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#Creekshed - Paddling across Pinellas

Thomas B. Hallock

University of South Florida, thallock@usf.edu

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Summer Guide 2016: Paddle across Pinellas

Kayaking from St. Pete to Gulfport via ditches, creeks and ponds.

By [Thomas Hallock](#)

I hate Nature. I hate Nature that cannot look past birding trails and kayak launches. I hate the sanctimonious signs that tell us to stay on the path, don't touch the plants. Don't get me wrong. I love to canoe. I'm a pretty fair ecologist. I just hate the mindset that says, "Nature here, people there."

CL A&E Editor Cathy Salustri promised to paddle with me across Pinellas, starting in St. Petersburg and finishing in Gulfport. A simple trip, if you look at a map (but impossible to conceive, if you adhere to Nature). Knowing Cathy might bag, I recruited my neighbor Eric Feldman, a Florida Man with skills enough to set aside common sense.

The three of us started up Salt Creek, a concrete ditch that slashes through south St. Petersburg, linking Bayboro Harbor and Lake Maggiore. We padded past the working marinas, under Thrill Hill, into an urban wilderness of mangrove and Brazilian pepper.

The mood changes under the low bridge at Fourth Street. Between the prop roots and a makeshift homeless shelter, we flush out great blues, little blues, great white egrets — almost every long-legged wader in my field guide.

The creek opens into Bartlett Pond, near the tennis center and transient hotels on 22nd Ave. S. Osprey wheedle above.

The city allocates natural resources unfairly. North St. Petersburg enjoys a waterfront promenade; the South side gets this stinky cesspool. A few years back, I asked a high ranking city official about dredging Bartlett Pond. He claimed "zero motivation" to remove the muck (he unexpectedly retired last summer).

Only a nutcase would paddle up Salt Creek. Locals warn us about alligators. (As if Salt Creek differed from any other body of water.) Salt Creek offers a history of border culture and fish kills. It has been home to cruetters and chicken thieves; it was a makeshift port for Colombian weed. Reporters in

nome to squatters and chicken thieves; it was a makeshift port for Colombian weed. Reporters in the 1970s called the creek “a smelly dump,” with water a “dull rust color” and eight times the coliform levels safe for human contact. The creek has not improved much with neglect.

We pull out of Salt Creek at MLK, near a Swiftmud dam that splits fresh and tidal waters at Lake Maggiore, or what used to be Salt Lake. Thunderheads build. The spiders do Cathy in (Editor’s Note: Actually, it was deadlines and looming storms. The spiders thought we were crazy for attempting the paddle).

Eric and I cross the lake alone. The wind churns the lake, which now feels like an inland sea, and my sit-atop is now a half-filled bath time. The storm kicks up plumes of mulch at the dump on the far shores of the lake, next to Boyd Hill Nature Preserve.

“Florida’s Greenest City” runs a landfill next to Nature, eutrophying a lake it just spent millions to dredge.

Eric and I reach a shelter at Dell Holmes Park just before the rain. A true Florida Man, Eric pulls out boiled peanuts and two cans of Busch lite. Cathy joins us for goodbyes and promises us a beer in Gulfport. The sky clears. My adrenalin rush settles into an early afternoon buzz.

When does a creek become a ditch? What happens when a body of water loses its name? Eric and I pass the canoe launch at Dell Holmes and meet a brood of limpkin — an “unusual bird,” according to Cornell’s ornithology lab, endemic to Florida marshes and to this forgotten crease in the city. We cross an unnamed pond adjoining the dump, then follow Salt Creek to its terminus, now a culvert under 26th Street.

I get my truck for the portage across US 19. A local asks, “You kayaked here?” I tell him we put in at Bayboro Harbor. He laughs.

The stranger’s incredulity was understandable, but kayaking Pinellas doesn't have to be so unlikely. Topo maps of the city show east- and west-flowing waters mingling here in some swampy morass. In 1923 the famed planner John Nolen drew up a design for the city that took topography into account, with a greenbelt now at the water hazards of St. Petersburg Country Club. Forty years later, citizens rejected a second pioneering plan. The 1974 Strategic Plan designated green space through this low-lying pinch, or swale. The plans survive today on the city’s website. St. Petersburg could adopt either plan today and come off as progressive.

We portage across US 19 and park. Eric and I drop into a skank retention pond behind Skyway Jack’s Diner. Cathy’s warning plays through my head: “My friend, an outfitter, advised against paddling

Eric. Cathy's warning plays through my head. My friend, an outdoorser, advised against paddling these culverts."

Eric and I reject common sense and let the outgoing tide carry us through Clam Bayou. I nick my finger on an oyster bed in the nature preserve (my only injury of the trip).

My shoulders ache. The tide mercifully carries us through the mangroves. I feel triumphant. I feel connection to the nature our city shoves aside in everyday life. The bayou opens into the bay. Eric and I pull our kayaks onto the beach, find the closest bar and order our promised beers.

Thomas Hallock teaches English at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. Follow him [@tbhallock](#).

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