's telling you the truth or when they're not, or what they really believe or if they believe something when they get into office and they change it.

So that's what people should do, they should pay attention to who they're voting for at any level, and they should vote for people that support their viewpoint of environmental protection. If they don't have that viewpoint, then vote for the other guy. If that's how you feel, then that's democracy. Do what you want to do, but I believe that the majority of people in Sarasota County want significant, real environmental protection. Unfortunately, the powerful few who have access to the decision makers, who have a lot of money behind—attorneys and lobbyist—are slowly unraveling that. So get involved, you know. Know who you're voting for. That's really a big deal. Involve yourself with a group that actually engages in activities and speaks up for the environment. That's how you do it as a person who doesn't know a lot about the ins and outs and the subtleties. Get to the big picture. If you put the right person on an elected board they have a bigger voice than everyone else.

It's really important, when we are talking about Florida, Sarasota County, Manatee County to remember it's not just us; nature knows no geographical boundaries. The oak trees don't know that one side is Manatee County and the other side is Sarasota County. If you look at the laws and how they're protected, they could be significantly different. So we have these artificial boundaries, but if you look at our ecosystems, they don't have those boundaries. Their connections have to do with function and wildlife and species diversity. We're not there yet in Florida; we probably never will be. If we keep thinking that the land is ours to do whatever we want to and there is inherent right... some people think there is a manifest destiny to pave and develop every piece of land. That this should happen. I don't buy that, I don't see that.

Culmo: Do you see the movement of legislation away from environmental protection happening now as an echo of a movement towards development that happened in the past? That there was a wave of development that was followed by a wave of legislative protection and clean up, and now that is falling away again?

Patten: I think there is an awareness that began in the 60's that we had to do something, and that awareness was made manifest by having people put in office that had the ethos of protection. Smart protection, not just say, "no, no, no"- that's not what I'm talking about. Those people passed laws and hired people in institutions that were going to protect. That climb happened gradually from the 70's to the 80's to the 90's. It really was a pretty steady growth of protection, and we've seen this unravel probably in the last 10 years. So I see it recently becoming unraveled.

Culmo: Is that related to shifts at the level of the state government over the past 10 years and the election of Rick Scott as governor?

Patten: The Water Management Boards really have the ability to do a lot of good. They can purchase lands for watershed protection. They can protect lands by not allowing, say, development of big phosphates next to a spring. [Rick Scott] has systematically put in people who are known to be huge developers or [agriculture] people who want more water from the aquifer, not less. He's taken the Department of Environmental Protection- he's gutted that.

If he would just look at Florida as a unified system. If the government would say, "ok, wait a minute, we can't take these pieces off the system and think they're separate. We can't just look at this river and think, well we can just go add more pollutants to it," or whatever it is. Realize it's part of one system and then ask how do you protect the system. You make an overall plan, and you stick to your plan. I don't think there's a plan. I think it's absolutely who makes the last phone call and who's the biggest donor. It comes from the top down, it really does.

Culmo: I am wondering how those people who want environmental protection who have more direct access and ability to influence decision making at the bureaucratic level are reacting to the shift away from environmental protection. Have you seen a change in strategy by those people working in government who want environmental protection over the past 10 years that legislation has been moving away from protection? Is there a way to shift the strategy at that level?

Patten: The strategy from my standpoint...if you want to shift the paradigm, if you want to get it back on right- in my opinion- right direction, you really have to elect people who share those views. It's not really that difficult to figure out how to fix this. That's what I think. You

elect people who are going to elect people, who are going to hire people. It all flows downhill. That's what you do.

