

Riverside Conservancy – Dr. Gregory Wilson

Gregory Wilson brings a wealth of experience to Riverside Conservancy as its board director and chief scientific officer. He is one of three founding members of the conservancy.

Holding a Ph.D. in biology/ecology (aquatic ecosystems management), an MBA in business management, and a bachelor's degree in zoology, Wilson has worked in university, corporate and nonprofit environments in both Florida and Ohio.

From 2014-2017, he served as director of research/business development for AdventHealth in Orlando, Fla. He also was the director of business development in life sciences at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center in Columbus, Ohio, from 2012-2014.

Other previous roles include serving as associate vice president of research, as well as associate vice president of economic development and strategic partnerships at Kent State University in Ohio.

Wilson was an appointee for the U.S. EPA National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology in Washington, D.C., and an appointee for the U.S. Rep. (FL) Michael Waltz Environmental and Water Quality Advisory Committee. In addition, he serves on the management board and finance subcommittee of the Indian River Lagoon Council.

Wilson is also a board member and current president of Friends of Gamble Rogers State Park and has volunteered in various roles at the Marine Discovery Center, the University of Florida's Whitney Laboratory for Marine Bioscience and GTM National Estuarine Research Reserve.

Locally, he has participated in the Florida Master Naturalist Program, as well as in the Protect Our Lagoon Academy.

Here's what Wilson had to say to Riverside Conservancy staff writer Lisa D. Mickey about his role with the organization:

Q: How was Riverside Conservancy an offshoot of the Protect Our Lagoon Academy?

A: It brought together those of us with different backgrounds and a common interest in the Indian River Lagoon, preserving the lagoon, as well as in sustainability efforts and living shorelines. That's where we all met. We were supposed to do a class project and Kelli McGee was the leader of the class. Tom Barratt had this idea of forming a conservancy – something he had done at home in Ohio – and the idea just jelled.

Q: Sounds like your team also jelled.

A: We've made a lot of progress over the last four years and we've covered a lot of ground. Each of us has unique skills. Kelli is fantastic writing grants, bringing in students and helping us plan out projects. She's the glue who keeps us all together. Dr. Art Litowitz has a background in dental medicine and philanthropy, and Tom is a business entrepreneur. My background is a combination of science and business. We all complement each other's abilities to make a really effective team. I'm excited that we now have students and volunteers engaged at Riverside Conservancy who are concerned about the ecosystems and want to help preserve what we have and make it as viable and sustainable as possible for the future.

Q: Did something from your past lead to this?

A: Mine was a spark that had been glowing for years. I grew up in northwest Ohio in the Toledo area along Lake Erie. My interest outdoors started with boating and camping. My family tent-camped all over the country, loading up the old station wagon and a 17-foot boat that was full of camping gear. When I was 12, I got my own little boat and we put that on top of the car. I spent a lot of time on the water and a lot of time in the woods. That was the foundation of my interest in the outdoors and on the water. In high school, I was interested in oceanography and when I went to college, I studied zoology. I spent a summer at Duke University's Marine Lab in North Carolina and when I graduated, I enrolled in the Ph.D. program in oceanography at Texas A&M. I was in that program for about a year, but employment prospects weren't very good, so I combined my science interest with some business skills and got an MBA at Indiana University and went to work in the corporate world.

Q: How did you keep your environmental interest in Corporate America?

A: I always kept it. About 30 years ago, I wrote on a business card what I thought my personal mission was in life. I wrote: *To better understand the*

environment and to work for its preservation. I carried that card in my wallet for years. That was my inner passion.

Q: How did you blend your passions in your career?

A: In the corporate world, I worked in research, partnerships, and technology. I worked for universities and in the health care industry. In the university environment, I ended up getting my Ph.D., focused on aquatic ecosystem management. I always worked in the interface of science/business/partnerships/technology.

Q: When did you finally retire?

A: I retired in February 2017 and I wondered what I would get involved in after I retired? I saw an announcement for the Protect Our Lagoon Academy class and it started that following week. I signed up and it was exactly the ember that sparked an interest that I'd had all along. That's how I connected with a group and followed a longtime interest in conservation and preservation. It wasn't just a class. It wasn't just a class project. It was a realization of my passion that enables me to play this out now in retirement.

Q: Why was it so important to you?

