

Does Anyone Know Where We re Going?

By Thomas R. Cuba, Delta *Seven*

A little while ago I sat in a conference and listened to a presentation on *Minimum Levels and Flows*. It was actually quite good. But eventually someone said something that started me thinking about why we do what we do. But wait. We know that already. We do it to save the planet: To protect the environment: To save a little Florida for our kids. Really?

Let me go back to what I heard. The presenter was telling us how the State had directed the scientists to develop minimum levels and flows for various large lakes and rivers. The idea was to make sure there was enough water left in the river or lake after we d all taken our fair share so that the fish could keep from getting suntanned. The exact words used were something like ...*the levels needed to avoid significant harm*. So he says that the first thing they decide on was to not do that - not exactly anyway. First they redefined the job to be one a little more achievable by scientists. They changed *significant harm* to *significant change*.

What was being said was that a lake is as good as a creek or a stream. A big river is as good as a little one. A mud puddle is as good as Lake Baikal. The question of harm implies an intrinsic value. The unasked and unresolved question of value to whom, was what was causing the problem. Let me expand a little. Consider life as a smallpox microbe. Antibiotics, to you the microbe, have very little value: To the human population they are indispensable. In addition to these statements of harm and value, was the statement that it is harder to measure harm than change: Lot s harder.

My brain expanded on these thoughts and I began to ask whether an oak forest was better than a cypress forest or a pine forest. And finally it ended up at the final resting place of many drifting thoughts: I was at the *So What?* spot.

Well that was easy. So *what are we doing?* Are we protecting everything we can just for the sake of keeping the state like it is? Haven t we all seen how the pinelands have suffered losses at the hands of strong wetland protection laws? Haven t we all recognized the ecologically ridiculous result of piecemeal protection? Isn t that where greenways came from?

The *So What?* is really a question of where are we going with all of this? In the foreseeable future we will need lakes, creek, streams, swamps, cities, roads, subdivisions and shopping malls. In the end, it all comes back to systems. We need shopping malls and swamps. We don t need too many of either one. Under our current system, the discussion will always be a game of one-on-one: One mall versus one swamp and the referee is a fellow named property rights.

Wouldn t it be nice to be able to look at Florida s carrying capacity for all of it s creatures in a balanced and internally integrated system and then decide how many big lakes and how many little lakes we need to support these species? Do minimum levels and flows relate to the animals in the water? Near the water? Visiting the water? Migrating through? Where does it end?

Wherever we want it to end.