We have a governor that told the Department of Environmental Protection that you couldn't use the [phrase] "climate change." I'm trying to grasp that. I'm trying to understand how you could do that when we know there's climate change, we know we have sea level rise. These aren't debatable subjects, these aren't some things that are politically debatable. He told his Environmental Department, in Florida of all places, where sea level rise is going to have a huge impact where you're from, Miami. It's already having an impact. Well that's top down. You tell an agency that can't say that... We're hiring a person that's being appointed as a Secretary of Interior, I believe, that says, "Well, we don't have man-made climate change, we don't have a problem, it's just not there." It's crazy, but those people hire other people, they pass policies, and it all flows downhill. You just keep moving up, and looking up and you say, "Who's directing these policies?" It's people that are elected. If someone says, "Oh well they're all crooks, I'm not going to vote," well then, take what you get.

If you haven't paid attention enough, you haven't been involved enough. It doesn't take forever to find out a few things about what your interests are. You're interests may be child care; vote for someone who supports your beliefs around child care. It may be health care, whatever it is. If you decide, "Well, politics are just politics..." Harry Truman said, "I was either gonna be a piano player in a whorehouse or a politician. From what I can tell, there's not much difference." What he was saying is that they're just kind of directing the slop, but it's not slop. It really has a significant impact on people. If you can't do that...

What I do now is, I try to be a part of or initiate grassroots projects. We just had a project in the City of Sarasota for tree protection. We had some significant advances that we were able to do to protect old oaks and other trees as development happens. There are other things that are proposed, dredging another pass that's never been dredged—100 yards of sand—a big pass. So I get involved in those issues and try to coalesce and put together groups that will bring these issues to light and make decision makers explain them and defend them. So if you're not in that mode and people are already elected for four years, then get involved.

I learned that in the 60's, we were fighting the establishment. Well, I am the establishment, and so are all the other people my age. We realize that the only way to get things done is to get involved and raise your voice, but some people are too busy. I get that, they really have lots going on. But if you have time to play two hours of video games a week, you have time for maybe putting an hour into something you believe in. So I buy that to some extent, but not totally. Maybe some people just don't have the passion, or maybe they think that the system is rigged so it's not going to make any difference anyway. Well, how can one person make a difference? It really does occur that maybe one person doesn't really make that big of

a difference, but put together two or three people, ten people or a hundred or a thousand people, now you're talking a critical mass that has to be listened to by decision makers.

So even though politics gets a bad rep, that's the system we're in. It's a political system, a pluralistic democracy. You have to be involved, or else you can't just sit back and go "What's happening?" There are three types of people in this world: people that make things happen, people that things happen to, and people that go, "What happened?" Don't be the guy that goes, "What happened?" Be the guy that makes things happen, or the woman that makes things happen.

Midnight Pass

Culmo: I read that you were involved in the closing and opening of Midnight Pass? Can you explain what a Pass is and why it needed to be opened and closed?

Patten: I was director of a coastal zone management at the time [of the closing of Midnight Pass], when the whole issue came up. Midnight Pass was what's called a dying pass. It's filling in, it was rapidly moving to the north. It wasn't very deep. When I first came here, it was very deep. You could go out to the end of the pass and catch big sharks flowing in and out.

A pass is an opening between the Bay and the Gulf, and some passes are dominated by waves, some by current. Big Pass is current driven. In other words, there is so much water going in and out that it scours it, and it's going to stay open. A wave dominated pass is when a storm comes in, and there are waves, and they fill it in quicker and it moves. Midnight Pass was filling in, and it was moving. When I say moving the shoreline, the opening was gradually going north. As it starts to get shallower and shallower, there is no velocity of water to scour it out. It becomes a sandbar.

Unfortunately as it was running north, there were two homes there, and unfortunately one [belonged] to a very famous artist. His name was Syd Solomon, a contemporary artist. He had lots of friends and followers. So my advice was to let it go, it's going to close. These folks came before the commission and said, "We need to close it on our own." That involved putting in not many truckloads of sand in a very shallow area to close it down. Then there was a big stink because you closed the natural pass. Well, yeah, it was closed when it was getting ready to close itself, but that doesn't matter. Man should have never gotten involved and tried to make that happen one way or the other.