A: I wondered how I could manifest pursuits in conservation with my ecology knowledge in retirement? My wife and I lived in Tampa 25 years ago and we knew we wanted to come back to Florida, but we weren't sure exactly where. I took a job as a research administrator with Advent Health in Orlando as I was getting close to retiring. Every weekend, I would go to different cities and towns up and down the east and west coasts of Florida to decide where I wanted to land. I connected with Mote Marine Lab and some aquariums on the west coast of Florida, as well as at Florida Atlantic University and Harbor Branch Oceanographic Institute, Whitney Lab in North Florida and the Marine Science Center in Ponce Inlet. We ended up here.

Q: What excites you about Riverside Conservancy?

A: When I worked at the university level, it was mostly in research and technology and partnerships. At Ohio State and Kent State, I oversaw some of our start-up operations. We had a business park. We started a research park at Kent State University. Part of my work has always been in helping new companies form and find resources to get started. That's also really what we're doing at Riverside Conservancy.

Q: How different has it been working with a nonprofit startup like Riverside Conservancy?

A: We've been very careful as we have grown Riverside Conservancy. We try to make sure we know exactly what we want to do and how to do it before we scale it or hire too many people or burden ourselves down with bureaucracy. Each of us has also brought different personal goals as we have formed, organized and grown Riverside Conservancy.

Q: Is there something you have learned while working at this nonprofit?

A: I've worked in the corporate world with Abbott Laboratories, in the academic world at a couple of universities and in the nonprofit world at AdventHealth, serving on a couple of nonprofit boards over the years. Each brings unique challenges and opportunities, but one of the things they all bring out is the power of teamwork. Here at Riverside Conservancy, we have brought together the different skills that were needed, different resources and now we're lining up partners and allies for our cause. The power of teamwork is incredible and we're starting to have an impact, both locally and beyond with what we're doing.

Q: What have been the challenges?

A: Resources are always a challenge for all nonprofits. You always want to grow faster, but thanks to the Litowitz Foundation and Kelli's grant-writing skills, as well as other resources, we've been able to get this far. Other public funds, grants and contributions are starting to come in now. I think the financial picture is strong. That's usually one of the challenges. We have been careful and strategic.

Q: What made you want to get involved with our coastal environment as opposed to staying in the Great Lakes region?

A: I still have a great fondness for the Great Lakes. We had six sailboats over the years and we sailed all over the Great Lakes, but we got tired of the winters and we wanted to be able to be outdoors year-round. As a Florida resident, we have many sensitive coastal areas in the state which need stewardship, so there is much opportunity for conservation here.

Q: What is your involvement with Friends of Gamble Rogers State Park?

A: I've been on the board of Friends of Gamble Rogers for about three years and am currently serving as board president. The mission of the Friends group is to raise money to support the park and to create programs for visitors. We hold programs and fund-raising events. Last December, we installed a native-plant garden at the park's entrance. We're expanding our kayak program and adding a self-guided paddling trail. Our latest big project is our House of Refuge. There used to be 10 Houses of Refuge along the Florida coastline where shipwrecked sailors could come ashore and find temporary housing and refuge from storms. There was one House of Refuge where our pavilion sits today at the park. We'll be converting that pavilion into an exhibit. I see our programs as another way to help visitors see something other than the beach and to appreciate other aspects of Florida. We're also planting shoreline plants, just as we do here at Riverside Conservancy.

Q: How important is volunteerism and local business partnerships?

A: Very important. Partnerships, entrepreneurial activities and aquatic science are the three areas I'm trying to help us grow. Recently, we were able to get [Edgewater-based] Boston Whaler involved with Riverside Conservancy as a local business.

Q: What can you envision 10 years from now for Riverside Conservancy?

A: It will be interesting to see where it goes. I hope we can restore many shorelines because our environment is under a lot of pressure, but it's about more than just shorelines. Florida is unique with people moving in from other places and rampant development happening everywhere. I hope we can encourage and educate people to conserve, preserve and appreciate what we have and to understand that the environment is global. Climate change is not just a local issue. Everything is connected and we're seeing impacts from that – ranging from dying coral reefs and melting glaciers to rising carbon dioxide levels. Riverside Conservancy is delivering an awareness on a local scale with shorelines and education programs, but I hope we can have global impact over time. These little sparks light the fire. I think we're about ready to blaze.