

E. O. Wilson says death of M. C. Davis a “huge loss” for conservation

<http://floridaenvironments.com/conservation-recreation/m-c-davis-walton-county-conservation-philanthropist-dead-at-age-70/>

Mon, Jul 13, 2015

Conservation

By BRUCE RITCHIE

M. C. Davis, a Walton County developer who became a world-renowned conservationist, died on July 11 after a long bout with lung cancer. He was 70.

Harvard biologist Edward O. Wilson, left, and M. C. Davis, owner of the Nokuse Plantation, listen to John Dindo, the director of the Dauphin Island Sea Lab, during a tour of Nokuse in 2008.

Davis purchased 50,000 acres in South Walton County to create a massive environmental restoration project he called Nokuse Plantation (pronounced No-GO-see). He also built the E. O. Wilson Biophilia Center there in honor of Harvard biology professor Edward O. Wilson.

Wilson, a two-time Pulitzer Prize winner who in 2008 said he was “blown away” by Davis’ conservation efforts, called his death “a huge loss for the conservation movement in Florida and nationally.”

“M. C. (Davis) was a brilliant innovator who constructed conservation initiatives — big ones — on his own and pursued them increasingly to completion,” Wilson told Floridaenvironments.com on Monday.

“In conceiving and constructing and guiding the Wilson Biophilia Center, he brought an entirely new concept to natural history conservation and direction in the southeastern United States. He was around the nation for many of us,” Wilson said. “I can testify personally ... he was a creator of ideas, a constant stimulation to thought and action, and it is not too much to say an irreplaceable force of nature.”

Davis and Nokuse Plantation in 2008 were featured in “Wildlands Philanthropy: The Great American Tradition.” The 322-page coffee table book describes the likes of John D. Rockefeller Jr., who contributed to the creation of Acadia, Grand Tetons and Smoky Mountain national parks, and the Mellons, who helped conserve more than 2 million acres in Alaska.

Davis, a land-speculator turned “nature nut,” didn’t think he could rank among the titans of conservation who would be featured in the book. Yet, he saw himself in it when copies were sent to him.

“When you see the quality of our neighbors it’s really a humbling experience,” Davis told Florida’s Acquisition and Restoration Council in 2009.

The state and federal governments in 2004 purchased a conservation easement on 16,751 acres for \$17.2 million.

In 2013, Florida and the federal government purchased another conservation easement on 20,800 acres for about \$12.5 million, with most coming from the state Florida Forever program. Davis discounted the property by \$7 million, according to the Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

“The money derived from it, as always, I’m recycling it back into nature,” Davis told the ARC Council in 2009. “I’m not making any money. I’m delighted to make a bargain sale. I think this is probably the biggest bang for the buck.”

The Air Force supported the purchases because they prevented development under the flight patterns of the fighter aircraft at nearby Eglin Air Force Base.

Davis ended his own life, according to an obituary published later on Legacy.com. “He had a plan, he carried it out flawlessly and he died at a place he loved the most,” the obituary said. Additional details were not provided.

Environmentalists said Davis provided a shining example of environmental stewardship in the region.

“He was not only a great American, but a truly monumental person who put his own personal fortune into fulfilling his conservation ethic,” Richard Hilsenbeck of The Nature Conservancy said Monday. “He helped conserve numerous and diverse species of wildlife and helped foster a better quality of life for all Floridians.”

Earlier this year, Davis faced opposition from south Walton County residents when he won approval for a Hampton Inn, the first chain hotel along trendy the coastal 30-A Highway. The Walton County Commission denied the project in April, according to The Walton Sun.

Davis previously said he made his money on land deals before hearing a Defenders of Wildlife lecture in the mid-1990s on black bears in Florida.

“I went from being a total right-wing capitalist to a tree-hugger in 90 days,” Davis said.

Davis paid for construction of the E.O. Wilson Biophilia Center to teach Walton County students about the local wildlife and ecology. He said it’s an opportunity to expose the public and youth to the nature that previous generations grew up with.

“How are you going to love something and how are going to save it?” he said. “You are not going to save it unless you love it. And you are not going to love it unless you are exposed to it.”