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My Word: Take a stand for state's next 500 years

By Lisa Roberts

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This is a landmark year for our state, marking 500 years of La Florida, as Ponce de Leon named this land when he sighted it in March 1513.

What did the explorer intend when he bestowed the name? No one can say for sure, because his voyage journal has been lost. However, Florida historian Gary R. Mormino writes that a Spanish historian who had access to the journal observed, "Believing that land to be an island, they named it La Florida, because it appeared very delightful, having many fresh groves, and it was all level, and also because they discovered it at the season which the Spaniards call Flowery Easter (Pascua Florida)."

Roughly translated, La Florida means "flowery place" or "land of flowers." Regardless of Ponce de Leon's intentions when he named it, there is no doubt he stumbled upon a paradise in which riches were counted in glorious natural resources rather than the gold he sought. This wealth consisted of springs of pristine water; mystical cypress swamps; majestic longleaf pine forests; uplands that were once ancient islands; and stunning white beaches.

La Florida is still a paradise to many, a much-lauded vacation destination with swaying palms, theme parks and world-class shopping. Many visitors and residents venture forth to sample its natural treasures — sinuous rivers, meadows of swaying wildflowers and trails through scrub, oak hammocks and primeval swamps.

But five centuries of exploitation have left ugly scars. Longleaf pine forests are all but gone, harvested for their wood. The withdrawal of millions of gallons of water each day has the Floridan Aquifer reeling. Saltwater is intruding into wells, and pollution from septic tanks causes algae to grow thick in waterways. Wetlands have been filled or drained, and parts of the Everglades have vanished.

Meanwhile, money with which to purchase conservation land has become scarcer than a Florida panther.

The course for the next 500 years is ours to set. What will we write in this blank book? We all have the power to make changes that are good for Florida, whether it's to use rain barrels in order to conserve water; to plant native species that provide wildlife habitat; to reduce our impact by living simpler; or to elect politicians who support conservation of our water and land.

This year is not only about the commemoration of 500 years of La Florida; it's about our stand for the future.

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