

Please don't call him an environmentalist

He's no fan of politicians or the media, either, but no one can match his long-term studies of Florida waterways.

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PERRY - Robert "Skip" Livingston peered down at his murky reflection in the Fenholloway River. Pollution from the nearby Buckeye pulp mill had turned the river as dark as midnight and tainted it with a sulfurous stench.

"Just passing by, if you didn't know about it, it would be hard to tell that it's polluted," the recently retired Florida State University professor said. "You can smell it, though."

Livingston, 68, has been studying the Fenholloway for 35 years, longer than any other scientist. Because his research was financed by Buckeye, environmental groups often dismissed his work.

"Skip was Buckeye's boy," contended local rancher Joy Taylor Ezell, who has fought the mill for years.

But Livingston's most recent study took a big bite out of the hand that's fed him.

Buckeye officials say they have spent \$85-million fixing their mill to stop the river pollution that wiped out 10 square miles of seagrass in the Gulf of Mexico. Company officials say the seagrass is rebounding.

"They're WRONG," Livingston roared, punching the air. His report concludes, "there has been no significant recovery of the Fenholloway seagrass beds."

So guess who's now citing Livingston as a credible authority on the Fenholloway? Linda Young of the Clean Water Network said she plans to call him as a witness when their challenge to Buckeye's dumping goes to trial this summer.

But don't expect her to invite Livingston to her next dinner party. She calls him "volatile."

That's fine with Livingston, a gruff ex-Marine, who doesn't sugarcoat his opinions. He calls environmentalists "arm-waving idiots," and takes a fairly dim view of politicians, state and federal officials, other scientists and the media.

Because of Livingston's sharp tongue, "there's a lot of people who are very angry with him," said Christopher Koenig, a former student of his now on the FSU faculty.

"I'm pretty much an outlaw," Livingston said, "just for telling the truth."

In Livingston's book *Restoration of Aquatic Systems*, published last month, he includes rants about clueless reporters, brainless environmentalists and spineless government officials.

"I'm contemplating a book called *The Trashing of Florida*, he said. "I know where all the skeletons are."

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As he surveyed the Fenholloway last month, Livingston wore a battered straw hat and a faded pink sweatshirt that said "Cape May Beach Patrol." He spent his teenage summers as a lifeguard on that Jersey shore, where he met his future wife, Marilyn. They have four grown children.

Livingston's father, a stockbroker and insurance salesman, was elated when Livingston graduated from Princeton and joined Merrill Lynch. But when he left his job to bum around Europe, "my father almost committed suicide," Livingston said with a chuckle.

In Monaco, though, he stumbled on a museum devoted to oceanography and found his future.

"I firmly believe in science," Livingston said. "I don't believe in anything else."

He earned a Ph.D. in marine science at the University of Miami in 1970, then landed a job at FSU. He soon launched a study of Apalachee Bay along the sparsely populated Big Bend coast because it's "one of the last unpolluted bays in the country," he said.

Its sole source of contamination: the Fenholloway.

In 1952 Procter & Gamble built the Buckeye mill in Perry, 50 miles south of Tallahassee. Legislators allowed the company to turn the Fenholloway - once a tea-colored river full of redfish - into a dumping ground for 50-million gallons of industrial waste.

The plant chews up pine trees to create pulp for such things as disposable diapers and sausage casings. The nutrients in the pollution spurred algae blooms and wiped out much of the river's fish population by reducing dissolved oxygen.

The Fenholloway is so bad, joked Ezell, that "H₂O means two parts horrible and one part odor."

The Econfinia River a few miles northwest of the Fenholloway proved to be a handy comparison, allowing Livingston to chart the damage Buckeye caused.

"Dr. Livingston's studies helped us identify the problems," said Buckeye spokesman Dan Simmons.

When Livingston began his studies in the 1970s, Koenig said, "he had high hopes for making a difference. He was not as angry as he eventually became."

