

Cousteau: mangrove restoration 'about saving ourselves'

By ERIC STAATS

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Fabien Cousteau did not need a scuba tank and a pair of flippers to tour a mangrove restoration site Tuesday near Marco Island.

Looking across the 225 acres of dead and dying mangroves, the grandson of pioneering oceans champion Jacques Cousteau did have some optimism.

"If we invest in nature, nature will invest in us," said Cousteau, 44, an ocean explorer, activist and documentary filmmaker in Southwest Florida speaking to the annual meeting of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida.

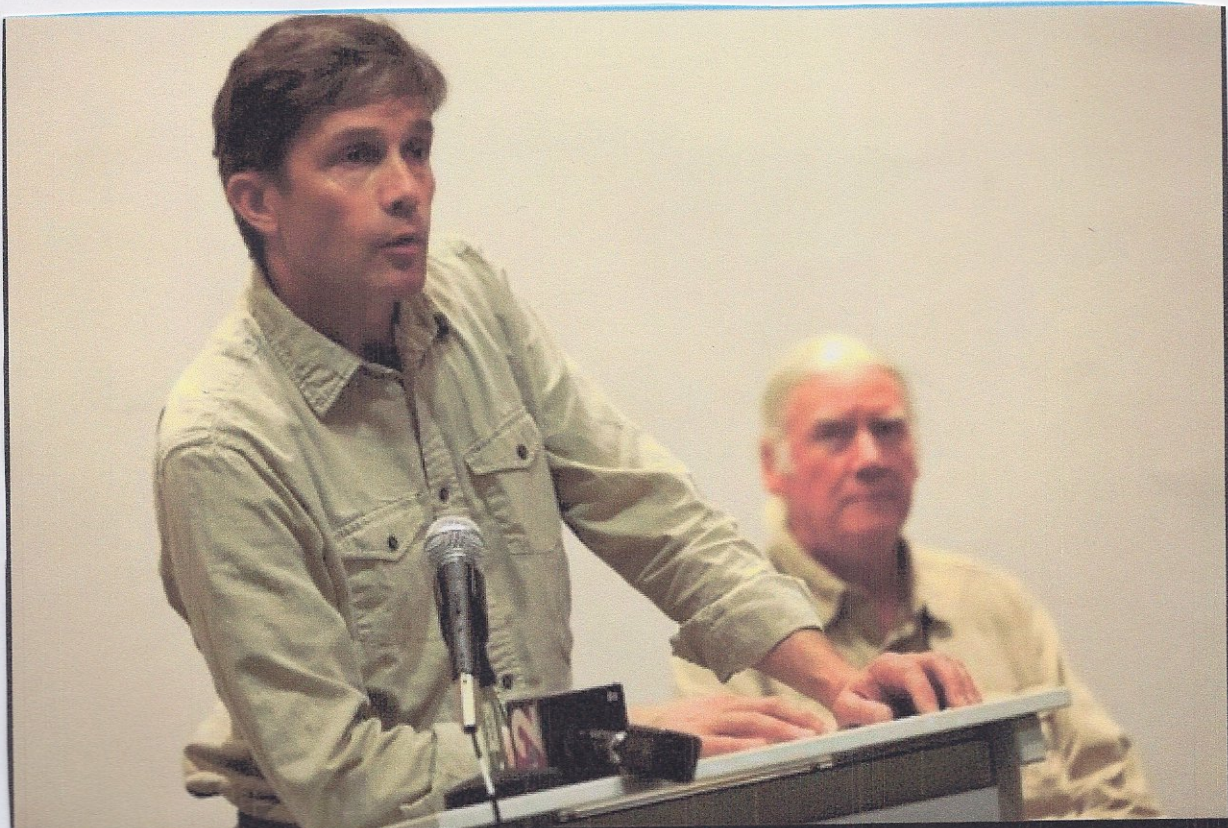


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David Albers/Staff

- Fabien Cousteau speaks about a mangrove restoration project near Goodland alongside Robin Lewis, head of Coastal Resources Group, at a press conference at the Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve on Tuesday, Jan. 17, 2012, in Naples.

The Conservancy and Rookery Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve are working with mangrove restoration expert Robin Lewis to revive the black mangroves along San Marco Road between Marco and Goodland.

Roads and development have changed the way water flows in and out of the forest, which began showing signs of stress after heavy rains in 1992 and began dying in 1995.

Backers of the restoration are trying to raise \$750,000 to install new culverts under San Marco Road and dig tidal channels through the forest, but money has been hard to find.

Citizens have chipped in \$7,500, the Conservancy and Rookery Bay are donating scientists' time, but the project still is looking to raise \$150,000 to match a \$450,000 federal grant.

A small piece of the restoration north of San Marco Road is set to break ground Feb. 22, provided state and federal environmental permits are issued in coming weeks.

The entire project, though, will take years, and lay the foundation for Mother Nature to take it from there, Lewis said.

"Mother Nature can do wonderful restoration work on her own," Lewis said.

Cousteau said projects like saving the Marco mangroves offer a chance to harness public frustration with degradation of the planet's life-support system and engage people in saving it.

Mangroves are the engines that drive a coastal ecosystem that serves as a nursery for economically important fisheries, buffer hurricanes and support Southwest Florida's tourism-based economy, restoration backers say.

"It's about saving ourselves," Cousteau said.

Cousteau started the Plant-A-Fish foundation that uses coral reef, oyster and mangroves restoration projects around the world to spread the message of environmental stewardship.

"The solutions need to come from each and every one of us," he said.