So they agreed to a plan to open it, which was totally designed to fail. I was there when they dug this ditch, and when they opened it up to the Gulf of Mexico. Water went in and out between this fifty-five foot wide ditch that was maybe twenty feet deep. I went home at two

in the morning, I lived up in the Key. I went home, and I came back the next morning, and it was closed up. The sand just filled in. The pass isn't just the opening between the island, it's the bar that's on one side of the island, it's the sandbar that's on the inside of the island, it's the bay. It's a system, so you can't just mess with one part and think you're going to be successful.

So that connection to the Gulf closed, and people, I think rightfully, were mad because we interfered with a natural process. Unfortunately we had asked experts around the state. It was rapidly becoming not functional. It was going to eventually beat around, but unfortunately there were two houses there. If those two houses weren't there, the opening would have run north and one big storm probably would have sealed it in. But that's not what happened. That's what happens when you try to direct natural processes to get what you want. At some point, you have to go back and do something else, and go back and do something else, creating a mess.

So Midnight Pass, the closing was a reaction by the Commission—who, by the way, were very environmentally positive, very supportive. But, they had a room with hundreds of people saying, “We can't let this man's house fall in.” I get that. You have to do something, we have to do something. Well what was done was the wrong thing, unfortunately. Even today, I see stickers that say open Midnight Pass. These people weren't even there; this was 1981 or [1982] or something like that, so it's what, 30, 40 something years later. Now it's not even a pass, it's an island that's connected because the back bay is filled in. There's no sandbar out in the Gulf. So it's not a pass anymore. It couldn't be a pass unless you really took out everything on both sides and in the middle, all the sea grasses. Then possibly it might be a pass. But, it's an emotional issue for a lot of people.

Post-Graduate Work at the Great Lakes

Culmo: This is kind off topic, but I am interested to hear about the work you did on the Great Lakes after college.

Patten: When I got out of graduate school I was totally broke, and I needed a job so badly. My roommate in graduate school, he interviewed for two jobs for what was called the Sea Grant College. Sea Grant was a function of the extension service, which if you're familiar with that, is connected to the universities around, all the universities in the country. They had an extension service of people they would pay. You know, they would help fruit growers if they were having a problem with diseases. They would go help cattle people if they were having some problem, and basically it was a way of tying the university into some real world problem. It was paid for by the state and university. Then they formed what was called the Sea Grant College, which was an extension of that, and I was hired as a Marine Specialist.

The Great Lakes had a number of issues, and had in the past, Lake Erie in particular. It was known as a “dead lake,” etc. So my roommate was offered the job and didn’t want it. So I interviewed for it, and they said, “do you want this job?” and I said, “well, yeah I do.” Even though it was kind of outside my field, I really wanted to go into land management and natural parks. That’s kind of where I was headed. So I took the job, and I set up an office.

I was a marine specialist. I worked with commercial fishermen that were catching all kinds of what they called “trash fish,” bottom feeders they had to throw back because there’s no market for them. I worked with communities that had erosion problems from storms that were coming into their harbors and smashing their boats. I worked with other groups that had specific problems related to Lake Erie. We had different programs for different people. We used scrap tires to make floating breakwaters. We put them together in diamonds, and put those together, and when you put them out in the open water, it dissipates wave energy by about 50 percent. So these harbors that had been exposed, the waves were now dissipated by 50 percent.

The other example I can think about quickly was that there’s a lot of fish in Lake Erie—well there used to be—that were called trash fish, suckers. They were trying to fish for perch and walleye, yellow pike, those had a lot of value, good taste, people wanted to buy them. These suckers they would throw back. Well you can have, in any net drag, you could have 60 percent be suckers. They were dead. They’d throw them back into the water, which is a waste of protein. But no one wanted them because their meat was brown when you opened them up, and they had this reputation of being bottom feeders and they were sucking up all the bad stuff. There could be some truth to that.

