

BY STEPHEN MORRILL

Robin Lewis: From eco-freak to environmental advisor

Lewis, who shifted his '70s "thou shalt not" philosophy to his '80s "why can't we manipulate?" view, aims to restore the habitat.

When Tampa developer Jack Wilson won the first ever Corporate Award given by the Audubon Society, no one was more pleased than Roy R. "Robin" Lewis III. If this rapprochement between the birdwatchers and the developers seems unusual, then Lewis's path from 1970s eco-freak to 1980s corporate environmental advisor might also be considered the same.

"I was president of Save-Our-Bay Inc. about '72," Lewis recalls. "In the course of fighting a lot of projects, I found out that there weren't many people who knew what was going on. A lot of problems were arising because there was just a total lack of knowledge, a total lack of application of basic science to managing the environment."

During one of his battles with the Tampa Port Authority, Lewis noticed some old spoil islands in the bay. Remnants of an old dredging project, they had slowly become covered with vegetation and had eventually become one of the finest bird sanctuaries in the Southeast. Lewis took a hard look at those islands and wondered how fast the islands would have developed if someone had deliberately planted and protected them.

"That got me out of the totally 'stop,' or 'thou shalt not' part of the environmental movement," he says, "into the 'why can't we manipulate?' I think we should be looking toward restoration. I got into this business because I wanted to restore the habitat."

He came by his vocation honestly. Lewis, who now lives in Tampa with his wife, Lois, grew up in Jacksonville, Florida. There Lewis hunted and fished with his father, "a typical Florida Cracker" and learned a little biology from his mother, who was a school teacher. He went to the University of Florida intending to go into medicine. A visit to the U.F. marine biology research station near Cedar Key changed his mind.

Lewis shifted his studies to marine science; by 1970, he was teaching at Hillsborough Community College and participating in the environmental movement. In 1975 Lewis formed Mangrove Systems Inc. to advise developers on how to scientifically and sensitively deal with the environment, and how to deal with the regulatory agencies.

"The state's laws have been getting tougher and tougher and tougher," he says. "And they aren't going to get any easier. In Florida today it's risky to ignore the environmental constraints of every single piece of property you buy."

While anyone can apply for the permits to do work in regulated wetlands, the odds are better if a professional environmental consultant is brought in early. "If you apply for a DER (Department of Environmental Regulation) permit, it'll take from six to eight months to get it," Lewis points out. "Suppose, after waiting six to eight months, you are rejected?"

Lewis, because he deals with various agencies every day, is able to tell a developer what the odds are of a development plan getting approval. In ten years, he's never failed to get a permit when he told the developer that he thought he could.

"The ideal scenario is for someone to come to us with a piece of property that they want to buy," Lewis says. "This is what Jack Wilson did, and this is why he'll make money and a lot of other developers will go broke. Jack asked me to go out and walk that site, put some stakes in the ground, and tell him roughly what he could use and what he couldn't use. And only with that infor-

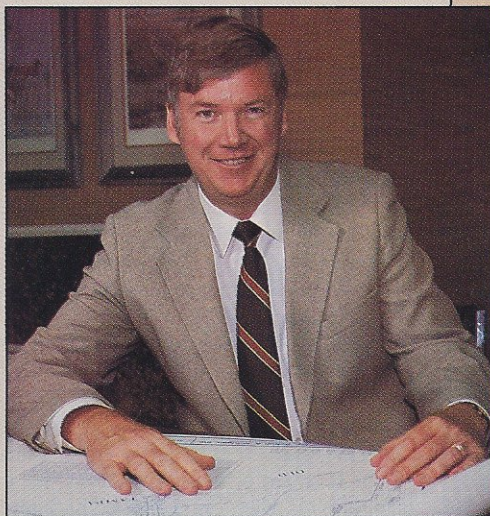


Photo by Penny Rogo

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mation did he close on the property."

But the ideal isn't always possible. "Most developers come to me after they have bought a piece of property and then gotten it all laid out. Then, very late in the game and after they've dropped a big bundle of money, they come to me and tell me that some agency they never heard of told them they have to get permits or they can't build. The developer's upset because he has interest on a construction loan running, and I have to tell him that it's going to take six to eight months to get his permits."

"Mitigation," a new concept whereby a developer can fill in marsh in one place while creating an equal amount of marsh someplace else, has proved to be a valuable tool for the developer. Wilson did this with his Bayport Plaza, hiring Lewis to restore nearby Fish Creek and a small estuary. Lewis was even able to talk Wilson into buying an adjacent tract that wasn't necessary for Wilson's development, and restoring that as well.

"I will accept a project in which there is no net loss, even if it means we have to take away some wetlands in one place and create them someplace else," Lewis says. "But I prefer to see something like Jack's project, and I work for that continuously with all my clients. We ought to try to do even better than we have to."

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