

Little Deer Narrative

Introduction

The following narrative is derived from an interview with Joseph Dileo at his home on Little Deer Lake, in May of 2000. Joseph's comments expose changes in Hillsborough County's built and natural environment in the second half of the 20th Century. Not only does Joseph highlight changes he also offers a systemic description of the effects of these changes and thus enables Atlas readers to gain an understanding of their far reaching impact.

Family History



Joseph Dileo and his son
Jeremy with the Dileo family
Dog - USF

Joseph Dileo has lived on Little Deer Lake for ten years with his wife Terry and their two children, Amy and Jeremy. However, Joseph's relationship with the area goes back over forty years. He grew up on Lutz Lake which is approximately a mile and a half, "as the crow flies", from Little Deer Lake. When asked why he wanted to live in a lakeside residence, he responds quickly, "I always wanted lake front property." He elaborates on his response by mentioning that you can pursue all sorts of recreational activities in the lake environment, such as fishing and skiing. Joseph also implies that the recreational aspects of lake living are certainly important, but that there is another equally important benefit gained from lake-side living. This other benefit can be described as the sense of wonder and tranquility the lake promotes in him when spending time near it. His words help to describe this emotional benefit:

"And it's just chock full of nature. You know you can go out at night and shine [a flashlight], and see a turtle or a raccoon, [there's] a lot of wildlife, it's tropical. I don't like wall-to-wall traffic. . . . I want the tropical atmosphere. . . . The lake . . . brings everything to life. It brings me to life too. I love

The lake environment has played a large part in the Dileo's family life. Water-skiing and Jet-skiing have been family favorites. Joseph believes that these recreational activities have brought the family together. He and his wife taught the kids to ski when they were younger. In the recent years Jet-skiing and tubing have become more popular as the Dileo's children have grown from kids to young adults.

When Joseph is asked how his children have benefited from lake living he goes on to note a litany of activities which would not be possible in a more urban environment, such as building forts in the woods and picking flowers. Joseph also identifies a less direct benefit of lakeside living. He proudly describes the positive influences his son and daughter have had on their friends, by introducing them to the wonders of nature, through enabling them to partake in fishing and other outdoor activities at the



Jeremy Dileo riding his
family's waverunner - USF

Dileo's home. He comments,



Amy Dileo with a 10-pound Large Mouth Bass she caught as a gift for her father on Christmas Day, 1996. - J. Dileo

"I was surprised with the kids, that my kids had brought over, that never fished before in their life. In at least five incidents my daughter has taken them out and showed them how to catch a fish. And they were so thrilled, [they had] never fished before in their life. "

Landscaping has been part labor and part hobby for Joseph. He is a firm believer in allowing nature to direct it's own course. However, he has offered a helping hand through planting native flora. He comments,

"I've . . . added to what is out there, like ginger lilies. The ginger lilies have a natural pattern. They like to stay close to the water where there is a muddy area. We thin them out, so they come back thick. We have had banana trees where cypress trees have fallen down. There is a void area there, it's ugly. We usually remove the cypress tree if it's on our property. You know we'll put back an oak tree or will put back banana trees. A lot of bananas were here. We have added some. Usually on a homestead you're gonna see ginger lilies, bananas, ...a lot of tropical stuff."

Joseph spends as much time in the lake environment as he can. He is an avid fisherman and hunter and has had many experiences convening with the wonders of nature. He recalls one time recently where he was able to witness an osprey in action. The osprey had followed him around the lake while he was riding a Jet-ski. Eventually it dove into the water to capture a fish. Joseph comments,



The Dileos' backyard is encased with huge Cypress trees. In this picture, Jeremy Dileo provides some scale to highlight the gigantic size of the tree. - USF

"I had an Osprey Eagle following me. So, I veered a little bit toward him. To see what he was gonna do. It didn't mess him up. It was unusual, I figured it was territorial or something like that. . . . And I heard a tremendous splash no more than ten feet from me. I looked and that Osprey Eagle came out holding . . . a good size brim. . . . Those kind of things. . . [most people probably never see in a life time]."