So I worked with the commercial fishermen and Cornell food scientist group, and I tried to get Welch’s interested. We collected these fish and we took them to Cornell, and the food scientists came up with these products that we found out if you had a little small, bite-sized fish ball you could pop it into your mouth, you didn’t care if it was brown. The enzyme breakdown didn’t matter. They tasted great, so we went to the commercial fishermen and we showed them these products, and they loved them and the people loved them and the testing was great.

We tried to find a food company that would sell them and pay for the manufacturing and sell them. We had them in different flavors, like sweet and sour was real popular, people liked that a lot. I think we had a name for them, sweet and sour sucker balls... and I’m not sure that’s what we should have called them. It didn’t quite work. But anyway, we tried to get people interested and to utilize what was already happening, to utilize those fish. I did that for two years, and then I came to Sarasota to help my dad with his business.

The big thing about the Great Lakes, about Lake Erie, is that it was dead. Back in the 50's and 60's, it was really dead. The fish populations were going down, lots of algae, water quality, because basically it had been a dumping ground for Cleveland, and Detroit, Buffalo, Windsor. Every municipality up along [the lake] were just dumping their waste in there, a lot of industry. Well they started cleaning it up in the 60's through the Clean Water Act, and it started actually to come back. I wrote this article just saying, "Well, maybe we need an awareness campaign." And I wrote this article that said, it's a Mark Twain paraphrase, "The announcement of my death is exaggerated." That's not how it goes, but it's something like that. So I wrote this article, and I put it out. Well, the Associated Press picked it up, and it got out into all these newspapers. I started getting calls from South Africa, England from all over the United States, wanting to know about this new awareness that Lake Erie is not dead. It's been dead for years, how is it alive? I was just sitting here at my desk writing this article one day trying to put together facts to show that water quality was getting better, fish populations were coming back, and apparently it had a big impact. I got calls from all over the place. It was probably visible thing I did, though I don't think it was the most important thing I did while I was there.

Myakka and St. John's - Florida Rivers and Floridian Environments

Culmo: So going back further in your history, you said you feel an affinity to the Myakka River because you grew up on the St. John's River?

Patten: [The Myakka and the St. John's River] are Florida blackwater rivers. They're unique; they're not like most rivers in the rest of the country. They're full of tannins and that's why they're dark. And it's actually not black, it's actually kind of this golden honey brown, if you just take like a foot of it running over the sandbar. So those are unique rivers, and they're highways to all kind of species: manatees, snook, they come up and their juvenile period is spent up in the estuary in the mix of the saltwater and freshwater. I just feel comfortable being under live oaks and slash pines and snakes and gators that are all part of Florida.

I had an airplane. I'm a pilot. I had a job in Palm Beach for 15 years. I would fly back and forth for that job, maybe 2 or 3 times a week. At night time, when I flew back, I would take off from Palm Beach, and it would take an hour to fly back. You could see a strip of light all the way down the coast of Florida on the East Side. Then it gets dark... then it gets really dark. You see almost no lights as you're going over Okeechobee, no lights over Lake Okeechobee, a lot of ranch land. Arcadia shows up kind of a blob of lights. Then you pass Myakka State Park, you're coming into Sarasota, and there's another string of very bright lights that go all the way down the coast. For 50 minutes, I was pretty much in darkness, but for the first 5 to 10 minutes and the last were the lights. That's what people think of Florida,

that and the big blob in the middle called Disney World.

So, Florida is mostly agricultural... ranches. It's not mostly condos on the water, but that's where people go. Floridians know that, people who grew up in the south and in Florida know about the Florida cowboys that are still there, that you can go out and find right now 20 miles from here running ranches. They know about the citrus industry and the cattle industry, and they know that people who come here lately, who kind of stay along the shoreline, are really, unless they go out to Myakka State Park or Arcadia, they're missing 90 percent of what Florida is all about. That's the Florida I know. Christmas time, you go into the woods and you actually find mistletoe and bring it back, you find holly and bring it back, you find pinecones and spray them with gold glitter, and that becomes your center piece. That's the Florida that I know and love.