

**Interview with John M. Dunn**  
author of  
*Drying Up: The Fresh Water Crisis in Florida*

**Why did you decide to write *Drying Up*?**

I'm a professional freelance writer and an environmental activist who has long understood that water issues are key to Florida's big environmental problems. So, when the University Press of Florida invited me to work up a book proposal on Florida's water woes, I jumped at the chance.

**What keeps scientists motivated to work on conservation issues despite the uphill battles they face from politicians and skeptics?**

What motivated many of these individuals to pursue careers in science wasn't money, but rather a love of the natural world and the sense of wonder it inspires. Every day these men and women witness the continuous human-caused degradation of nature, and unlike most other people they also understand the underlying reasons for this destruction. That's why most of them are dedicated, vigilant, and in some cases, militant in their efforts to better understand and protect life on earth.

**In the face of seemingly endless challenges to freshwater conservation, have there been any recent victories?**

By far the most encouraging conservation victory occurred in 2014 when 75% of Florida voters passed "The Florida Water and Land Conservation Amendment." This new amendment to the state constitution authorizes the state government to spend \$300 million to purchase environmentally sensitive lands, including "lands that protect water resources and drinking water sources." And when state lawmakers tried to ignore this mandate, the citizens of Florida forced their representatives to heed the clear, voice of the governed and implement the new amendment as it was intended.

**Are there any individuals or organizations you believe should receive more recognition for their contributions to resolving Florida's water crisis?**

Although our big water issues are far from being resolved, the well-known big environmental groups such as Earth Justice, the Sierra Club, Audubon, the Florida Springs Institute, Friends of the Everglades, and the various Riverkeepers in Florida deserve more credit. I'd also acknowledge the lesser-known grassroots organizations that pop up now and then to protect our water sources. They, along with a handful of hardworking journalists and lonely lawmakers who are unafraid of political repercussions from the Florida Growth Machine give us hope that improvements can be made.

**With Ron DeSantis sworn in as Florida's new governor, what should his administration's top priorities be regarding water issues?**

His first step in addressing Florida's water woes was surprising and welcomed. Not only did he offer a bold plan of finance and action to address the problems facing Lake Okeechobee and the coastal areas, he also signaled that "business as usual" wasn't going to be his mantra for dealing with many of Florida's troubled water resources. This kind of leadership is necessary for setting the tone for getting the work done and for encouraging others to join in the effort. However, more money and attention is needed for Florida's troubled springs and other polluted water ways. The governor has not yet signaled that he intends to tame the unquenchable thirst of Florida's Growth Machine, nor has he said he intends to encourage Florida to join most of the developed world in mitigating the **causes** of sea level rise, a phenomenon which could prove to be the biggest threat to Florida's supply of fresh water.

**In *Drying Up*, you mention virtual water, advanced treatment technologies, tiered water usage rates, and other methods of water conservation. Which policy or technology do you believe Florida could benefit the most from if it were enacted?**

Clearly, a suite of new technologies and new water concepts are needed. There is ample record that higher prices for water, more efficient technologies, and water-reuse efforts all help conserve water. But much more is needed. Strong leadership from our elected leaders who understand our environmental problems and are willing to tackle them is indispensable. It is also time to resurrect the Department of Community Affairs in Tallahassee and bring back large-scale growth management operations before millions of new residents move to the state. Floridians must live within their “water means.” By far the biggest threat to our water resources is the ongoing disruption of natural hydrologic systems. Floridians must adopt “soft path” approaches to counter this. Restoration is also key. Scientists already know how to restore rivers, springs, wetlands, and estuaries. We must fund and encourage them to do this work.

**Corporations and farms use millions of gallons of water per day. What would you tell individuals who are hesitant about conserving their own water because they feel like it won't have an impact in helping the water crisis?**

Citizens are right to be frustrated to be put on water restrictions as water management districts give out new water permits to big developers. However, most individuals belong to a group whose fresh water largely comes from the “public supply” (groundwater and surface water), which accounts for roughly 37% of water withdrawals in Florida. So, how the public uses and consumes water does matter. Meanwhile, they should re-purpose their energy and use it to put pressure on elected officials and water managers at utilities and water management districts to curtail wasteful water practices. This means that water managers must say no to the issuance of new water permits when the science indicates doing so is harmful.

**In addition to your book, could you recommend any educational resources for people wanting to learn more about the state of Florida's water?**

Although these books are dated they do provide valuable background information that I used in preparation of bringing the topic up to date:

- Cynthia Barnett's *Mirage: Florida and the Vanishing Water of the Eastern U.S.*
- Craig Pittman and Matthew Waite's *Paving Paradise: Florida's Vanishing Wetlands and the Failure of No Net Loss*
- Tom Swihart's *Florida's Water: A Fragile Resource in a Vulnerable State*
- Tony Allan's *Virtual Water: Tackling the Threat to Our Planet's Most Precious Resource*

Other more current resources:

- U.S. Geological Survey Sites: <https://water.usgs.gov/watuse/>  
USGS Water Withdrawals in Florida, 2012:  
[https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2015/1156/ofr20151156\\_marella-water-use-2012.pdf](https://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2015/1156/ofr20151156_marella-water-use-2012.pdf)
- The University of South Florida Water Institute: <http://waterinstitute.usf.edu/>, especially the Water Atlas: <http://wateratlas.usf.edu/>
- The Florida Springs Institute: <https://floridaspringsinstitute.org/>
- The Blue Water Audit: <https://bluewateraudit.org/about/>
- The University of Florida Water Institute: <https://waterinstitute.ufl.edu/>

**What do you say to those who have recently re-located to Florida to live in corporate-run communities and don't believe their home associations have water problems?**

Their property managers may mask water problems, but only for a while. All water is a state resource. It is always moving. It doesn't obey commercial or political boundaries. Water in a spring, lake, river, or aquifer is all the same resource and vulnerable to the same threats: excessive demand, pollution, salt water intrusion, flooding, and damaged hydrologic systems. Whether the problem announces itself as sinkholes, water restrictions, algae-contaminated waterways, or recycled sewage water in the drinking supply, every homeowner will have to reckon with reality unless Florida abandons its business-as-usual mentality.

**What did you hope to accomplish with *Drying Up*?**

My goal was to provide a water "primer" for non-specialists so they could learn some of the background of Florida's water issues, the key problems, the big players, the jargon, and solutions. I believe once people learn such things they also realize that these kinds of environmental problems aren't mysteries. Those in positions of authority may have power but they don't have a monopoly on understanding the issues. An informed, motivated citizenry can do a lot to keep Florida from "drying up."