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From firewood to Florida springs: How one camp lesson sparked a lifetime of stewardship

By Mike Arnold Chronicle Reporter
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Kyle Littlejohn uses a large rake to pull the invasive aquatic plant known as hydrilla onto a barge from a canal on the Rainbow River. Littlejohn is an independent contractor working with One Rake at a Time. One Rake at a Time is spearheading a project to rid the river of exotic species of vegetation and algae to foster the growth of natural vegetation.

Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor





"One Rake at a Time
is a public charity
devoted to cleaning
up and taking care of
our springs,"
Art Jones, founder and
president, One Rake at a Time.

One Rake at a Time aims to restore, protect area springs.

[Matthew Beck/Chronicle photo editor](#)

Art Jones was just eight years old when a cold, wet night in the Adirondacks taught him a lesson that would shape the course of his life. It happened at Camp Chingachgook, a YMCA camp nestled along the southern edge of Lake George, where traditions ran deep and every camper had a role to play.



Art Jones has spearheaded the One Rake at a Time project on the Crystal and Homosassa rivers and now has taken on the Rainbow River in hopes improving the water quality of the spring-fed river in Marion County.

Photos by Matthew Beck / Chronicle photo editor

“We always had to have a project, a camp project that we would do for the next year, you know, make a tenting site better or build a new trail up the mountain or something like that,” Jones said. “And we would do overnight camping. There was a bunch of eight year olds and we’re hiking up the mountain, and we get to the campground and we make the fire and the next day, the counselor tells us, ‘you’ve got to go get some more firewood and leave firewood behind. We used up somebody’s firewood here, we want to leave some for someone else.’ We complained, ‘why do we have to do it? Our arms are tired. We just want to keep going. Why do we have to make some more firewood? We don’t need any.’ But we did it anyway.”

The next day, they began their hike to the next campground and got caught in the rain.

“We’re trying to get there, trying to get there, we got to the campground, we’re soaking wet. And there’s a lean to there, and guess what was inside the lean to? Firewood. Dry firewood. We’re like, yes!”

That next morning, the counselor did not have to tell the campers to go get firewood.

“We were into it,” Jones said. “Oh, yeah, even better, for the next group. And then we built a nice little fireplace there. We extended the roof out off the shed a little bit, so you could have a fire when it was raining. It was just the culture of that YMCA camp. We learned why it was so important to leave it better than you found it, leave it better for the next person. And I think that’s been in my life for a long time.”

Today is the 55th anniversary of Earth Day, a movement to inspire and empower “new advocates to protect our planet, today and every day.”



Kyle Littlejohn uses a large rake to pull hydrilla and algae from a canal on the Rainbow River.

[Matthew Beck/Chronicle photo editor](#)

Cleaning up Rainbow River

Jones doesn’t need Earth Day to remind him to protect the planet, he has been doing it over the past two decades. As founder and president of One Rake at a Time, he has built a legacy in Citrus County helping clean up the springs. Today, he is taking the same approach to cleaning up the lower Rainbow River.

"I walk out here every morning," Jones said. "Here it is. It's just so beautiful to see that sun go up. It's kind of sad to see the sun go down. I really like the sunrise, because it's just the beginning of the day, and each day is important. Just like One Rake at a Time. Every rake full of algae or hydrilla, you take out of the river, every day you wake up is just as important. We want to see how much you can get done that day, make that day count."

When Jones first saw the home he lives in now on the Rainbow River he went out on the dock and saw the sandy bottom and thought "I don't have to work quite as hard up here." So he bought the house.

Then, after moving in, he jumped in the water and immediately sank in three feet of muck.

"I'm like, what?," Jones said. "There was just a little bit of sand on the top. It camouflaged it."

"I had no idea that the Rainbow River was in such decline that the hydrilla had really disrupted the whole ecosystem, the fishing wasn't as good, the otters were disappearing. So I said, 'I'm going to start cleaning up the Rainbow River.'"

