

## New Indian Riverkeeper says he 'can get tough if he has to'

By Tyler Treadway (Contact)  
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Photo by Eric Hasert

George Jones, 53, the new Indian Riverkeeper for the Indian River Lagoon, drops a chemical into a sample of the lagoon water to check the salinity level during a recent workshop at the Manatee Center in Fort Pierce to teach volunteers how to collect water samples. "Right now with all the storm issues, the state of the river is not real good. We're going to need to make some fixes over the long haul. Didn't take overnight to get here and it's not going to get fixed overnight. But we sure need to start on it." Jones said.

TREASURE COAST — The new Indian Riverkeeper has been a bureaucrat, so he knows how to negotiate; he's also been a certified law enforcement officer, so ...

"I can get tough if I have to," said George Jones. "My job is to be an advocate for the Indian River Lagoon and the people. And I take that responsibility very seriously."

Jones, a 34-year employee of the state Department of Environmental Protection, officially became riverkeeper on Sept. 1. Sponsored by the nonprofit Treasure Coast Environmental Defense Fund, his job is to look out for the best interests of America's most diverse estuary as well as the local residents, anglers, boaters and business owners who use it and depend on it.

A recent study by the St. Johns River Water Management District said the lagoon contributes about \$4 billion to the economies of the counties it borders: Martin, St. Lucie, Indian River, Brevard and Volusia.

"I think there's a lot of grassroots support for the lagoon," Jones said. "People understand that it's an important resource, one of the most important resources in the United States, let alone in Florida."

Jones said the first few days of his new job have involved a lot of getting acquainted, and re-acquainted, with people with the various local, state and national agencies and nonprofit groups that have interests in both developing and preserving the land and water in South Florida.

"I already have a good relationship with most of the people at the agencies I'll be working with," Jones said. "We didn't always agree with each other, and I don't expect we always will, but we have respect for each other."

Henry Caimotto, owner of Snook Nook Bait and Tackle in Jensen Beach and a member of the Rivers Coalition, said he was impressed with Jones' experience and connections.

"He seems to have good organizational skills and he knows all the politicians and all the players," Caimotto said. "It's good to have him on our side."

After retiring from the state, Jones took a year off.

"I had to detox from government," he said. "But it was too early to sit around and fish all the time."

The riverkeeper job, he said, "is a wonderful opportunity for me to do something I feel is important. Work is work, but to me, this is a passion. I think the job will be rewarding to me; I hope it's rewarding for the lagoon."

The reward isn't financial; the job pays about \$24,000 year.

"I know I could have made more as a consultant somewhere," Jones said, "but I think I can make a difference. I'm very partial to Florida's natural resources, and I think they ought to have an advocate."

Jones takes over from Kevin Stinnette, the original "keeper" who gave up the post after six years to devote more time to his full-time job teaching at the new marine science academy at Forest Grove Middle School in Fort Pierce.

## **ABOUT GEORGE JONES**

- 34-year employee of the Division of Recreation and Parks of the state Department of Environmental Protection

- Held positions as ranger, assistant park manager, park manager and bureau chief, in which he supervised more than 300 employees in state parks throughout South Florida and oversaw a budget of more than \$4 million.

- 57-year-old Port St. Lucie resident

- For more information about the Indian Riverkeeper, go to [www.indianriverkeeper.org](http://www.indianriverkeeper.org).

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