

PEACE RIVER

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it begins in a watershed surrounding Lake Hancock in Polk County. The water was tannin-tinted reddish-brown, but mostly clear, the tall oaks on the banks hung with long tangles of Spanish moss that swung in a soft March breeze. As I stood in the water in my sandals and felt my foot being nibbled on, I looked down to find a school of minnows all facing my leg, a few of them darting at my toes.

The Peace River is, by evidence and anecdote, the most popular spot to hunt for fossils in Florida. The vertebrae paleontology collections manager at the Florida Museum of Natural History in Gainesville, Dr.



HULBERT

Richard Hulbert, said the state made it a official in the 1980s: you need a \$5 permit to collect fossils on your own. The hope is that you'll also donate scientifically significant finds to the cause of public knowledge.

"Every year, we issue 800 to 1,200 permits," Dr. Hulbert said. "People report back what they found. (About 75 to) 80 percent of people are collecting on the Peace River."

Judging by a few hours spent with a group of first-time fossil hunters and hired guide Mr. Renz, there is still plenty to be found, even though the river has been "heavily excavated" by hunters since the 1960s, Dr. Hulbert said. That's in large part because things are always changing, being washed away, falling apart and revealing something else.

The river wiggles laterally over time, Mr. Renz pointed out. If you saw it in time-lapse video across an entire era, it might appear to slither like a snake. Last year it probably looked pretty much like now, but thousands of years ago, maybe it was 500 feet to the left, he mused. Once Mr. Renz came back to a spot on the river where the year before there had been a palm tree. A storm had recently dislodged the tree from the bank, and beneath it he found nearly half of the fossilized remains of a giant sloth, he said, one of his most astounding discoveries.

First-time hunters

We used shovels and hand trowels and the screen washing technique, where we held boxes with metal-screened bottoms, to sift through the riverbed's treasures. Those treasures range from about 10,000 years old to 2.5 million in this part of the state, Dr. Hulbert said.

"So, fairly young fossils."

North of Tampa, generally, fossil hunters have collected specimens up to about 40 million years old in Florida. For context, dinosaurs went extinct about 65 million years ago. But there probably are dinosaur bones under the Peace somewhere, Dr. Hulbert said, "if you could drill down deep enough, many, many thousands of feet, in some cases miles."

The first fossil I found in the Peace was a gray shark tooth, a little smaller than my pinky nail and probably from the beast's upper jaw, Mr. Renz told me when I held it out to show him. There were numerous now-extinct species of gray shark, he added, so it's hard to tell which one unless you have the whole jaw. My second find was a miniscule shark tooth, half a pinky-fingernail clipping. Then a smooth little chunk of ancient mammoth tooth that whole, Mr. Renz said, would probably have been the size of my head. Then, a fossilized

barnacle.

There were three men in the group that Mr. Renz led on this day. Each of them was accompanied by a young son. All of us were first-time fossil hunters. They were all on vacation from up north or out west. I checked in with each of them after about an hour of hunting.

Findings

Michael Smith, 33, and his son Jason Smith, 8, are from Tennessee. Jason was thinking maybe later he'd have enough shark teeth from the riverbed to fashion a necklace. Mr. Smith is a geographer who does market research for Dollar General stores, he said.

Nate Segraves, 36, and his son Tobin Segraves, 5, were also producing plenty of treasures. So far the river had for them yielded sharks teeth, as well as chunks of the fossilized rib bones of a dugong (sea cow) and a piece of fossilized turtle shell. They live in the Bay area in California where Mr. Segraves is a chemist and works for a large biotech company, he said.

One of the adults gave his son Tobin a fossilized fish scale to keep in his pouch and Tobin exclaimed, "I didn't find it."

"Some kids are adamant," Mr. Renz said. "If they didn't find it, they don't want it."

And there was Brooks Gump, 47 and his son Avery Gump, 15. They stood on the far side of the river where the bottom was a little sandier, both of them with the same wavy dark hair, bent over their screen, peering at the contents. The Gumps live in upstate New York where Mr. Gump is a professor of public health at Syracuse University, he said.

Mr. Renz helped identify finds, and offered advice, education and encouragement. A full-time guide, he doesn't fossil hunt by himself much on the Peace any more. Like the smooth stones on the riverbed, his interests were shaped by the cumulative effect of days that became years and so on.

"The passion doesn't die, it just evolves," he said. "I've been in the Peace so often there's not a lot of thrill in it."

One of his own more recent fossil hunting expeditions took place in the Andes Mountains in Peru. Mr. Renz is third generation Southwest Florida and still lives in Lee County. He's traveled and lived throughout the country. He is married to Marisa Renz and is tall and funny and full of stories, wearing a floppy hat that protects his head from the sun.

He stresses he's not a professional paleontologist, however knowledgeable and experienced he may be.

"There's a role for an amateur like myself," Mr. Renz said. "That's why I'm always emphasizing to people not to hoard the fossils but share them with the state."

Twenty years ago or so, said Mr. Renz, recognizing in me a younger version of himself, he wrote for a weekly newspaper — the *Fort Myers Beach Observer*. Now besides his business, Fossil Expeditions, he is a photographer and also publishes his own books about fossil hunting.

"You'll be surprised how fast 20 years go by," he said. Or, for that matter, I was thinking, a few million.

Trophy fossil

A megalodon is an extinct giant shark that grew up to 60 feet long, and its teeth are considered a trophy find for many fossil hunters. The beast's pups would come inland to shallower, safer waters, near where we were looking for fossils on Thursday. So Mr. Renz advised that while we probably wouldn't find mature megalodon teeth, it would not be out of the ordinary to find juvenile teeth that were 1 or 2 inches in size.

There were seemingly endless artifacts that came up in our screens from



From left to right, great white, megalodon and mako shark teeth. MARK RENZ / COURTESY PHOTO



Megalodon Nursery — art by Marisa Renz. MARK RENZ / COURTESY PHOTO



The tooth of a megalodon. MARK RENZ / COURTESY PHOTO