

Legend of 'African Queen' sinks under scrutiny

By Suzanne Wentley
staff writer

STUART — Though without the leeches and the war, a local land preservation group imagined the classic movie "The African Queen" playing out right on the banks of the St. Lucie River: A replica steamboat for tours along the area of the river where the group said portions of the movie were filmed. Maybe even the original African Queen boat on display.

The group — the Martin County Regional Land Trust — even won a \$5.5 million state grant to preserve the property, using "The African Queen" connection as a major selling point.

Turns out there's a little problem: There's no proof that any part of "The African Queen" was filmed along the South Fork of the St. Lucie River, land trust board members now acknowledge.

"As far as I can find out, there is no connection whatsoever with 'The African Queen,'" said board member Phyllis Cole. "Inwardly, like other board members, I cringe every time I see that."

"We all feel responsible for what was represented, and none of us are happy with it," she said.

The land trust has scrapped its original plans for the 51.3 acres along the St. Lucie River, known as the Delaplaine property.

Sudore, who now represents the Florida Land Trust Network, said she thought the Martin County Regional Land Trust board members are denying the cinematic history to devalue the property to develop it in the future.

"They're passing a lot of information that is totally erroneous," Sudore said. "In my opinion and my belief, there are motivations that are not preservation-oriented here."

However, officials with the Historical Society of Martin County also were unable to find any reference to an "African Queen" filming on the St. Lucie in such books as "Florida and the American Motion Picture Industry 1898-1980," or any of the local files in their collection.

'A total farce'

The "African Queen" connection was first reported by Sudore late in 2000, when state transportation officials were considering buying the Delaplaine property for construction of a second Palm City bridge.

In March 2001, the land trust presented the state a

The group no longer plans to relocate the African Queen boat from its current Key Largo location, or to display artifacts from Katharine Hepburn, or to create a river tour and cinematic exhibit — all key elements outlined to state officials during a lengthy 2001 presentation to win the \$5.5 million grant.

Instead, the Delaplaine property will be a nature preserve with hiking trails and a canoe launch.

State officials said it's very rare for a funded project to change development plans after a grant has been issued, but they're not asking for the money back.

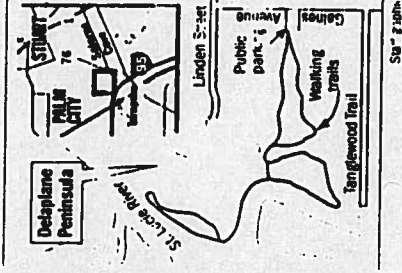
"The African Queen" — the filming of the movie — has not been doc-

umented that it took place on this site," said Grant Gelhardt, an environmental administrator with Florida Communities Trust. "Although that was interesting and informative, it did not play a role in the project site being funded."

Nonetheless, trust board members said, they are ready to put to rest the local lore about the 1951 movie classic featuring Humphrey Bogart and Hepburn.

"All along, 'The African Queen' to me was a silly diversion," said Jim Snyder, a member of the seven-person land trust board. "If we got sidetracked... over 'The African Queen,'

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that would be a tragedy."

'Queen' defender

The person who researched and presented the "African Queen" connection to state officials, land trust president and CEO Gail Sudore, was fired about a year ago, board members said. On Wednesday, Sudore stood by her claim that the Delaplaine property was connected to the movie and said the grant proposal she wrote was valid.

Sudore said she had a number of documents proving the filming happened on the St. Lucie River: film logs given to her by the director's daughter, Anjelica Huston, records from Universal and Paramount studios, memories from nearby property owners and personal photos and notes from Hepburn.

But Sudore was unable to produce the proof on Wednesday. She said she gave the documents to her attorneys after her ouster from the land trust, but provided no further information.

\$5.5 million grant application, in which mention of "The African Queen" was nearly as important as the environmental arguments for preservation.

In the application, Sudore wrote the land trust was "in discussions" with the owner of the original African Queen boat to relocate the vessel from Key Largo.

But Jimmy Hendricks, whose father bought the 1912 boat in 1982, said his family was never in negotiations with the land trust.

Nor, he said, were any parts of the movie filmed in Florida. "That's just a total farce," he said. "All the location work was done in Africa, and all the studio work and background shots were done in the studio in London."

The Delaplaine project needed 15 extra points to be funded, state official Gelhardt said.

"It was the longest presentation we ever heard," he said. "They convinced the board they should receive additional points, and they got funded."

Eight of the 18 extra points they received after their presentation were specifically for "the site's place in movie history," according to state records.

Property title

In October 2002, Martin County agreed to take title to the property — as long as the land trust managed the land. All but 1.3 acres were purchased in April for \$4.7 million, with final negotiations under way on the remaining land.

Land trust board members said they never considered returning the funds to the state, since they thought the waterfront habitat, development pressure and its proximity to other preserve land makes the property an important purchase.

But board members added they've rewritten their bylaws for greater oversight on future grant applications — and decided not to hire another CEO — to avoid such problems in future projects.

"It's been a tough one to wade out of," Cole said. "We hope by our good work we'll be able to overcome it."

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