Great Dismal Swamp is not a dismal place at all

By Holmes Rolston III

So that’s Lake Drummond in the middle of the Great Dismal Swamp.

I made it thanks to a lot of paddling and thanks to George Washington. This swamp is Virginia’s equivalent of the Okavango Swamp or the Everglades.

Before he became the father of our nation, about 1763, Washington dug the “feeder ditch,” or canal, along which I paddled. Otherwise, I couldn’t have made the 10 miles to it at all. Or more accurately, Washington’s slaves dug the ditch. That was the way it had been in miserable swamps, George Washington and others acquired 40,000 acres of the swamp land through a “royal grant.”

Washington did not have our perspicacity about getting at exploitation, taking out 70,000 cypress trees in 1763. He did remark that it was a “gloomy place” and that “the wild fowl and game.” The ditches were used to float logs.

But before the lake, we reached a spillway, a small check dam used to keep the lake level higher. Unlike other basin swamps, the Dismal Swamp is gently sloping, with a northwest to southeast flow, dropping only 10 feet across an 8-mile expance. We pulled the kayaks out and up a slip rack, and put them in again maybe 5 feet higher than the lower ditch.

We paddled another mile along the shore, searching out the biggest bald cypress trees. The oldest were 50 yards out of the lake with bassoarch long enough to get our kayaks into, if we lie back low.

The water was a little more than waist-deep, with cold and warmer spots, and a good sandy bottom. The water is colored like tea, soaking out the tannin in the bark of submerged trees.

Lake Drummond is more than 3,000 acres in a nearly perfect circle. The origin of bottom sediments and radiocarbon dating, geologists conclude the lake is much younger than the swamp — more than 4,000 years old, in a swamp that is 10,000 years old. Maybe it was great post fires, geologic upset or a meteor crash that created it.

Making our way back, we wove in and out of the bald cypress at the edge between lake and forest. We never found Atlantic white cedar, another cypress. Once the largest known stands were here, but it is now rare, being logged out.

The Dismal Swamp southern bog lemming, once thought to be extinct, still lives here. The Dismal Swamp southeastern shrew, formerly a federally threatened species, has now been delisted.

The swamp is often scenic, aesthetically pleasing. Spanish moss grows here at its farthest northern reaches. Tall bald cypress, maples, gum, pond pine, lobelia pine, ferns and wildflowers are common and colorful.

Yes, swamps can be beautiful. To many, a beautiful bog or a pleasant mire is almost a contradiction in terms. Mountains are sublime; swamps aren’t.

Post Edgar Allen Poe once went into this swamp to commit suicide, at least according to local folklores. He was thinking one should commit suicide in a dismal place. But he found the swamp so beautiful, he changed his mind.

Today, biologists agree that swamps rich biodiversity are among the most threatened of landscapes. Here, life persists — phlox-like — forever regenerated in the midst of its perishing.

We could see that on all sides of our kayaks.

Our kayaks kept getting stuck on submerged logs, and we had to push off and dodge the cypress knees and the

The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge stretches for more than 112,000 acres in North Carolina and Virginia. PHOTO COURTESY OF HOLMES ROLSTON III

They claimed it didn’t spoil when they kept it many months at sea. Water doesn’t spoil, but the tannin in the water, making it acidic, kept down bacteria that could cause disease.

A rare species in the swamp is called the chicken turtle, named for its long, striped neck. The neck when stuck out is nearly as long as its shell. This turtle is on Virginia’s endangered species list, though it is stable in other states.

Another day, we visited where the Dismal Swamp reaches the sea, now in First Landing State Park. Here, at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay, the first settlers arrived.

Still on the ship the “Susan Constant,” the captain, on April 26, 1607, road afloat to the passengers assembled on the deck the laws and conditions of the new colony.

Just inland, forested high sand dunes are interspersed in the swamp. We walked over several of these on good terra firma. The newly arrived settlers did not yet know they had reached a great swamp land, then perhaps a million acres, and quite unsuitable for their landing.

Several weeks later, they decided to settle at Jamestown, reaching their new colony May 13.

So maybe you can say America really began where the Dismal Swamp meets the sea.

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