Snook Haven is a vestige of Old Florida, a secluded place graced with moss-draped oaks and sturdy cabbage palms, situated on the banks of the Myakka – officially known as a Wild and Scenic River.

The former fishing camp has long served as a home for wildlife and a historic refuge for visitors escaping cities, suburbs and northern climes. Snook Haven’s popularity has soared in recent years as a site for casual dining and modest entertainment – eight miles from Venice but seemingly a world away.

But Snook Haven is closed. At least for now.

Intense rainfall caused by Hurricane Ian – officially labeled a “1-in-1,000 year” event – resulted in flooding that damaged the restaurant, various facilities and the spacious house at Snook Haven.

Fortunately, the Sarasota County officials responsible for managing Snook Haven as a public asset are considering the steps necessary to reopen the restaurant and restore the house. The County Commission is expected to consider the next steps on Dec. 13.

The questions the commissioners and their staff face are similar to those encountered by the owners of homes and businesses hit hard by Ian: When can recovery occur? What changes in building elevation and construction will be needed to avert future flooding? How will those alterations affect public access to Snook Haven and its unique character? Are the anticipated rebuilding plans sufficient to sustain even higher waters?

I have been thinking about Snook Haven, which I often do – more on that to come – after reading a news article about a recent draft of the National Climate Assessment.

The assessment contains 1,695 pages of research, findings and projections by hundreds of scientists and 13 federal agencies.

For good reasons, the assessment goes beyond the complexities of science to simplify, localize and personalize the impacts of our world’s changing climate.

Cover image: Tom Tryon and his maternal grandfather in 1962

Photo Below: Tom Tryon and his uncle, James Zacharias, in 2022
“The things Americans value most are at risk,” the assessment asserts. "Safe homes and healthy families, reliable public services...." Poland – moved from Ohio to Palmetto and then to Snook Haven, where they operated the active fishing camp, some tiny rental cabins and the bar on the Myakka River.

My mother and I often traveled from our home in Palmetto – via bus or sometimes by passenger train – to Venice, where my grandparents would fetch us and then drive to Snook Haven. Mom and I would stay in the family house – a two-story, wood structure with wraparound porches.

Grandpa died an early death at Snook Haven in 1962, when I was four, and Grandma and my uncle, James Zacharias, left the place within a couple years.

Despite my young age at the time, I retain distinct memories of my experiences at Snook Haven: admiring the house’s grand fireplace made of river rock, pretending to take the wheel of the houseboat, trying to cast a lure into the brackish river, drinking chocolate milk from a can at the bar and shrieking, along with my mother, when an enormous snake fell out of the trees in our vicinity while we were walking one night. (I’ve been scared of snakes ever since.)
Not everyone has ties to this iconic venue, but Snook Haven is nonetheless part of the community’s fabric – its quality of life.

Not everyone has ties to this iconic venue, but Snook Haven is nonetheless part of the community’s fabric – its quality of life. There are countless other places in our region that generate special memories among old-timers and newcomers alike – and, at the same time, localize and personalize the effects of rising waters.

As part of The Patterson Foundation’s Higher Waters: Suncoast Quality of Life initiative, my colleagues and I have interviewed people who study and deal with not only coastal sea-level rise but inland flooding.

Every interview has touched upon data and science. Yet seldom have the people we’ve engaged failed to mention the role that special places play in shaping the quality of our lives – individually and communally.

All the more reason to recognize their value today by ensuring they are resilient, so future generations of grandkids may enjoy and remember them.

Tom Tryon leads The Patterson Foundation’s Higher Waters: Suncoast Quality of Life initiative.
Hurricane Ian Offers Some Lessons on Protecting the Myakka River
By Jono Miller

The Myakka is not like many other Florida rivers: there is no persistent spring flow that keeps the river flowing all year. The closest thing to such a base flow is some mining and agricultural runoff.

In fact, almost every year the river shrinks to a point where there is not enough water to paddle downstream from Myakka River State Park. That’s what it was like for the first half of 2022.

But also virtually every year, usually during the late summer, rainfall fills the Myakka’s banks – the river expands into the adjacent hydric hammock and the oak and palm forest somehow manages to tolerate weeks of inundation. If it weren’t for these annual high-water events, pine flatwoods would probably line the river, but the high water creates conditions that disfavor the flatwoods species. So if you perch in a wetland-fringing hammock, you will likely be standing in water at some point during the year.

Because our local thunderstorm-driven rains, tropical storms and hurricanes sometimes occur at the same time of year, they can coincideto create an inevitable, unpredictable, situation. Thus, Hurricane Ian arrived in September while the Myakka watershed was filled to the brim.

All of the Myakka’s impressive, extensive wetlands were already full. The first reports of trouble came from Myakka City, where residents were reporting record water levels; the hurricane was pouring massive amounts of rain into the already saturated system.

Then, south of Myakka City, there were reports of devastating dairy cow losses at Dakin Dairy. Then the aging Hidden River dike was breached (again), flooding homes that had been built in the historic floodplain. Then the Myakka River State Park felt the effects; indeed, after the hurricane passed, park officials took an airboat down the park drive to record unprecedented water levels.

In addition to the rainfall impacts, many old pines and massive oaks in the region were lost because of high winds. And as the bulge of river water worked its way downstream, it was inevitable that cabins and homes would also be dramatically impacted.

Meanwhile, Myakka watershed ranches were contending with unusually high water, downed
One approach is to retain agricultural and park/preserve lands that can tolerate some inundation. Even temporarily accommodating a foot of water on a square mile of undeveloped land acre stores over 200 million gallons of water.

Whenever possible, homes and other human structures need to be moved out of the flood plain. That could mean elevating, relocating or paying people to relocate and removing the structures.

Structures that can’t be moved, need to be prepared. Fuels, lubricants, biocides, etc., need to be stored (or moved) up, out of water’s reach.

Governments could help residents with a variety of flood-proofing strategies such as removable doorway dams that can block up to two feet of water and still allow access. And residents need accurate and timely information about when and how to evacuate.

What to do? The goal is to keep people and their stuff out of areas destined to be inundated.

This won’t be the last time we have copious tropical rainfall on top of an already-full Myakka system. No matter what we design for, there can always be a worse-case event.

Higher Waters: Suncoast Quality of Life is an initiative of

Jono Miller is a Sarasota resident and a longtime community leader who has done extensive research work on the environmental and development history of North Port.

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