



STORIES IN FLORIDA

The Greening of Wagner Creek

Restoring the long-neglected waterway that flows through Miami's Health District.

May 01, 2019

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Miami's Wagner Creek wasn't the sort of place you would seek out for a picnic. Decades of illegal dumping, leaking pipe systems, and storm-water runoff from nearby auto-repair shops had degraded the creek and affected its water quality. And as early as 2003 the 1.6 mile-long waterway that cut through the city's Health District had earned a sad notoriety as one of Florida's most contaminated waterways. Now all that is about to change. An \$18.4 million cleanup operation has finally begun. The creek bottom is currently being dredged to remove its pollutants and The Nature Conservancy is spearheading a partnership effort to transform a section of the creek from a toxic abandoned waterway into an inviting urban sanctuary.



Since part of our mandate is to encourage a closer connection with nature, we are working hard to bring it into urban environments, where most people live and work.

GREG KNECHT

Deputy Executive Director, TNC Florida

For some people, hearing that TNC is involved in a city beautification project comes as a surprise. The world's biggest conservation group is better known for its large-landscape, endangered species, and marine conservation projects. Yet, for the last three years, TNC has been applying its six-decade-long expertise to its "Cities Program," a series of urban projects designed to create alluring greenspaces, providing storm-water runoff solutions, reducing the "heat-island effect" through tree plantings, and giving communities greater access to cleaner water and air. "There's a growing tendency, especially if you live in a city, to think of 'nature' as some far off, inaccessible, almost-imaginary place," explains Greg Knecht, the deputy executive director of the TNC's Florida Chapter. "Since part of our mandate is to encourage a closer connection with nature, we are working hard to bring it into urban environments, where most people live and work." To date, the TNC Cities Program has completed 20 urban-improvement projects in U.S. cities from DC to Detroit.



WAGNER CREEK In Miami's Health District, a focus of our Cities work in Miami, Florida. © Samantha Blend/TNC

For decades Wagner Creek has mocked its bucolic name. Poisoned by waste from an old city incinerator, it made its slow, fetid way from its source in Allapattah, becoming the Seybold Canal (a channelized part of the waterway) as it ran through Miami's Health District and the historic neighborhoods of Overtown and Spring Garden before joining the Miami River and, further downstream, Biscayne Bay. It was an eyesore, a blight on the rapidly growing city that was springing up along its banks. In August 2017, a long-overdue water clean-up operation began, led by the City of Miami, partially funded by the State of Florida, and prompted by fears that Wagner Creek's dioxins (cancer-causing chemicals) would contaminate the Miami River that itself had just been nursed back to health. Since then a dredging program has skimmed several feet of sediment from the riverbed, to improve the flow, reduce tidal flooding, and extract pollutants.

Now that progress has been made with the dredging project's completion—TNC is leading the next stage in the plan: to create public “greenspaces” along the section of the creek that runs through the concrete-heavy Health District, home to the second highest

concentration of healthcare facilities in the U.S. It's home to Jackson Memorial Hospital, the third largest public hospital in the country, and the University of Miami's Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, ranked number one in the nation for ophthalmology. And the Health District will continue to grow as the health industry and research institutions continue to invest in this highly urbanized area.

“The new parks will give the 100,000 people who live and work in the district a place to exercise, relax and connect with nature,” explains Sonia Succar Rodríguez, the cities program manager for the Conservancy's Florida chapter. “There are major environmental benefits, too. As we invest in landscape elements designed to remove surface runoff and include natural infrastructure to prevent erosion, we can bring the waterway back to health and help the district's recurrent flooding problem.”



VISIONING WORKSHOP The community was invited to give input on the Wagner Creek project. © © Lou Lozada/Vodagraph

The Wagner Creek Greenspace Project officially kicked off with a Community Visioning

Workshop held outside the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine Professional Arts Center in the heart of the Health District. “Its purpose,” explains Temperince Morgan, executive director of the Conservancy in Florida, “was to bring the local community and stakeholders into the planning process to ensure the Wagner Creek Greenspace Project is a collaborative success.” During the workshop, faculty and students from the University of Miami’s School of Architecture and graduates from the Miller School of Medicine worked with participants to hear their vision for the creek.

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When the entire project is finished, the Health District will be totally transformed. No longer a polluted waterway, Wagner Creek will be beautiful, inviting and environmentally beneficial.

SONIA SUCCAR-RODRIGUEZ

TNC Cities Program Manager

Using input from the visioning workshop, the Conservancy is now finalizing a design masterplan, drawn up with help from the engineering firm CH2M and the University of Miami. Once complete, the plan will be presented to Miami-Dade County and stakeholders within the Health District. Work has already begun on a second, smaller parcel of land owned by Jackson Hospital. “When the entire project is finished in 2020,” says Succar Rodríguez, “the Health District will be totally transformed. No longer a polluted waterway in Florida, Wagner Creek will be beautiful, inviting and environmentally beneficial, an attraction for decades to come.”

THE GREENING OF WAGNER CREEK Learn about how we're working to restore Wagner Creek in the heart of Miami's Health District.

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The Nature Conservancy's Partners in the Wagner Creek Greenspace Project

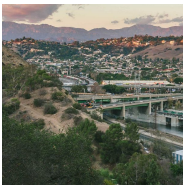
Financial support is currently being provided by The Miami Foundation. In-kind support is coming from The University of Miami and Florida International University. Additional public partners/stakeholders include Miami-Dade County, The City of Miami and Jackson Health System.

Miami River Day

Miami River Day, sponsored by the Miami River Commission, is an annual celebration of the Miami River. It's a great opportunity to bring the community together with partners and community leaders to learn how to bring nature back to the city for long term sustainability and resilience.

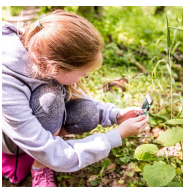
MIAMI RIVER DAY Annual celebration of the Miami River.

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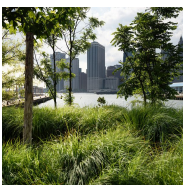
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