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We're Messing Up the Rivers

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by Brittany Taylor

For a string of summers during the '90s, I would accompany my best neighborhood friends and two of their parents to the Ichetucknee Springs State Park in Fort White, Florida. It was a never-ending two hour drive each way, but once we got there, we were in paradise. The Ichetucknee River is fed by nine springs. The water was crystal clear and ice cold, and even during the hottest summer months, it took dares to get the four of us leap from our rafts and tubes into its depths. We thrilled in the plants that would wrap around our legs, the creatures we watched flit by, the turtles we counted and the imagined snakes we darted away from. There were shallow caves, I recall, that you could climb into, areas where lilies would grow thick as corn in the fall. The six-mile-long stretch of river open to tubers was a joy ride, and as the sun stretched high overhead, then began to dip low over the trees that lined the water, we would run, dragging our tubes and chaperones behind us, from the take-out point back to the launch as many times as we could manage.



My last trip to the river was in August 1998. I left Florida the summer after, and haven't laid eyes on such clear water since. In 1999, negotiations began for the construction of a tire-burning cement plant to be built just three miles from the Ichetucknee, and that same year, information about an influx of nitrates into the water became known, if not discussed. Today, between the plant worries and increasing amounts of nitrates in the water, the Ichetucknee is in grave danger, much like 50% of America's lakes and rivers that are currently too polluted to be entirely safe for swimming or fishing.

Since 1975, the nitrogen count has doubled in the Ichetucknee River, and the nitrate level at the head spring was 43 times higher than is natural in 2006. "In increased concentrations, the nitrates feed the growth of noxious algae, which can form a thick layer on the top of the river that shades the bottom layers of water, killing other plant life and the animals that eat those plants." Further, as the High Springs Herald reported in 2006, "some visitors to the spring have had allergic reactions that some connect to the algae. More than 20 such incidents have been reported at Ichetucknee Springs over the past seven years."

This isn't just an Ichetucknee problem, and the end seems, unfortunately, inevitable and unchanging, unless circumstances rapidly improve *now*. The nitrates are absorbed into our ground water through "storm water that flows over lawns, pastures, gardens, golf courses, highways and agricultural fields," The High Springs Herald article says,

carrying away some of the nutrients in the fertilizers added to lawns and gardens. The most noticeable difference so far, notes Jim Stevenson, coordinator of the Ichetucknee Springs Basin Working Group, is "the severe decrease in the diversity of plant life in the river." In certain areas, algae completely cover the plants. The same thing happened outside of Tallahassee at Wakulla Spring. "At Wakulla, algae growth took over in a decade," said Dan Pennington of 1,000 Friends of Florida. "Ichetucknee is on the same path. You can visually see it." In the past six months, water conservation legislation and clean water acts have been discussed across the Midwest, as well as along the Mississippi River, and though it received major attention in 2005 with the Clean Water Authority Restoration Act, we are still in dire straits.

"If you live in a spring basin and you fertilize your lawn and you flush your toilet, you're part of the problem," Jim Stevenson said. "We just need to do everything we possibly can do to reduce nitrates." You can do a number of things to help. Stop using fertilizer or reduce the amount you use. Try planting hardy native trees and shrubs that don't require additional assistance to survive. Have your septic tank inspected and maintained every five years, and *never* flush pesticides, ammonia, or toxic chemicals down the toilet. Join a local water protection group and lend a hand. Write to your county commissioner or congresswoman and alert them to your situation; better yet, grab a dozen friends and host a letter-writing party. Spread awareness. Throw a fuss if you need to. Garner attention. Make a change, so that the river that you love and the river that I love will be there for our friends and families and children to love, decades and centuries from now.

Sources: "[Environmental Facts](#)" from The Light Party; [Environmental Law and Policy Center](#); [Save the Ichetucknee River](#); "[Ichetucknee Springs State Park](#)" from the Florida Online Park Guide; [The Sierra Club](#); "[A River in Danger: Algae Killing Ichetucknee Springs](#)" by Christa Jenkins-Desrets, *The High Springs Harold*, 2006

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