

# DISCOVERY

Ocala Star-Banner ★ Saturday, August 8, 1992

Creature Feature 2D

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Photos by Lucy Beebe/Star-Banner

The entrance sign to Gulf Specimen Marine Lab in Panacea welcomes visitors, top. A basket starfish is an example of the marine life studied at the lab, left. Jack Rudloe, author and marine biologist, holds up what he calls "modern fossils" — tar modules that washed ashore on this Panhandle beach, right.

## Biologist a fighter for nature

By Lucy Beebe  
Senior Reporter

**P**ANACEA — Jack Rudloe got his first taste of turtle conservation when he bit the leg of a camp counselor who was trying to kill a snapping turtle with a sledge hammer. Rudloe was eight years old.

The New York City native still nurtures his fiery style and is known as a bit of a snapping turtle himself, particularly when it comes to stopping the destruction of Florida marshlands and bay bottoms.

Rudloe and his wife Anne, a marine biologist, live in Panacea, 30 miles south of Tallahassee. Panacea is a coastal town facing Apalachee Bay.

During a recent visit, Rudloe drives towards the bay, lecturing, one hand on the wheel, one hand pointing and stabbing at environmental injustices he sees in Franklin County — 18 acres of cypress swamp where some company wants to put a strip mine, a deeply-eroded beach that used to be a great horseshoe beach with a rich littoral zone.

"No one wants to take anyone on," said Rudloe. "And commissioners are into denial." He assigns numbers, in jest, to environmental fights. Knockout blows are common. "That was fight number four, we got killed."

But resurrection is the name of the game in conservation battles and Rudloe keeps rising up to fight another round.

Rudloe seems happiest out of doors and in the marine environment. A scuba diver, naturalist, and author, he began a unique business in 1963. The Gulf Specimen Marine Laboratories, Inc., in Panacea, is a non-profit company that supplies marine life to schools and research labs, some 1,500 of them, in the U.S., Canada, Europe and Israel. Invertebrates are their specialty.

"This is a modern-day hunter/gatherer thing," says Rudloe. "We do a simple harvest, take only what is needed, and strive to keep from damaging fragile marine habitats."

In addition, endangered marine species are studied, particularly the Atlantic Ridley turtle, and research conducted into mariculture. Programs are given in coastal environments for groups and teachers.

The aquarium area of Gulf Specimen is open to the public, Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$1.50 for children under 12. Bright orange starfish, sea anemones waving their tentacles and small sharks, are just some of the sights. A touch tank encourages "hands on" exploration.

Marine communities are closer than you may think. The staff has a dock trip to what they call the living dock at Panacea. There visitors see the "fouling" community and the intertidal zonation of barnacles and oysters growing on pilings. In 1989 Rudloe wrote a book called "The Living Dock." He has also written books about the Wilderness Coast in North Florida, a handbook for beachcombers, a book about the sea, and one on sea turtles.

Turtles have been a special interest for Rudloe, ever since his mother brought home green five-and-dime store turtles to their New York apartment. His book, "Time of the Turtle," first published in 1979, is a marvelous blend of scientific facts and personal adventures, including the search for the Turtle Mother.

The Turtle Mother is a story that passes through many cultures. On various spots of the globe, man-made formations, shaped like turtles, face the ocean. "The Turtle Mother is Please see Rudloe on 2D

## Rudloe ready to go the distance

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magnetic, and calls sea turtles out, she is a mediating force between man and nature," said Rudloe.

At one time Rudloe worked on shrimp boats and observed first hand the death of loggerhead turtles, killed by crew members after they were caught in shrimp nets. But, whenever he can, turtles will not meet an untimely death.

During a trip this spring to Nicaragua, for more turtle research, Rudloe was buying live turtles in the waterfront open air market, then walking across the street and setting them free in the water. The locals, of course, thought he was wasting his money.

Rudloe is a self-trained naturalist. He dropped out of college to start the lab business. His excellent observation skills woven with scientific facts, genuine environmental concerns, and folk culture knowledge make his books the kind readers grab and don't put down.

One of his concerns is global warming. While some say it's all a manipulation of the data, Rudloe says the seabed really is rising, and will continue to rise. Millions of years ago, Florida was underwater, with just a ridge of land or sand dunes, down the middle. Rudloe thinks it could happen again.

"Someday you could buy waterfront real estate on the Ocala Ridge," said Rudloe, and he grins.

It's a shocking idea, radical. Round one in another environmental controversy. Rudloe is ready to go the distance.

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