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Preserving the Pascagoula
by David G. Schueler:
book review

by Ian G. Droppo

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Preserving the Pascagoula by Donald G. Schueler.

Published by the University Press of Mississippi, ISBN 157806466X, 192 pp., US\$ 18.00.

Preserving the Pascagoula is a well-written, engaging story, of how multiple individuals and organizations created from scratch, one of the finest natural area programs in the United States of America. This book is a reprint of the original published in 1980 with a New Edition Preface, Afterwards and published Keynote Address given on the 25th anniversary of the "preservation purchase" of the Pascagoula River Wildlife Management Area. While this book was originally written over 20 years ago, its description of the processes taken to preserve an important ecological area is still relevant today. Donald G. Schueler takes a unique approach in writing *Preserving the Pascagoula*. In telling the story, he has been able to provide the essence of environmental conservationism with a delightful mix of humour, vivid character descriptions, and unexpected twists and turns in the saga of preserving the Pascagoula Swamp. As such, this book is not what would be considered a typical science based book commonly reviewed within Estuarine, Coastal and Shelf Science. Instead, it is more of a novel that through the enjoyment of reading provides a model for successful conservationism.

The aim of the book is to document the pioneering conservation effort spearheaded by the Nature Conservancy and its innovative Natural Heritage Program that culminated with the purchasing, 25 years ago, of 32,000 acres of pristine southern bottomland hardwood forest and swampland (the Pascagoula Swamp) bordering the Pascagoula River [the largest waterway in the United States which is still free-flowing (i.e. no obstructions by dams or weirs)]. The need for the purchase of such ecologically significant land/water is made clear by reference to the detrimental impacts that uninhibited, unorganized development (i.e. agriculture, and urban sprawl) or economic harvesting of land (e.g. lumbering) on flora and fauna (i.e. endangerment and extinction); a problem which exists today and will continue due to global population growth. By purchasing lands of ecological significance, they can be preserved thereby ensuring the survival of significant species. The book strives to make it clear, however, that 'haphazard conservation is no better than haphazard development'. In this regard, Schueler documents the Nature Conservancy's development and use of an 'Ecological Inventory Method' to objectively determine the relative ecological worth of a given wild area. Such a method of decision-making takes away the subjective/human nature to only preserve those that are aesthetically pleasing, and allows organizations to concentrate on those that give the greatest ecological conservation bang for the buck. This method allowed for the proactive approach to conservation rather than the typical reactive approach. The Nature Conservancy's strategy of purchasing lands of determined ecological wealth, therefore required both scientists to deal with the ecological monitoring and assessment and wheeler/dealer tax savvy business minded people to make the land acquisition deals; a unique mix not often thought of in conservation.

It is clear that successful conservationism can only be achieved through a team effort including individuals and organizations from multiple socioeconomic and political levels. This book describes the unlikely union of individuals with counter ideals ranging from counterculture activists to staid conservatives. It documents how these individuals

worked and fought together, participated in legal wrangling, back room political lobbying and grassroots educational efforts all in the name of preservation. The individuals come from varying walks of life and represent, private corporate interests, the non-profit Nature Conservancy, the Mississippi state Wildlife Heritage Committee, the Senate, the House of Representatives and the local voting population among others. Much of the book is spent telling the story of the coordination and interactions (sometimes confrontational, sometimes cooperative) of these groups with the Nature Conservancy as the key player. In essence a key lesson of this book lies here. That is, when dealing with and directing multiple parties for one cause, know your players' personal and organizational needs and cultures and be able to adapt your plan to have all parties involved feel that they have gained from the experience of participating. This gain, may be self-centered in terms of political, monetary and tax gain, but also may be as pure and simple as the knowledge of contributing to a good cause such as the preservation of the Pascagoula Swamp.

Finally, this book can serve as a model to other states and international government and non-government organizations that wish to embrace the conservation ideal. *Preserving the Pascagoula* suggests many ways in which individuals can initiate proactive action, instead of merely reacting to threats to the environment. It is certainly worth reading by anyone looking for 1) "a good read" and 2) a success story of conservationism.

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