So Jones began handraking out the hydrilla that was clogging the river, shading the eel grass and slowing its flow. Jones said the state sprays the hydrilla twice a year, which adds to the problem. The hydrilla dies and sinks to the bottom where it decays and adds to the layers of muck.



A mixture of hydrilla, eelgrass and algae form at the bottom of a canal on the Rainbow River. The One Rake at a Time organization is taking on a project to remove the invasive vegetation like hydrilla so native grasses, like eelgrass, can regain its foothold on the bottom of the river.

Matthew Beck/Chronicle photo editor

Jones has been to Tallahassee on behalf of the Rainbow River and DEP has granted him \$3.9 million to vacuum the muck out of the bottom, just like they have successfully been doing in Kings Bay and the surrounding waterways for years. He is, however, still waiting on his Army Corps of Engineering permit to begin the work, so in the meantime he, an independent contractor, and volunteers rake away.

In the beginning, there was Hunter Springs

Jones was living in St. Petersburg when a red tide pushed him north in search of a good place to swim. He ended up at Hunter Springs, where the Lyngbya covered large swaths of the water blocking access to the spring. Locals told him it wasn't always this way, adding "somebody needs to do something about this."

Jones spent the day swimming around the spring and fell in love with the possibilities that lay ahead.

"I went out there the next day, really early in the morning," Jones said. "I carved a path through the Lyngbya algae, threw it on all of my truck, hauled it off. It was really nice you had an open path to the main spring vent. No one ever knew I was there."

Later that afternoon, Jones returned and the path was still open and people were swimming around the spring.

"It was getting really bad," a woman at the spring told Jones that afternoon. She said, 'then we came out this morning, and it was like a miracle. There was a path to the spring. It was like the parting of the sea.' And I'm like, 'OK, I'm going to do this again.' "

Jones bought a house in Crystal River and got busy raking up Lyngbya. He said at first he was doing it by himself, but others began noticing it and started volunteering to help. Eventually, he was told he needed a permit, so he got one to rake 25 acres of the Kings Bay.

He joined Kings Bay Rotary and they adopted the project and so did Leadership Citrus. Eventually State Sen. Charlie Dean took notice.

Jones appeared before the Citrus Legislative Delegation and told them of his five-year plan to rake out the Lyngbya.

"I remember Charlie Dean telling me he was up at the podium there, and he said to me, 'Art Jones, I like you. You're very genuine, and I'm going to help you.'"

