

# Documentary Film by Elam Stoltzfus Celebrates South Walton's Rare Coastal Dune Lakes 6-2009

By Lynn Nesmith

In summer Grayton Beach is a popular gathering spot for all manners of recreation. But on a cold winter day, it's a completely different story.

On one of those solitary December afternoons a couple of years ago as I walked along the shore, the beach was pretty much deserted except for a lone photographer staked out along the banks of Western Lake. It was one of those magical days when the dune lake had recently opened up to the Gulf, and the gulls were having a heyday as the fish tried to decide which way to swim in the rapidly flowing water.

The photographer was Elam Stoltzfus, who was capturing footage for a documentary film on the rare coastal dune lakes of South Walton.

It's been 20 years since Stoltzfus took his first video images along 30-A. On that time he was part of a CNN film crew working on an early feature on Seaside. "I was originally hired to do the audio for the segment," recalls Stoltzfus. "But the crew was all women so I ended up carrying the heavy camera and doing some of the filming."

Stoltzfus was back in our area in 1994, this time to film Grayton Beach State Park when it was named the best beach in the country by Stephen Leatherman, aka Dr. Beach. The natural beauty of South Walton made a strong impression on Stoltzfus. "From my first visit I realized the dunes lakes were special," he adds. "And I knew I would be back eventually for another project."

A native of southeastern Pennsylvania, Stoltzfus relocated to Northwest Florida in the early 1980s when his folk Christian band was on tour in Blountstown and he met his future wife. Born and raised on an Amish farm, Stoltzfus credits the austerity of his childhood surroundings for nurturing a love of nature. "Even as I tended my farm chores, I dreamed of art instead of cattle and crops," recalls Stoltzfus. "The absence of outside media allowed me to develop fresh and creative perspectives as an artist."

Stoltzfus graduated from Florida State University in 1988 and honed his filmmaker skills working with a studio on an array of political ads and commercial, public service and institutional videos. He laughs, however, that he got his big break in LA, working on educational films for the state's department of corrections in Lower Alabama.

Actually, he got his creative launch in the backwaters of South Florida when he was asked to work on a film on with renowned fine-art photographer Clyde Butcher. That associate led to another project with Butcher, "Living Waters," a one-hour documentary on 12 of Florida 41 aquatic preserves, and Stoltzfus' first major art project under his own name, Live Oak Productions,

"I'm a story teller and a swamp rat, confesses Stoltzfus. " I found my calling and way to have fun with art and nature. Not to mention that millions of people have seen 'Living Waters' and it has made a difference. "

After “Living Waters” was shown at the Chautauqua in Defuniak Springs, a group of preservationists set out to document South Walton’s unique dune lakes. About the same time, Point Washington resident Chandra Hartman, was writing a script for a Sustainable Tourism project as part of her degree from Prescott College, and made a proposal to the Walton County Tourist Development Council, who came up with funding for a short documentary.

Hartman and Stoltzfus collaborated on the script with the TDC and the Choctawhatchee Basin Alliance with the goal of educating people about the ecological benefits of the coastal dune lakes and how they can be sustained for years to come.

With a tenuous and ever-changing relationship to the Gulf, the dune lakes can be separated by a barrier beach up to 500 feet wide with dunes sometimes rising to 10-30 feet high. Depending on rainfall and inflows from springs, the lake periodically reaches a critical level and the lowest elevation of the beach gives way to “pop off”, “blow out” or “open up” – three of the familiar descriptions to the phenomena of as the dark tannin-colored water of the lake rushes into the Gulf. The 13-minute film captures the beauty of the lakes and, explores the biodiversity of the coastal dune lakes and explains water quality monitoring, as well as describing development along the lakes and recreational opportunities.

Based on the positive response to of the film, Stoltzfus is seeking funding for a full-length documentary that will explore varied dune lakes around the world. The ecology of our beloved coastal dune lakes is incredibly uncommon, and because of their rarity, there is little existing research. Even scientists seem to disagree what constitutes a coastal dune lake. Stoltzfus acknowledges similar bodies of water in Australia and New Zealand, but their properties are slightly different than the ecological formations of Walton County’s 15 lakes. Other researchers recognize dune lakes along the Pacific Northwest and in Madagascar.

“Our goal is to education, inform and entertain,” explains Stoltzfus. “There’s a power in images. It’s like cracking a window and opening up a view.” And Stoltzfus maintains he is an artist, not a scientist. “In filming, I treat the dune lake as a character,” adds Stoltzfus. It’s the protagonist in my story.”

### **Jewels of the Coast**

The Gulf of Mexico might be the Panhandle’s defining body of water, but the rare coastal dunes lakes along 30-A are equally engaging and worth a field trip. Walton County has 15 named dune lakes from west to east: Fuller Lake, Morris Lake, Campbell Lake, Stallworth Lake, Allen Lake, Oyster Lake, Draper Lake, Big Red Fish Lake, Little Red Fish Lake, Alligator Lake, Western Lake, Eastern Lake, Deer Lake, Camp Creek Lake, and Lake Powell. Walton County is also blessed with four Florida state parks that either border or encompass several of the lakes – Topsail Hill Preserve, Grayton Beach, Deer Lake, and Camp Helen. These parks also offer woodland trails and dune walkways to explore woodlands and lakes, as well as the pristine stretches of beach.

“Coastal Dune Lakes” was co-produced by ELAM STOLTZFUS of Live Oak Production Group in Blountstown and The Walton County Tourist Development Council. The film is available for viewing on online at [www.beachesofsouthwalton.com](http://www.beachesofsouthwalton.com). and on Stoltzfus’ website [www.coastaldunelakes.org](http://www.coastaldunelakes.org). The TDC website also provides information on environmental tourism and visiting Walton County’s state parks and rare coastal dune lakes.