

Riverside Conservancy: Introducing Executive Director Kelli McGee

Kelli McGee brings a deep background to her current role as executive director of Riverside Conservancy.

She earned a double major in biology and psychology at the University of Virginia, and studied the cognitive aspect of marine mammal research at the Dolphin Research Center in the Florida Keys. Her dolphin research partner's name was Natua, which means "of the sea."

As a research associate, McGee also served on a marine mammal stranding team and helped perform necropsies on hundreds of species of stranded mammals, including Atlantic bottlenose dolphin and short-finned pilot whales.

She earned a law degree in 1997 from George Washington University in Washington, D.C., and worked as a water-quality lobbyist for five years on Capitol Hill. She helped write federal law, penning the Beaches and Environmental Assessment and Coastal Health Act (BEACH Act), signed into law in 2000. The BEACH Act required the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to develop criteria to test, monitor and inform public users of possible poor water quality in coastal recreation areas.

To get the nonpartisan act signed into law, McGee worked through the National Governors Association, focusing on "the business aspect, as well as the health and human welfare aspect" of water quality throughout the nation.

She eventually went to work for actor Ted Danson's American Oceans Campaign, which later partnered with Oceana, a nonprofit ocean advocacy organization. Danson founded the nonprofit when he took his children to a Southern California beach one day only to find it closed due to poor water quality. McGee moved to Southern California to become director of the nonprofit's west coast operations.

But the Virginia native was lured back to Volusia County in 2002, where she spent summers as a child with her family. She worked for Volusia County for 14 years with roles as Natural Resources Director, Planning and Development Services Director, and Growth and Resource Management Director, eventually founding her firm – Natua Strategies – which strategically assists nonprofits and philanthropic organizations.

McGee coordinated the Marine Discovery Center's Project H2O in 2017, while also working with other local and regional nonprofits.

Here's what she had to say to Riverside Conservancy staff writer Lisa D. Mickey about her career in environmental advocacy:

What is your role with Riverside Conservancy?

As the executive director of Riverside Conservancy, it's my job to coordinate the acquisition of conservation easements, write grants, coordinate the planting of new living shorelines and create partnerships with organizations. We are all pieces in a puzzle that make up the ingredients to have good, healthy habitats and water bodies. We help put those puzzle pieces together and bring new players to the table. My job is to grow this work and to guide us as a strong partner in improving water quality.

How long were you in the role as coordinator of Project H2O?

I did that for about a year in 2017. I came in and facilitated the Protect Our Lagoon Academy and finished out that program.

What was that program about and how did that lead to where you are now?

Project H2O was a collaboration of many organizations, institutions and colleges that came together to unify and capitalize on the partnerships and strengths of the different organizations to promote healthy habitats through outreach. During Project H2O's second year, the emphasis was on integrating technology into the program and creating the Protect Our Lagoon Academy. While Project H2O promoted clean water and research by our partner universities -- including the University of Central Florida, Stetson University, Bethune-Cookman University and Daytona State College, as well as Volusia County water quality monitoring -- it also continued the outreach efforts of the Marine Discovery Center, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, the Save the Manatee Club and other partners.

What did Project H2O accomplish in our community?

When you bring together so many diverse organizations, you are able to tap into the strengths of each organization. The resources of all the organizations together can also help with the weaknesses of each organization. We maintained research and outreach in Volusia County, but we provided a forum for the agencies to come together, share ideas and share resources to help improve water quality.

There was also actual outreach and measurable results of water quality improvements. Through the Protect Our Lagoon Academy, students learned about the water quality of the lagoon and the efforts local governments were taking to clean up the water. We looked at water quality trends and at the ways that we could actually help improve the water quality. Project H2O partners came to the Marine Discovery Center (where the classes were held) and taught different courses during the academy, sharing with the students their strengths and their needs. Academy graduates, called "Lagoon Ambassadors," vowed a commitment to work on improving water quality in the lagoon.

Through the program, our Lagoon Ambassadors became informed citizens. They could communicate in a deep and understanding way, not just to the general public, but also to city commissioners. They attended local city council meetings. Many of the academy Ambassadors were retired professionals with doctoral degrees. Some were business people, professional educators and fishermen, but everyone came into the program as a student. They raised their voices to save the lagoon. Many spent hundreds of hours working in outreach events and community meetings. Others organized restoration projects.

In fact, Riverside Conservancy was an offshoot of the Protect Our Lagoon Academy in 2017. Our founders -- businessman Tom Barrett, retired aquatics ecologist Dr. Greg Wilson, and retired orthodontist Dr. Art Litowitz -- all took the six-week Academy program together, studying various aspects of the Indian River Lagoon. They were the ones who discovered there was a real need to help local private property owners restore residential shorelines. As their final project in the Academy, they formed Riverside Conservancy.

In your experience, can we act on a local level without being polarized or political?

Yes! The only way we're going to be able to protect the lagoon and improve water quality is by working together in a nonpartisan way at the local level. Regardless of whatever is happening in Washington, D.C., or Tallahassee -- the good news is, there is a great opportunity for leadership

at the local level. Everybody wants clean water. It shouldn't be viewed as business vs. environment, or economic vs. environment.

For sustainability, you have to have a solid economic engine, a healthy environment and a healthy population. It's very natural to do this in a non-regulatory way. On the local level, there's not going to be regulations on industries to the extent where they're not going to be able to thrive in their own business. We have a wonderful, solid base of companies and business owners who are truly engaged. They care because they live here and their families live here. People like to fish and be on the water. Whether you're a scientist or sustenance fisher, there's a need for clean water and it's actually something that I think can unify us. The phrase is overused, but we need to "think globally, act locally."

Project H2O and the Protect Our Lagoon Academy no longer exist, but they were the springboard to Riverside Conservancy. How do you hope to lead Riverside Conservancy moving forward?

Even though Project H2O is no longer funded, partner organizations have continued to host academies as funds become available. For example, Bethune-Cookman University hosted a Protect Our Lagoon Academy (Master's Class) in 2019 and Volusia County hosted clean water academies in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021. Riverside Conservancy helped co-sponsor those academies and events such as the West Volusia Water Alliance's annual forums.

Moving forward, Riverside Conservancy continues to work with the original Project H2O partners, as well as new partners throughout the Indian River Lagoon. Together we continue to plan educational programs, such as Zoom living shoreline workshops, clean water academies and shoreline plantings.

Riverside Conservancy is fortunate to have interns from local universities and supports high school efforts, including the annual Envirothon competition and field trips.

As always, Riverside Conservancy continues to seek riverfront property owners who want to conserve the natural landscape and help restore aquatic habitats.