

First Altamaha Riverkeeper dies at 81

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James Holland did not need data from a fancy marine biology lab to warn him about trouble on the Altamaha River.

As a crabber and fishermen by trade, the longtime Brunswick resident was among the first to witness environmental degradation in the river's vital estuary here on the Georgia Coast. And Holland did not wait around for others to come to the rescue of his beloved ecosystem.

He went on to become the first Altamaha Riverkeeper in the early 2000s and remained among the river's most passionate advocates long after stepping down.

Holland died Thursday at home in Brunswick following a lengthy illness. He was 81.

Though he never finished high school, Holland would go on to teach himself the science of the ecosystem and become knowledgeable about the threats to its health. Holland and other like-minded environmentalist founded the Altamaha Riverkeeper in 1999, providing a voice to defend the fragile ecosystem.

Holland served as the first executive director of Altamaha Riverkeeper, from 2000 to 2010.

“He was completely self-taught,” said Janisse Ray, a founding member of the riverkeeper group and an environmental writer. “But he was fired by a passion that was unparalleled. It was a passion for the resource and a passion for the economy of the resource. All of that translated into environmental action.”

For years after stepping down as riverkeeper, Holland remained a steadfast protector of the river, known as the Amazon of the South, and its estuary. He was a regular at Glynn County Commission meetings and other meetings of other government agencies, speaking out against projects that he perceived to be threats to the environment.

Holland was a self-taught and talented photographer, often using aerial photos he had taken of the river system to emphasize his arguments. He was a frequent contributor to The News' Letters to the Editor, always on behalf of the environment.

“In the end, what we do as humans will be the deciding factor about whether our marshes will or will not recover,” Holland wrote in a 2016 letter to the editor.

Holland was born in Cochran and raised by an uncle. He moved to Glynn County after a stint in the U.S. Marines, Ray said. He grew to love the Altamaha estuary while wresting a living from it as a crabber. When his crab catches started to drop in the

1990s, Holland's concern led him to join the region's environmental movement, Ray said.

He soon became its strongest and most knowledgeable voice.

"I know he made a lot of people angry," Ray said. "But he spoke his truth, and he didn't sugar coat it. He didn't let the poverty of his youth and his lack of formal education define him. He became an iconic figure in the protection of this natural resource."

Fletcher Sams, the current executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper, credited Holland's ardent defense of the ecosystem with laying the groundwork for its long-term protection.

"James leaves behind a legacy of standing up to those in power who place profits over our natural resources," Sams said. "The torch he lit decades ago still burns bright."

Holland is survived by his daughter, Judy Johnson of Brunswick.