

philanthropists and corporate contributors that include the Mellon Foundation, Exxon and ITT.

In December 1979, the Conservancy began negotiating to buy Dog Island. Lewis still was talking with the Miami investors.

Lewis' condition led to some urgency: He has lung cancer. Although his health has since improved, he was quite ill during the negotiations. The Nature Conservancy didn't want to lose the sale. Lewis wanted to dispose of the island while he still was able.

"Jeff was telling people he was going to die," Alexander said. "He was walking around the streets of Carrabelle trying to decide what to do."

In January 1980, Lewis decided. The Conservancy signed a purchase option to buy the stock of Dog Island Co. for \$2 million. Lewis was assured of a tax break.

Almost immediately, the Miami investors sued Lewis and the Conservancy. They charged that Lewis had broken an agreement to sell to them.

As the lawsuit dragged on, the Conservancy was reluctant to shell out the payments to keep its purchase option alive.

"The Nature Conservancy didn't want to put money in a company with major legal problems," Alexander said.

Finally, in October 1980, Circuit Judge Ben Willis ruled in favor of Lewis, saying that Florida law required a purchase agreement to be in writing.

By July 31, the Conservancy had put together the purchase money from its reserves. A check went to Lewis, and all the stock in Dog Island Co. went to the Conservancy.

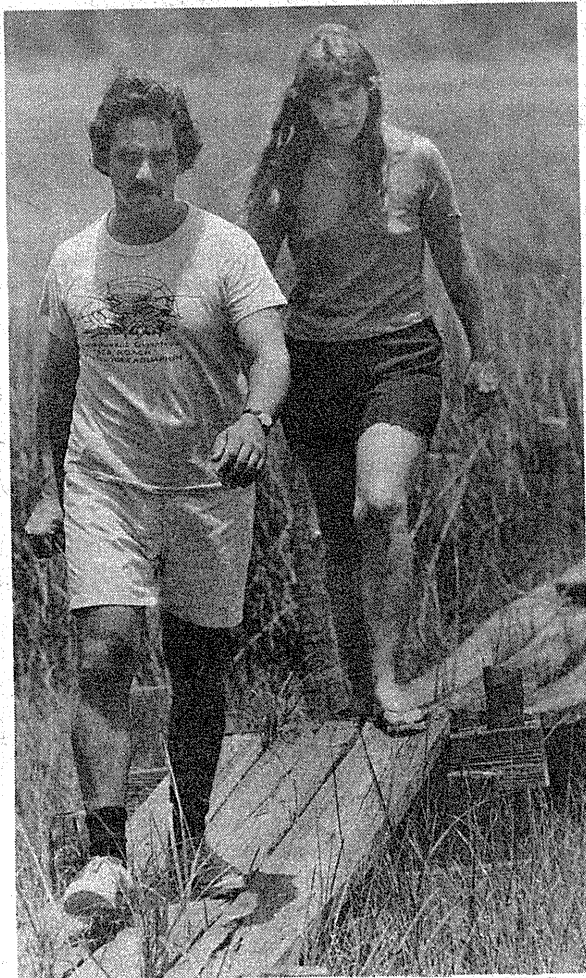
The Conservancy, which had acted all along as a middleman, began a drive to raise \$2 million so the Dog Island Conservation District, a special governmental district set up by the Legislature, could buy back the land as a wilderness preserve. So far, island property owners and others have contributed about \$650,000.

The district eventually will oversee the 1,300-acre preserve and have first rights to make offers on any other part of the island put up for sale.

The Conservancy now is studying the island's geology and wildlife habitats to determine how best to keep the island as a wildlife preserve with limited public access.

When the district buys the land, the Conservancy will lace the deed with legal clauses to ensure that Dog Island remains forever a home for such animals as sea turtles, peregrine falcons and terns.

"This is the environmental real estate business," said Alexander, who now lives and works on Dog Island as a Conservancy representative. "In a way, you can say they are developing Dog Island as a wilderness preserve."