In 1981, *Sports Illustrated* put him in a pantheon of Florida environmentalists along with Everglades protector Marjory Stoneman Douglas. The Natural Resources Defense Council used him as an expert witness in pollution lawsuits around the country.

"I trust him as a scientist," said Nancy Marks, an attorney for the council who has worked with Livingston for 20 years. "He won't tell me what I want to hear."

But that proved to be a mark against him in other circles. He was one of 50 scientists dropped from EPA advisory panels because Reagan administration officials decided they didn't pass an ideological test.

Then Livingston was sued for millions of dollars by a Panhandle developer angry over advice he gave the Franklin County Commission. Death threats prompted him to tote a .38-caliber pistol to classes, he said.

He grew bitter, Koenig said, because "people tried to destroy him and he got very little support from anybody."

Eventually a judge dismissed the suit and told the developer to pay Livingston's \$20,000 legal bill. The developer declared bankruptcy. Livingston never saw a dime.

Meanwhile, federal and state grants dried up and he was fired by Leon County officials from a lake pollution study when he criticized them for approving development around the lakes.

By the 1990s, Buckeye and other mills were his main funding source. In 35 years the industry has spent \$11-million on his work. Livingston says taking the paper mill money was the only way to keep his studies going for so long.

"Thirty years, that's almost unprecedented," he said. "That's really all I did this for."

But Koenig noted that the risk in taking money from polluters is that "you've got to do the dance - a lot of private companies, they expect that."

Buckeye executive Ray Andreu said the company never asked Livingston to tailor his results, and even if it had, "I don't think anybody on earth can make Skip tailor anything."

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Buckeye hasn't been the only mill destroying Florida's waterways. Over the years, Livingston has studied them all, with the mills footing the bill. According to critics, he missed some things.

Chlorine used to bleach the pulp wound up producing harmful dioxins, which can cause cancer. Buckeye officials say they have changed their process to eliminate dioxins, but two years ago the Environmental Protection Agency said there was still too much dioxin in the river. (In its recent legal filings, Buckeye has argued that state law sets no limit on the amount of dioxin it can dump.)

Livingston has been contemptuous of news coverage on dioxins but he concedes he never studied the river's dioxin contamination.

Meanwhile, scientist Stephen Bortone discovered that female mosquitofish swimming in the Fenholloway and other Florida waterways polluted by mills developed male sexual characteristics, a change he thinks was caused by something in the mill waste.

Environmental groups and news reports played up Bortone's discovery and ignored the Fenholloway's other pollution problems. Livingston, who never found any sexually confused fish, complains in his book about "sensationalized accounts ... that are largely without scientific confirmation."

As a result, environmentalists used to accuse him of skewing his data to benefit whoever paid him.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service official Columbus Brown, who was Livingston's teaching assistant in the 1970s, doesn't buy it: "Nobody owns Skip Livingston but Skip Livingston."

Bortone says he has never seen any sign Livingston was skewing his data to suit the mills.

Bortone's paper mill research ended five years ago. He couldn't get funding to continue it.

Even Livingston has had money trouble lately. He spent a year studying the impact a Palatka mill owned by Georgia-Pacific has had on Rice Creek and the nearby St. Johns River - but then the company cut off funding for further studies. A company spokeswoman called it "a business decision."

So, Livingston says, he spent \$82,000 of his own money to finish his report, which blamed paper mill pollution for helping increase the St. Johns' toxic algae blooms.

Georgia-Pacific reimbursed some of his expenses, but the company told state officials his findings were "inappropriate" and "irrelevant." Young of the Clean Water Network says the permit the state issued for Georgia-Pacific to dump waste in Rice Creek appears to ignore Livingston's research.

To finish his latest Fenholloway study, Livingston says, he spent \$210,000 of his own money - and after 35 years he will no longer accept Buckeye's bucks.

"Buckeye and I," he said, "don't see eye to eye."

-- Times researcher Caryn Baird contributed to this report.

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