

Opinion

Robert Knight: Are springs in Florida’s future?

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Diver Joe Wallace enters the cavern in Peacock Slew in Wes Skiles Peacock Springs State Park in Live Oak on Dec. 4. [Alan Youngblood/Gainesville Sun]



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For faithful readers of this opinion page, you already know my summary of current research — Florida’s springs are dying by a thousand cuts. Many of Florida’s artesian springs already flow intermittently and some not at all.

Excessive groundwater pumping from more than a million wells is the root cause of this decline in springs health. Almost all of Florida’s springs are also polluted by harmful nitrate nitrogen levels, resulting from excessive fertilizer use and inadequate wastewater treatment. Dams strangle some of our mightiest springs and excessive recreation smothers many others.

Unlike other animals, humans can anticipate and influence the future. Not just what will happen tomorrow, but next year and even 100 years from now. This unique power of humans is both a wonderful gift and a dreadful burden. While it is not difficult for many citizens to shirk this responsibility, it becomes especially hard to ignore this power to shape the future when the welfare of ourselves and the ones we love is negatively affected by not taking action.

I was witness to a recent presentation by Mary Christina Wood via Skype to the attendees of the University of Florida law school’s biannual Public Interest Environmental Conference in Gainesville. Wood, with the University of Oregon’s School of Law, presented a compelling vision of the disastrous effects of global warming if humans do not take their forward-thinking responsibility seriously.

We have heard that average world-wide temperatures are increasing and that an inevitable consequence of this warming trend is the melting of glaciers and a resulting rise in sea levels. After absorbing Wood’s talk about climate-change feedback loops and tipping points with no mercy and no second chances, it appears that too few of us are taking climate scientists’ dire predictions of a warming planet seriously enough.

For example, none of us seem worried about finding higher ground with sea levels rising less than one-eighth of an inch each year. Even old folks can hobble fast enough to keep their feet dry if that is the worse we can expect. But Wood’s talk posed a much harder question for us all: “What would we do if we learned that our grandchildren will not be able to survive to old age if we fail to act now to stop the rise in atmospheric greenhouse gases?”

With runaway climate change, it is predicted that the earth’s temperature may be too high in the next century for survival of life anywhere on the planet. Our lack of decisiveness today may well dictate a premature end to the lifespan of our own grandchildren. As a grandparent I have little trouble thinking about sacrificing myself today to avoid a certain disaster for my progeny later, even long after my death. That is a responsibility I take seriously.

But how can we be sure a sacrifice we make today will make a difference in the distant future? That is why evolution gave us brains and the ability to understand cause and effect. We can be sure that some disasters that will directly affect the quality of our grandchildren’s lives in the distant future will be prevented or at least mitigated by actions we take today.

Cutting our use of groundwater today has the immediate and long-term effect of improving the health of Florida’s springs and environment tomorrow. Keeping our fertilizer use to an absolute minimum improves the quality of groundwater that nourishes springs and our bodies for years. Driving a fuel-efficient car, recycling paper and plastic and planting trees reduce our carbon footprints, inevitably slowing the rate of global warming.

Experts are predicting that the collective and focused actions of all humanity can prevent the destruction of the world’s environment. Government regulations and public education have the power to positively influence the decisions of millions of thoughtful citizens. In any emergency, the best time for action is immediate.

The springs won’t turn themselves around. Neither will the world’s climate. Only humans were given the foresight needed to change the course of history.

Bob Knight is the founder and director of the Howard T. Odum Florida Springs Institute in High Springs.