Democrat photo by Mike Ewen

Jack and Anne Rudloe

Man of the marsh

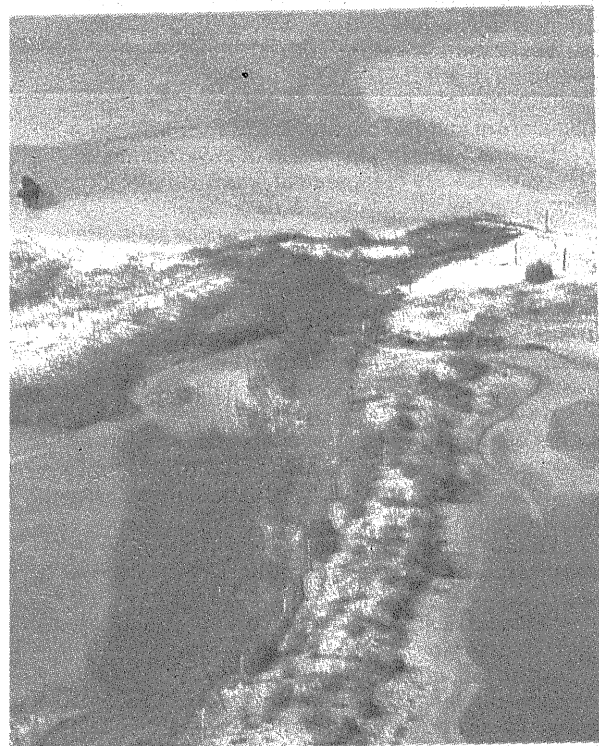
PANACEA — The alligator swimming toward the center of Otter Lake carried a dog named Megan in its mouth and a man named Jack Rudloe on its back.

Rudloe jumped to save his pet without much thought. The battle over the dog ended quick as a flash. Rudloe lost.

"This thing has wiped out my mind," Rudloe said later, when he told the story of the bloody encounter on a muggy day in August.

Risking his life for an Airedale was no agonizing choice for Rudloe, who is not shy when he wants something. More than anything else, he wants to keep bulldozers out of the gray salt marshes of Wakulla County.

What people should realize, he says, is that the



Democrat photo

side in shallow water just offshore

Without marshes, marine organisms have no place to breed. Many birds have no place to feed. The entire food chain is threatened.

For 17 years, Rudloe has impatiently explained that to Wakulla's elected officials. He has stormed out of meetings and stood in front of the bulldozers of land developers.

"Collective humanity is creeping along the coast," said Rudloe, who lives at Panacea. "Nobody is held responsible."

One of his three books about the ocean contains a biographical note calling Rudloe "a passionate self-taught naturalist." Rudloe, 38, is neither frail birdwatcher nor deskbound conservationist.

He spent his first 16 years in New York City. Then his mother read a newspaper ad for Franklin County's Lanark Village that promised "a carefree life in sunny Florida." The family moved to Florida.

Except for expeditions to the Indian Ocean and other faraway seashores, Rudloe has lived in the Big Bend of Florida ever since. He graduated from Leon High School and attended Florida State University for three months — "until I flunked out or they drove me away."

Rudloe is a hunter of sharks, octopuses, flounder, clams and jellyfish. He sells the catches as marine specimens to research laboratories.

In Florida newspapers and national magazines, he has been portrayed as a character, a fighter, a lone wolf. He likes the fame. Money doesn't much interest him.

For a September appearance on NBC's "Today" show, Rudloe exchanged his rumpled shorts for a blue suit and slicked down his usually uncombed hair. He squirmed in his chair and solemnly answered questions about endangered sea turtles.

Back home, Rudloe badgers Wakulla County officials, pleading with them to stop digging roadside ditches, chopping trees and allowing septic tanks in floodplains.

With his wife, Anne, a marine biologist, he dives to underwater reefs near the Bahamas, Bermuda and beyond. They live on university grants and money from the marine-specimen business. At home behind Panacea's shopping center, they share their stilted bayfront house with their 1-year-old son named Sky.

"Everybody's a backyard conservationist," he said. "I don't care about something until I know what's there. But as soon as you know, it gets really interesting."

The marshland dominates the southern end of Wakulla County, a shoreline where resort developers' dreams fade when would-be tourists meet ferocious salt-marsh mosquitoes.

These tidal marshes are the boundary between ocean and land. Fresh water and nutrients run off from land to mix with salt water. Tall grasses just along the water's edge provide food and shelter for animals that range from tiny invertebrates to fish to birds that eat the fish.

The coast is indented with bays where the Ochlockonee, Sopchoppy, St. Marks and Wakulla rivers meet the sea.

"You can't see what's happening. You could have 100,000 shrimp die and not even know it," Rudloe said. Shrimp are among the sea life breeding throughout the Gulf of Mexico.