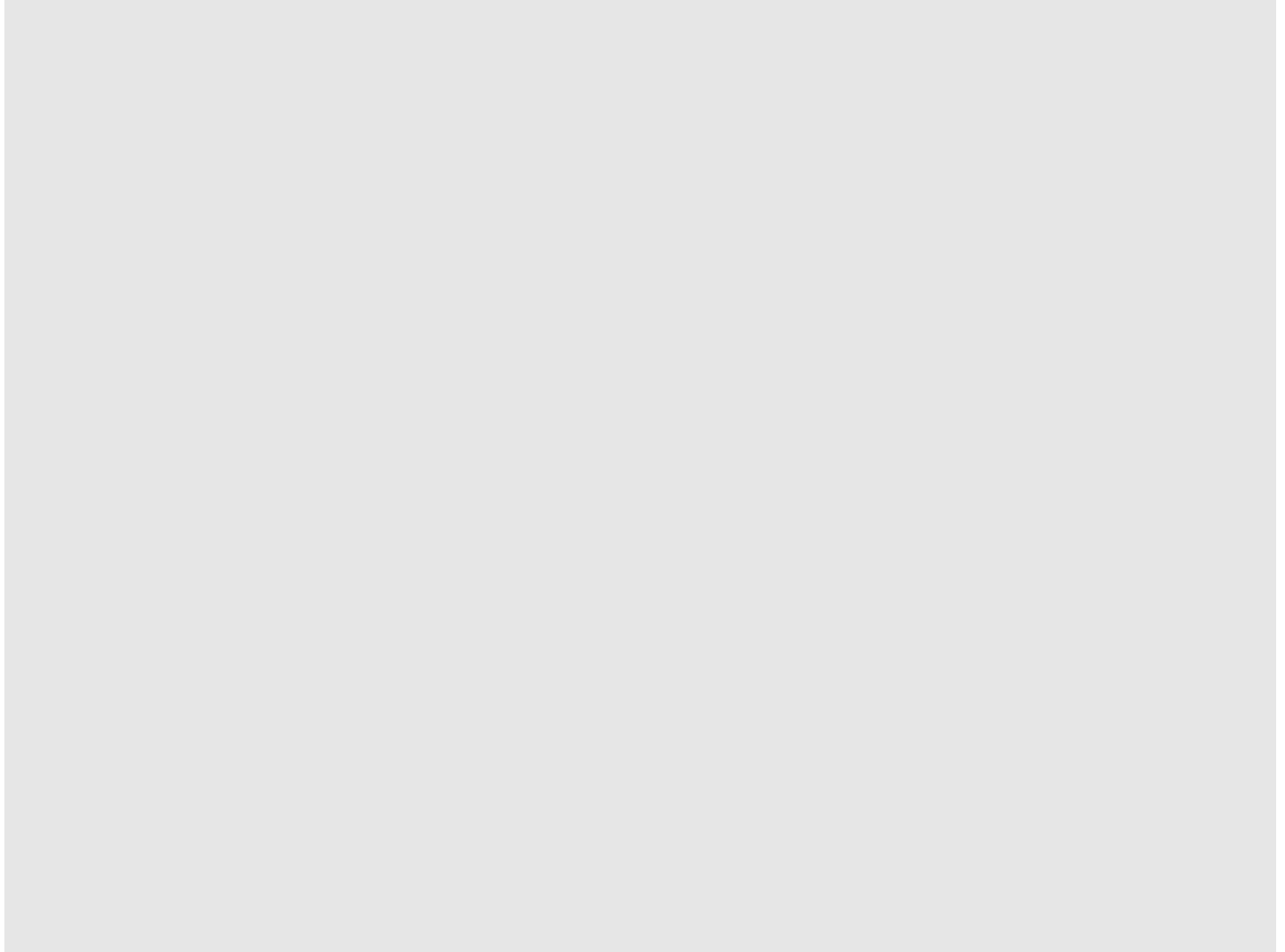
In a few weeks, a check for \$100,000 showed up at Crystal River City Hall.

Over the years, more than 2,500 people joined in the project which would earn hundreds of thousands more in state funding. One Rake at Time also worked on a Halls and Homosassa rivers projects and Weeki Wachee.

Present day, Dunnellon and a documentary

Jones said he still is involved in Kings Bay, but things are starting to take off in Dunnellon.

DEP is funding a documentary on him and One Rake out a Time and Jones has developed a robust social media campaign thanks in part to longtime independent contractor, Kyle Littlejohn.



Kyle Littlejohn collects hydrilla on a barge Thursday from a canal on the Rainbow River. Littlejohn uses a large rake to harvest the invasive species from the river's bottom.

[Matthew Beck/Chronicle photo editor](#)

He said he is older and wiser now and is involved with the state agencies from the outset.

“Luckily, the Rainbow River’s really in great shape compared to where I started in Crystal River,” he said. “We’re going to be starting on the bottom here (lower end), and all the agencies are happy about that. The thing that was really nice, when I got a grant from DEP to help with the Rainbow River, is they love that we’re raking it out and we’re cleaning it, but the one thing you can’t rake out is muck. That, you’ve got to vacuum up and you need to get all that muck off the bottom of the river and get the bottom of the river clean enough to plant the eel grass.

“But that’s a solution to where we don’t have to be spraying chemicals on the river all the time. And I think everybody wants that. We’d rather do it in a way that’s sustainable and is proven in the Crystal River project.”

Jones said there has been a 67 percent improvement in aquatic life since replanting the eel grass in Kings Bay.

So what keeps Jones motivated. He points to the lesson he learned as a YMCA camper on Lake George in New York. "I've always wanted to do my part to make things better and to leave things better than we found it."

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