It is experiences such as this that make lakeside living so special to Joseph.

Lake History



Little Deer Lake lies in the Rocky/Brushy Creek watershed in Northwest Hillsborough County just west of Route 41 and north of Lutz Lake Fern Road. It is a relatively shallow, 12-acre lake surrounded predominately by Cypress trees. Over the years the area surrounding Little Deer has changed from a rural hinterland to suburbia. Joseph comments in the following passage provide a portal through time, so that one may gain

Little Deer Lake - USF a feel for what it was like to be in Lutz during the nineteen-sixties:

"When I was six years old, I came out to Lutz. Nobody knew where Lutz was. I grew up on Lutz Lake. And as a kid I would go from lake to lake. The lakes just seem to be so full, everything was an oasis. . . This (Route 41) was all fruit stands. You know people out of state would stop and buy sacks of fruit and take it up north. And you could smell orange blossoms all up and down 41 and Dale Mabry....but everywhere you went was an oasis that was thriving."

Joseph has seen a wide diversity of animals in the lake environment during the last ten years. The bird population has been especially diverse with whooping cranes, mallard ducks, Carolina wrens, and at one time a wild turkey. Joseph is constantly amazed at what shows up in his yard:

"Anything is liable to pop up. You might go out there and you'll see a huge rat snake. You might see at a certain time when the snakes are breeding and you'll see five ten black snakes."

Although Joseph believes he sees a relatively diverse and healthy wildlife population in the area around his home today, he feels that it is not as large and pervasive as the population that existed when he was growing up in the area.

On a historical note, Joseph claims that there was a whiskey still in the vicinity of his current home during the era of Prohibition. He often sees remnants of the stills former presence, whiskey bottles. He comments,

"Now there are prohibition bottles by the thousands out there. . . . I heard that stills would run whiskey from one lake to another. And I could see how they'd do it, because I can maneuver to Big Deer Lake, Lake Scoal or Half Moon Lake... So, you could literally go from lake to lake to lake. Even if you had to pull the johnboat over a little section to get back into another lake."



These are just a few of the Prohibition Era bottles that the Dileos have found in the area around their home. -

USF

The Dileo's have collected numerous prohibition bottles over the years. Some of the finest are displayed in their living room.



The stick in Jeremy Dileo's hand represents the reduction of water levels over the two months prior to the day the picture was shot

- USF

In the ten years that Joseph has lived on Little Deer he speculates that low water levels have been the most significant threat to the lake's health. This topic did not come up by chance. Currently (fall 2000), Florida is facing one of the most serious droughts in its recorded history. This drought has "achieved the distinction of being the fifth driest in 110 years of recorded Florida weather"*. Joseph attributes Little Deer's low water levels to well field pumping and the drought. Although he believes that well field pumping has had the greatest impact on the lake's water levels. In the following comment he offers his rationale for asserting that pumping has been the most significant contributor to low lake levels over the years, and he also describes the severity of the current low water situation on the lake:

"It has to be pumping. Um, because when we have a drought it takes a while before we really get hit (before water levels drop noticeably). When you see a lake go down virtually 3 to 4 feet in a week, week and a half, you know their pumping. Oh yeah, I lost the whole shoreline here just last month. The dock is starting to come out of the water. The poles in the back were always in water, they're out."

Joseph has a systemic understanding of the comprehensive effects of low water and drought conditions. He has seen how low water can alter the local habitat by destroying the homes of some life forms while creating homes for others. In particular low water has encouraged the spread of melaleuca, which is more commonly called a "punk tree", by increasing its' habitat through the recession of lake water. Joseph comments,

"Now you have punk trees (an exotic plant) that thrive[s] . . . in this kind of a wet and muddy environment."



