

# Paddling along the 'Everglades of the North'

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815-937-3369 | Posted: Friday, August 1, 2014 9:04 am

"I'm hooked already," Patty Wisniewski said Saturday after about a dozen kayak paddle strokes into the Kankakee River's Balshinksi Bayou, a historic vestige of the Grand Kankakee Marsh just east of the Illinois-Indiana border.

She was expressing her immediate enthusiasm for kayaking for the first time.

She's been hooked on the Grand Kankakee Marsh for years though. She spent several years as executive producer of the now widely viewed and acclaimed video "Everglades of the North: The Story of the Grand Kankakee Marsh."



Participants leave from the state line launch in the "Everglades of the North Paddle" at the LaSalle fish and Wildlife Area last Saturday.

Saturday's event was the "Everglades of the North Paddle" organized by the Northern Indiana Paddling Association.

At the state line boat launch, she said: "It was right here in 2009 that we met with Bill Byrns and started things." That was their launching of "Everglades" with the assistance of Byrns, long-time outdoors editor, writer and photographer of The Daily Journal. Byrns didn't live to see the December 2012 television premiere of the video, in which his contributions are credited. He died in August 2011.

The state line is the western end of about 90 miles of straight "Kankakee River" channel that was cut north and northeast nearly to South Bend, replacing about 290 miles of wildly meandering natural river. With untold hundreds and hundreds of miles of smaller drainage ditches, the channelization converted half a million acres or more of the historic grand marsh into productive farmland.

The loss of the marsh also virtually erased one of the largest concentrations of wildlife on earth and eventually loosed a torrent of drainage-swept sand that has filled much of the historic natural bed of the Kankakee River far into Illinois.

The video focuses not just on that loss but also on recent decades of conservation and restoration efforts that brought back the bald eagle, the sandhill crane and even the rare whooping crane.

The destruction of the marsh and river was recorded in a few historic books of river tales, obscure state reports and many newspaper accounts, but it wasn't generally known even to many of the people who have lived in the region. It generally wasn't taught in the region's local schools as history, natural science or conservation.

The video, however, has told the epic story in repeated broadcasts on 34 public television outlets, starting with Indiana's Lake Shore Public Television and "serving, I believe, 34 states," Wisniewski said.

The producers donated copies of the video to schools in the region and used the profits of video sales to establish scholarships in honor of Byrns; funding champion Cara Spicer of Gary, Ind.; Lowell, Ind. historian Richard Schmal; and the Izaak Walton League Diana Chapter at Shelby, Ind., another fiscal sponsor. Wisniewski gave \$1,000 Saturday to the association to build a shelter at its new river campsite in Indiana.

The video's educational outreach was demonstrated at Saturday's paddle, when Purdue University soil scientist Darrell G. Schultz said he had "just discovered" the video and plans to use it in his classes. He also uses historic maps of the Grand Marsh region overlain with the system of drainage ditches to illustrate the transformation.

The video's impact also was demonstrated in the number who showed up Saturday for the "Everglades Paddle." When paddling association president Dan Plath asked how many of the 70 or so paddlers had seen the "Everglades" video, most raised their hands.

The "Everglades" focus of the outing probably doubled the turnout compared to three previous annual stateline trips, he said. Awareness of the river and its history also has fueled the group's tremendous growth from 50-60 members at the start in 2009 to about 500 now, he said.

"Definitely because of the documentary we have pulled a lot of people from out of state; a lot from Chicago," he said. "It has increased awareness of the river and interest in the history of it.

To get the sense of the history of the river and marsh "this area and the Illinois side in the Momence wetlands are probably the best stretches of the river to see. But even on our Sandhill Crane Paddle (in the fall) where the river is straightened, you see a lot of remnants of the original and the flowers and the birding are spectacular."