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COMMENTARY

We have met Wekiwa Springs' enemy . . . and he is us

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Remember the old Godzilla movies? Atom bombs exploded in the ocean. Shortly thereafter, a big, scaly, radiation-mutated monster emerged and trashed Tokyo.

This is something like that right here in Central Florida -- only in our case we have contaminated Wekiwa Springs with fertilizer and sewage, giving rise to Mutant Algae.

The floating, slimy globules cause welts and rashes on those vulnerable to them. But it could get worse as our springs are turned into increasingly foul petri dishes.

Alas, the state's grand venture to save the springs is failing. It simply has not been possible to preserve a beautiful, spring-fed river system in the heart of a sprawling urban jungle.

I saw the effort unfold 25 years ago. The state designated the Wekiva River as an Aquatic Preserve and an Outstanding Florida Waterway, two of its most impressive classifications. It was akin to George Bush designating Iraq a functioning democracy.

At first, the environmental bureaucracy tapped into its arsenal of rules and regulations to crack down on development and pollution. But here in Florida, building must go on. So we force the environment to accommodate developers, instead of the other way around.

Ultimately thousands of homes were built around the Wekiva, encouraged by local politicians all too anxious to increase zoning densities. The river went from wilderness to a facade of wilderness.

And now there are the globules. This is where I must share the blame because I myself have fed them on several occasions.

I do so when I fertilize my grass. Some of that fertilizer seeps into the ground. And from there it finds its way to the aquifer, where it joins fertilizer from my neighbors' yards.

And all of it is swept up into the underground currents, where it mixes with more fertilizer and the seepage from 55,000 septic tanks.

And then some of it is routed to Wekiwa Springs, where it blasts to the surface in a never-ending torrent of water.

Normally, the water flowing out of the spring -- like water in a swimming pool -- is pretty sterile stuff. And that is why springs naturally are so clear.

But throw fertilizer in the mix and you create an algae buffet. It eats. It grows. It smothers the natural vegetation. It makes everything slimy. It's gooey to step in. The water gets greener. The globules start growing.

This isn't just a Wekiwa problem. It's going on in springs all across Florida. We are destroying these gin-clear gems.

At Weeki Wachee Springs, home to the famous mermaids, the underwater damsels have to clean algae off the glass viewing window before shows.

And it's not as though you can just shut off the pollution. The ground is so saturated with the stuff, who knows how many years the flushing process would take and how much it would cost? Already the home builders are balking at putting in better, more expensive septic tanks.

They are backed by Orange County Commissioner Fred Brummer, whom many Wekiwa advocates consider a particularly toxic globule.

But even beyond money, for change to occur, people simply will have to stop living the way they are living.

St. Augustine lawns have to go. Most fertilizers have to be banned. Pet poop must be scooped.

I don't know how to create such an ethic in several hundred thousand people. But if we don't, I doubt many of them would dare swim in Wekiwa Springs a few years from now.

Mike Thomas can be reached at mthomas@orlandosentinel.com or 407-420-5525.

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