

Editorial: Save the Rainbow

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Those who know Rainbow Springs and the 6-mile river they feed will tell you there are few slices of Marion County that offer as much pleasure and peace to the senses and the soul.

They will also tell you the springs and river are nowhere near the crystal-clear natural wonder they once were, thanks to decades of nitrate pollution and human enjoyment that have caused algae blooms, a noticeable loss of clarity, the disappearance of bottom vegetation and the rise of non-native plants that threaten native species.

So it was good [news](#) to learn that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has hired a Gainesville environmental service firm, Pandion Systems, to spend the next three years developing a plan to save the river from continued degradation.

Pandion will receive \$210,000 for the project, and it will be money well spent if the consultants can come up with a practical plan for reducing pollution and overuse of the Rainbow system.

But the realities of growing North Central Florida make that a challenge, to say the least. First, the river has been so inundated with fertilizers and animal waste over the decades that DEP statistics show nitrate levels have increased 40 times since 1950, from .05 milligrams per liter then to 2.0 milligrams today.

That statistical alarm bell is enough to cause river lovers plenty of consternation. Yet, what Pandion spokesman Pete Colverson told the Star-Banner in an interview last week is even more disturbing. He said that at the current rate of increase, nitrate levels could double again over the next five years. That's right, double; in the next five years.

What's more, Colverson said the situation is so dire the company may ultimately recommend not trying to restore the river to its previous purity and instead focus on simply trying to stop the pollution and human damage from getting any worse. The reason? It is simply impossible to clean the river, as more and more nitrates make their way every day into what is an officially designated Outstanding Florida Waterway.

How disheartening that we have allowed — for decades we have known the Rainbow was being inundated with pollutants — Rainbow Springs and the Rainbow River to become so polluted that they cannot be cleaned up, that our best hope might be to save them from total destruction.

We are eager to see what Pandion scientists find and ultimately recommend, because saving the Rainbow is not an option — besides being a natural wonder, they are also an economic boon to Dunnellon.

There are plenty of steps that can be taken to reduce nitrate pollution, and with development slowed down, now is the right time to look at them. But banning nitrate-based fertilizers, limiting any more development along the spring and river banks, and restricting recreational use of the river will be tough decisions that will take political courage.

Those are the sort of steps that Pandion almost certainly will recommend, for starters. Let us hope the community and especially our policy makers are cognizant of exactly what is at stake as this three-year study is carried out and such decisions have to be made. That is, nothing short of saving the Rainbow from human destruction.