

Sylvan Lake



Hugh Jones (USF)

The following narrative is based on an interview with Hugh Jones held on August 23, 2001 at his house on Sylvan Lake. A long-term Sylvan Lake resident, Hugh provides an important perspective on issues affecting the lake.

Personal History

Hugh and Judy Jones have lived on Sylvan Lake since 1978. Before moving to Florida, Hugh had lived on a lake in West Virginia. When he and his wife married and moved to Florida, Hugh insisted that they live on a lake. After 18 months of searching for the perfect lot, the couple found one on Sylvan Lake. Hugh built their house himself, and the Jones's son Chad was born there.

Fishing is one of Hugh's favorite activities in life, and he has fished the lake countless times over the years. In the interview, Hugh showed photographs of fish he has caught and of fishing trips with his son Chad when he was a child. Fishing is also a way Hugh has spent time with his neighbor, Henry. He related the following story about the day he and Henry caught fish for a fish fry at Henry's church:



Hugh fishing with his son Chad (Hugh Jones)

"I helped him and we caught a bunch [of crappy specs], several hundred to feed the whole church congregation at the fish fry. And he [Henry] cleaned them all. I helped him catch them. I said, 'I'll catch them and give them to you but you've got to clean them.' And so his people at the church just cleaned them and everything but they had a real nice fish fry."

Even though this year the water level has been lower than Hugh has ever seen it, he knows where the lake's deep spots are and continues to fish successfully in the lake.



View of Sylvan Lake (USF)

History/Information

Sylvan Lake is a 188-acre lake located in the Yankee Lake Watershed, in Sanford. Due to the drought, the water level was relatively low during the interview. However, according to Hugh, the lake has a history of low water levels. Over the years, neighbors who do not live on the water have dug two canals to provide them with lake access. With the exception of four or five years when the lake was at a relatively high level and the canals were full of water, Hugh estimates that the canals were only usable for about eighteen months out of the first seventeen years he was on the lake. However, recently the water level came up nearly to full capacity, and the canals have been full

enough to provide lake access to Hugh's neighbors.

Although the lake's water level is undoubtedly an important issue, Hugh is much more concerned about the water quality of Sylvan Lake. He worries about the long-term effects of the increasing number of people using the lake and runoff from residential development:

"All the runoff comes right down that road. I've seen it come down that road to where you could white water a canoe in there. But it goes away fairly quick. But where does it go? Right out there, which has changed the quality of the lake considerably."



Dried up canal in Hugh's neighborhood (USF)

While most roads in the area are maintained by the county, Hugh's road is not, and he has seen no way to rectify the situation. Fortunately, Hugh recently heard that at least part of the road will be paved in the near future.

In terms of his opposition to increasing public access to the lake, Hugh related that the more people who use the lake, the more water pollution. He is concerned that Sylvan Lake often becomes a "jet-ski haven" on weekends, although at the time of the interview, the lake was not deep enough to safely run a high-powered boat in it. As a way of protecting the lake, Hugh is adamant about restricting the use of his property as lake access for the general public. Public access to Sylvan Lake has increased over the years due to the building of Seminole County's Sylvan Lake Park on the lake as well as the construction of an unauthorized boat ramp enabling residents of a nearby subdivision entry to the lake.

Hugh suggested that the quality of the Sylvan Lake's water has decreased considerably over the years. There has been a significant increase in lily pads over the past ten years, which Hugh sees as connected to a decrease in water quality. At one point, lake residents were concerned about vegetation in the lake and had the Fish and Game Commission take water samples and tests; fortunately they found that the vegetation growing in the lake was indigenous and did not need to be eliminated.

According to Hugh, the number and variety of fish in the lake has lessened considerably as well:

"We used to have a tremendous amount of gar. You can't hardly ever see a gar out there anymore. And there used to be a real good blue channel cat. You can't find them anymore. Specs, yeah, we still have those. Not the runs that we used to have but a few in the spring. And the bass, yeah, but nothing like we used to. You could go out there any, any time when I first moved here and catch twenty, twenty-five bass every night, every evening. Now you're lucky if you get one."



Lily pads on the lake (USF)

Hugh has seen other types of wildlife in the lake area decrease as well. Four hundred acres of land around the lake was a bird sanctuary with no public access when Hugh first moved to the area; however, after the landowners died, their children sold the land to developers. Additionally, Hugh has not seen ducks on the lake in ten years.

Although there is a Sylvan Lake homeowner's association, Hugh has instead tried to address issues affecting the lake by contacting his representatives in the county government and by working with environmental groups and agencies. Hugh feels that his efforts have so far been largely unsuccessful.

Development

Hugh describes the surrounding area before development as “jungle”. He related that the lot on which a nearby Publix was built was swampland when Hugh first moved to the area. About ten years ago, when there was an international soccer tournament in the United States, Sylvan Lake Park, a Seminole County Park, was built on 126 acres of property on the lake. The facility includes six soccer fields and a sport training facility and has hosted many national and international soccer teams (www.co.seminole.fl.us/parks/sylvan.asp).

According to Hugh, most residential development has occurred within the last six years and much within the last three years. Across the lake from Hugh’s house, a “moat” was built in order to keep the runoff from lakefront lots from flowing into the lake. However, after the lakefront lots were bought, the moat was torn down. Hugh associates much of the deterioration of the lake’s water quality with this action.

For the first fifteen years that he lived on the lake, Hugh felt like he and his neighbor Bill had the lake to themselves:

“Because none of the other people even had kids like Chad, you know, and you’d look out there on a Saturday afternoon and it’d look just like it does now. Nobody out there. Whenever Bill and I’d want to go fishing, we’d just, nobody was out there. Just Bill and I.”

Over the years, the residential development of the lake has resulted in more people using the lake. Since Hugh moved to Sylvan Lake, five subdivisions have been built on just the northeast side of the lake.



Serene view of Sylvan Lake (Hugh Jones)

The Future

In the interview, Hugh expressed concern about the future of Sylvan Lake. He fears that the health of the lake is beginning to deteriorate and will continue to do so unless protective actions are taken. Run-off and access to the lake by the public are factors that Hugh sees as critical to Sylvan Lake’s water quality. Although he has not been able to make much progress thus far, Hugh plans to continue his efforts to protect the lake on which he lives.

Written By: Ashley Spalding