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Elizabeth Neville looked across the Ocklawaha River to hundreds of broken trees in the water Wednesday morning.

“I can’t smile when I’m out here,” said Neville, a manatee advocate for Defenders of Wildlife.

Neville was one of a handful of environmentalists taking a boat tour of the Ocklawaha River on Wednesday to discuss what they say are the benefits of dismantling the Rodman dam.

The area near the dam is called the Drowned Forest because the trees originally in that area drowned when the Rodman Reservoir was created, Neville said.

She was taking a sunrise boat ride from Kenwood Boat Ramp to Marion Blue Spring, where some sites—like the graveyard of dead trees – are only visible when the Rodman Reservoir drawdown is happening.

Tilapia jumped, ospreys flew and eagles cried in the early morning hours among the murky water covering the spring water that was originally crystal clear.

When the reservoir is filled, it will become a black mud color again.

Neville showed pictures of Cannon Springs, a stop along the Ocklawaha River. It shines clear, for now, as an indication of what could be if not for the dam, Neville said.

The drawdown started in October and will be in effect until the beginning of March.

As part of the drawdown, 65% of the Rodman Reservoir was dewatered to “maintain the ecological health and productivity of the reservoir while offering improved recreational benefits for the public,” according to Free the Ocklawaha, a coalition created to make Ocklawaha a free-flowing river and reconnect the Silver and St. Johns rivers.

“(The Ocklawaha) is, kind of, that forgotten river and we’re going to make sure it’s not forgotten anymore,” said Margaret Spontak, chairwoman for Free the Ocklawaha.

Drawdowns happen every three to four years, and members of Free the Ocklawaha said this is the time to see what partial restoration of the river would look like.

Restoration would include getting rid of the Rodman Reservoir.

Also known as the Rodman or Kirkland dam, the reservoir was constructed in 1968 as part of the Cross Florida Barge Canal project. The work was stopped in 1971, but the dam remains in Putnam County.

The Florida Game & Freshwater Fish Commission recommended in 1971 for the reservoir to be drained, according to a timeline made by Jim Gross, executive director of Florida Defenders of the Environment.

In 1978, a statement by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers concluded “draining Rodman Pool and restoring the river would have no significant socioeconomic impacts,” according to the timeline.

While some restoration has been made, 20 of the 21 springs along the river were flooded, as were 7,500 acres of forested wetlands and 16 miles of the Ocklawaha River, according to Free the Ocklawaha.

“I’ve been aware of dams and the damage they do for a long, long time,” Gross said. “There are lots of misconceptions about this river. There are lots of misconceptions about the dam itself and about its value to the community.”

He said the economic value of the dam could be expanded if knocked down.

A University of Florida study in 2017 stated an “analysis of visitors’ expenditures shows that the activities on the natural stretches of the Ocklawaha River result in greater contributions to the regional economy, compared to the recreation on the Rodman Reservoir sites.”

Visitors spent \$6 million at the Rodman Reservoir annually and \$13 million at free-flowing river sites, according to the study.

Free the Ocklawaha stated in a press release there are six key benefits to restoration. It would bring back migratory fish, expand the manatee habitat, improve water flow and quality, restore wetland forests, expand recreational opportunities and revitalize North Florida’s economy.

Erika Ritter was raised on the river since she was a child and has had an up-front view of the changes over time.

“This is my front yard,” Ritter said. “I grew up watching my front yard be destroyed. ... My main concern now is the connectivity for fish. We’ve lost the fish,” Ritter said.

She said people want the dam kept in place for large-mouthed bass, but there have always been bass in the river.

Spontak said Free the Ocklawaha currently has 33 organizations behind the coalition including the Florida Wildlife Federation, the St. Johns Riverkeeper and the Center for Biological Diversity.

Although some boat tours are fully booked until the drawdown ends, residents and visitors have until March 1 to take in the sights of the uncovered Ocklawaha before the reservoir is scheduled to refill.

“I think people are seeking natural areas,” Ritter said. “That’s what we’re after here today, back to our natural areas.”

For more information on the coalition, visit freetheocklawaha.com.

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