Due to low water shoreline, vegetation accustomed to higher water levels has struggled to stay alive. - USF

However, while punk trees thrive Joseph claims that fish suffer, for *"fish don't seem to respond [well] to the lakes being smaller, they lose their habitat where they [once] had logs."*



The dryness exhibited by this Cypress tree demonstrates one of the many destructive effects of low water. - USF

Another consequence of low water level is the reduction in the size of a lake. This is recognized formally in what might be called the 'littlization' of lakes in Hillsborough County. When a lake loses water its surface area is reduced. This has frequently led to the division of a lake into two smaller, (sinkhole) lakes. Joseph's words help to describe this phenomenon,

"When I grew up nothing was a little. There was all one lake. You know there was no Little Lake Hobbes, no Little Deer Lake, no Little Lutz Lake. Since everything is pumped down, water-bodies have been separated. Now were coming up with all these little names. You know it seems like this place has doubled with lakes, but it hasn't. [Little Deer and Deer were] one and you could ski non-stop."

Development

As mentioned, the general area surrounding Little Deer Lake has changed dramatically over the years. Joseph believes that the pace of development picked up tremendously in the latter part of the 1990s. Development has brought with it a host of changes, which have amounted to a significant reduction in habitat.

One trend that has contributed to a general reduction in the area's natural habitat is the "cleaning of lots". Joseph claims that he has seen a significant increase in the

removal of native vegetation from residential lots over recent years. He comments, *"And, it's just awful with all these people cleaning up."* In the following quote he passionately points out the ultimate consequences of extensive habitat reduction. *"I mean . . . [the animals] don't have anywhere to go. I mean they're getting killed."*

Not only does the removal of large quantities of vegetation reduce the area's natural habitat it also detracts from the experience of individuals who enjoy the natural areas, by enabling the sound of a honking horn or the glow of a security light to reach places they never have before. Joseph comments, *"You go down to the lake at night and see lights on. It just looks like you can see, you know cars now through . . . where it was [once] so wooded. You couldn't see cars and tail-lights and stuff like this [before all the vegetation was removed]."*

The destruction of bay heads is another disturbing trend Joseph has witnessed. For bay heads serve as "natural retention pond[s]" providing excess rain water with a place to migrate and recharge the water table. However, when bay heads are drastically disturbed they lose their effectiveness in dispersing runoff, increasing the likelihood of flooding. Joseph describes the destruction of bay heads for development purposes in the following passage: *"And I've seen them take bay heads like this and completely whack them down and clean them. Use the natural bottom, and put grass on the top and kind of tailor it."*

Another phenomenon Joseph has witnessed in the area is the dumping of trash in wooded areas. Not only is illegal dumping unsightly but it may also disrupt the ecosystem through contamination and the destruction of habitat. The Dileos have invested many hours removing trash from the woods. One time they actually 'broke down' and removed concrete slabs that were dumped in the "woods".



This photograph of a bayhead on Joseph's property shows the lush vegetation that grows in a bayhead. - USF

Future

Joseph has known the Lutz area for four decades and has observed a change in the landscape of the area, from a setting that could be characterized as rural to one, which is burgeoning into 'full blown' suburbia. For Joseph and many opponents of unchecked growth the destruction of habitat is a major problem caused by suburbanization. This phenomenon may ultimately destroy the beauty and tranquility of rural locales, and thus destroy the very reason for which people move to such areas like northern Hillsborough County in the first place. At the end of our interview Joseph made a rather profound statement about this very scenario, he states,

"Why you would want to come out here and buy a beautiful place like this [and remove large portions of native vegetation?] You feel like you're in the woods, and you see all the birds and squirrels and everything thriving. And you might look up and see a raccoon running across the yard. And see a white tailed rabbit or swamp rabbit. All kinds of things, but you start mowing all that stuff out and just getting it bare. Then I think not only does . . . [it ruin the beauty] of the surroundings . . . it screws up everything, from the looks to the animals, [to their

habitat, and to the entire ecosystem]."

There is no doubt that in the long run if humans are going to coexist and flourish with other living organisms well into the future, then we must implement environmentally sustainable practices into our lives, and especially into the way we deal with the outside world, including our backyard.

*Gross, Edie

2000 *Trees Suffering from Drought*. St. Petersburg Times. Times Publishing Company.