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# Ocklawaha River

**STATE:** Florida

**THREAT:** Dam

**AT RISK:** Clean water, manatee and fish habitat

## SUMMARY

The Ocklawaha — a unique river of natural springs, abundant fish and manatees — was unnecessarily devastated in 1968, when Rodman Dam was built for a canal that was never completed. For more than 50 years, the river and its fish and wildlife have suffered. Fish are blocked from migration pathways, and the dam has created serious water quality problems. Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida can right this wrong. He has already prioritized protecting the state's waterways, so now he must take the historic step and support the breaching of Rodman Dam to restore life back to the Ocklawaha River.



PHOTO: DOUGLAS J. ENG

## THE RIVER

The 74-mile Ocklawaha River rises from the swamps and lakes of north-central Florida, winds along the Ocala National Forest, connects with the spring-fed Silver River and travels east near Orange Springs before reaching the St. Johns River, an American Heritage River. Silver Springs, a world-renowned spring and one of the biggest in Florida, provides 60 percent of the Ocklawaha's flow. The river runs through Marjorie Harris Carr Cross-Florida Greenway and Silver Springs River State Park.

The Ocklawaha River has a rich history. The fossil remains of paleo-mammals, such as mastodons and saber-toothed tigers, are often found near the river. The Timucua people inhabited the region centuries ago, and in more recent times the Creek, Choctaw and several other tribes displaced from their lands by European settlers formed the Seminole nation on the banks of the Ocklawaha. Much of the river remains largely undisturbed, providing natural landscapes of hydric hammocks, long leafed and slash pine, and the sugar sandy soils that give Florida its white sand beaches.

## THE THREAT

In 1968, the natural connection of the Ocklawaha River to the St. Johns River was severed by the Rodman Dam, part of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project, which was never built. The dam flooded over 7,500 acres of forested wetlands, 20 springs and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River. It caused significant harm to threatened and endangered species and adjacent wetlands and forests. Moreover, the loss of flows to the St. Johns River undermined the ecological health of that river and its estuary and severed important routes for migratory fish.

The dam serves no useful purpose, but the reservoir behind it — Rodman Pool — is a popular bass-fishing destination. The pool itself has never functioned as a natural lake and must be

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## TAKE ACTION:

[AmericanRivers.org/  
Ocklawaha2020](http://AmericanRivers.org/Ocklawaha2020)



artificially maintained and drained every three to four years to kill nuisance aquatic vegetation with herbicides.

Decades of federal and state agency science, agency recommendations — from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Department of Agriculture, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Florida Department of Environmental Protection and St. Johns River Water Management District — two environmental impact statements and more than 30 conservation organizations across the state support improving river health by breaching the earthen dam at the historic Ocklawaha River channel.

This plan would restore river and spring

flows and improve water quality and floodplain function. The plan would also include measures to improve public access, including building new fishing docks and boat ramps.

A free-flowing Ocklawaha River would reconnect Florida’s iconic Silver Springs to the Atlantic Ocean, providing habitat and restoring migration for American eel, American shad, channel catfish, striped bass, Atlantic sturgeon and endangered shortnose sturgeon to their primary spawning habitat. Restoration would provide access to Silver Springs and critical thermal refuge sites for threatened manatees. Forest and wetland restoration would link the Ocala and Osceola national forests, part of the Florida Wildlife Corridor. It would make North Florida waters from Silver Springs to the St. Johns Estuary more resilient to impacts of climate change, including rising seas and saltwater intrusion.

Restoring the river would give the public more opportunities to fish, camp, hike, kayak, birdwatch, study nature and swim in springs. It would re-open a lost blueway (water trail) for motorboats and paddlers from the Atlantic Ocean to the Harris Chain of Lakes. A 2017 University of Florida study estimated direct annual recreational expenditures for a restored, free-flowing section of the Ocklawaha would be \$13.6 million versus \$6 million for the current, impounded section of the Ocklawaha. This study also showed use of the impoundment has declined since 2004.

Unfortunately, this restoration of regional significance has been held hostage in the past by politically well-connected and very vocal local interests that value the impoundment as a bass-fishing destination.

## WHAT MUST BE DONE

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection’s greenway plan states that the Ocklawaha River should be “partially restored” if funds are made available and permits are issued.

Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida can now make history by restoring the Ocklawaha River by fulfilling the state’s formal greenway plan. The permitting agency, St. Johns River Water Management District, has concluded that partial restoration is permissible based on decades of water quality monitoring during the drawdowns conducted every three to four years. Gov. DeSantis has demonstrated his commitment to the improvement of Florida’s water resources by dedicating millions of dollars to support Everglades restoration. Lending his support to Ocklawaha River restoration is essential to the health and economy of three outstanding rivers and one of the state’s largest and most important springs.