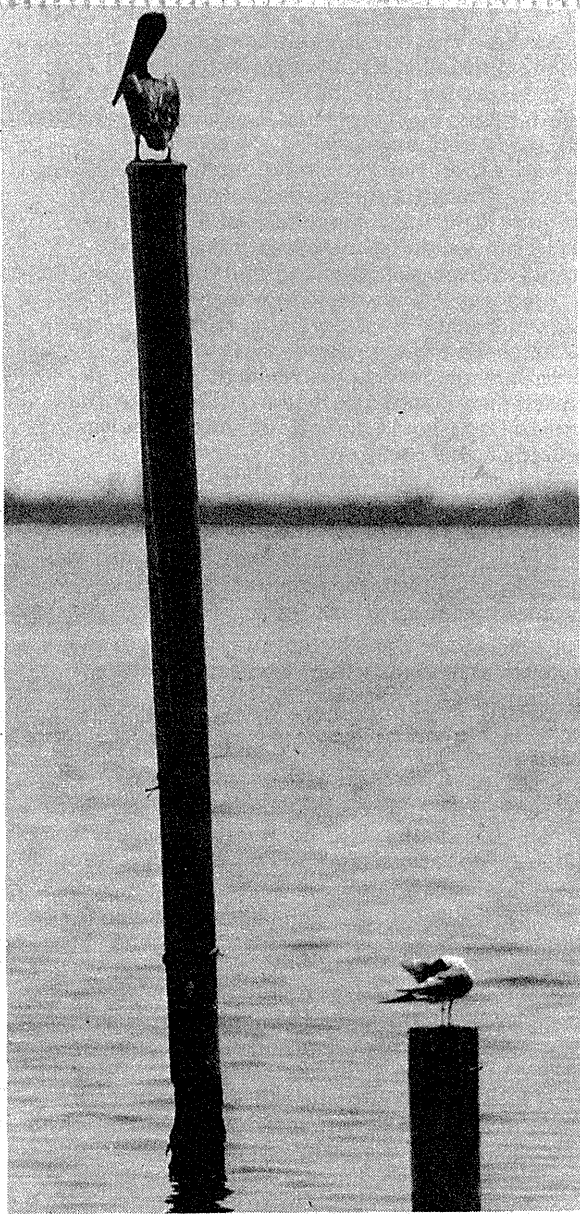
In Wakulla County, the only sandy beaches are meager strips at Ochlockonee Point and Shell Point. Wakulla has no crashing waves along what geologists have christened a "low-energy" coastline.

Much of the coastal marsh is protected from development by the federal St. Marks Wildlife Refuge. With real estate filling up on Florida's wide and sandy southwest beaches, the few miles of privately owned coast in Wakulla County are becoming what realty billboards have branded them for a decade: "Florida's Last Frontier."

When a developer from Clearwater got permission to build houses and condominiums along man-made canals on a marshy peninsula, Rudloe went to the county courthouse to raise hell with the planning commission.

"This smacks of a scam," he said, striding to the front of the Crawfordville courtroom to inspect the developer's aerial photographs.

Elected officials in Wakulla are used to seeing Rudloe at meetings. They listen courteously when he asks them to avoid septic tanks in flood-prone areas. "Thank you, Jack, we appreciate your concern," they say for the hundredth time. When he begins to



Democrat photo by Mike Ewen

Panacea: The long and short of pole-sitting

talk fast and loud, they roll their eyes and ignore him.

Rudloe thinks the system is stacked too heavily on the side of landowners and their profits.

"The law gives almost no importance to the life around us. As soon as you have some shadow of a title to land, you are allowed to scrape it down to a biologically useless state."

His anger extends to state agencies charged with enforcing regulations: "They are basically well-meaning people, but they are castrated by the Legislature and the bureaucratic empire."

He chastises the slow hand of government: "Bureaucrats are incapable of moving. By the time they get going, the damage is done."

He scorns retirees who come for the good life in Florida and destroy what attracted them in the first place.

"Somebody retires down here and builds their dream home. Here come the bulldozers. They scrape, rip, tear and alter. Then they put up azalea bushes and try to make it look like Peoria, Ill."

He doesn't mind if they come, he said, but he'd rather see native vegetation respected and left alone.

"I guess I'll lose interest when Wakulla County gets to be such a slum that I can't stand it any more," he said.

Rudloe's dreams include a vision of all the seaside motels and condominiums falling into the sea.

"If a hurricane destroyed it all, I would jump up and down for joy."

As he talked about his fears for Wakulla County, he paused to listen to a distant buzz. With a vigilant gleam in his eye, he wondered whether it might be a chain saw.

"You get weird around here," he said.