



EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY
Fossils are easily found in the Peace River.



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Though the river has been heavily excavated, Mr. Renz says there's still plenty to be found.



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Father and son use the screen-washing technique to find fossils.

the riverbed, though by the time I left during the noon lunch break — a few hours before the rest of the group planned to pack up — a megalodon tooth was yet to be found.

Mr. Renz said “some of the real die-hard” fossil hunters have the idea that the more remote spot on the Peace, the better their chance of an unusual or scientifically valuable find. “But really, it’s often just luck of the draw,” he said.

What we know about the Peace

Starting in the 1960s, scuba divers began looking seriously for fossils in the Peace River and other areas of Southwest Florida. The late Mitchell Hope gathered one of the largest collections, now one of the Natural History Museum’s two largest fossil collections. The bulk of both came from the Peace River area.

“(Mr. Hope) actually had a special Boy Scout troop whose specialty was going out and collecting fossils,” Dr.

Hulbert said.

The other collection was donated in 2011 by John Waldrop, a middle school and community college teacher in Lake Wales, Fla. He took groups of students and others fossil hunting and was renowned for keeping good records of times and location. He also recognized that the scientific community had largely overlooked the Peace, Dr. Hulbert said.

“So he decided to do the first systematic excavation of the Peace River, that we know of, using scuba gear.... (to) not just go for the easy stuff but to search diligently in places and find species that hadn’t been found before and look carefully for smaller things... John set out purposely to kind of set the record straight and revive the scientific interest in the Peace River. He actually started to write a manuscript.”

Science takes another look

Now, Mr. Waldrop and Mr. Mitchell’s collections will form the basis for

a major scientific review of fossils in the Peace River starting next month. Their collections make up about three quarters of the specimens that will be included in the study, which includes pieces from other collectors and other parts of the state, not just South Florida.

“I’m going to finish John Waldrop’s goal of for the first time almost in 100 years, to do a scientific review, particularly the mammals, of the Peace River,” Dr. Hulbert said. “It will be based primarily on those two collections.”

And it’s a mammoth task. Dr. Hulbert plans to begin the curation process of sorting and identifying the collections in April. There are 40,000 to 50,000 pieces in Mr. Waldrop’s finds alone. By contrast, the museum curates on average 10,000 specimens per year.

“The Peace River stuff will be one of the first things I process,” he said. The project ultimately “allows you to understand the history of life... So each site, each region is a little piece of that

much bigger puzzle. The Peace River area, that part of Southwest Florida, is a little less well understood than...Central Florida. A lot of the animals are going to be the same but until you get in there and do the work you don’t know exactly what you’re going to find.” ■

in the know

Websites:

- >> Fossil Club of Lee County: www.fcolc.com/
- >> Southwest Florida Fossil Club: www.southwestfloridafossilclub.com/
- >> Information about fossils at The Florida Museum of Natural History and link to fossil permit page: www.flmnh.ufl.edu/vertpaleo/
- >> Fossil Expeditions, guide Mark Renz: www.fossilexpeditions.com

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