

Marine Scientist Turns Environmental Lawyer. by Pamela Hayford Smith, Ft Myers News-Press Sept 24, 2001

[News-Press Photo]

Ralf Brookes - dressed in slacks, button-down shirt and tie - voluntarily stands for a portrait thigh deep in the Caloosahatchee River clutching an environmental law book.

The marine scientist turned lawyer about 15 years ago.

"I became frustrated that the law wasn't keeping up" with the science, Brookes said. After earning a bachelor's degree in science, geology and marine science from the University of Miami in 1985, Brookes went to the University of Florida for a law degree.

Today, Brookes, 38, has his hand in a number of environmental issues that are coming to a head.

Brookes is one of a team of lawyers suing the state of Florida and the federal government on behalf of several environmental groups.

The groups, led by Clean Water Network, argue the governments aren't doing their job in establishing pollution limits on impaired Florida waterways.

The agencies are in the process of developing a rule to determine those limits, but the groups Brookes represents fear the agency's latest draft will cut short the list of waterways that get those limits.

"The main idea is to set the limits for as many impaired water bodies as possible," Brookes said.

Brookes is also the sole lawyer going up against the largest water desalination plant in the Western hemisphere.

He represents Save Our Bays and Canals, arguing continuous monitoring is needed to make sure the plant doesn't pump too much salt into Tampa Bay.

The two-and-a-half week trial ended last Monday and a court decision is expected within a month.

Brookes is also challenging the air quality of the Big Bend Transfer Co.'s planned sulfur processing plant in Apollo Beach.

He's going up against the Tampa Electric Company over its plan to burn coal residual.

He's on the board of the Florida Wildlife Federation, one of the groups challenging the back-pumping of agricultural runoff into Lake Okeechobee.

He lobbied for Everglades restoration.

He's worked with the Sierra Club challenging a 1,500-unit development and golf course in a Tampa-area wildlife corridor.

He is also representing the club in challenging a developer that wants to build a bridge to the undeveloped Crane Island, near Amelia Island, and build houses there.

He's helping put together the Pine Island Community Comprehensive Plan.

Brookes has also represented developers and people who might appear to be on the opposing side of the environment.

For example, when the North Collier County Waste Treatment Plant was over capacity, Brookes represented some families trying to get sewage hookups. "I helped them there because they had already gotten their permits. There were 10 families waiting on that," Brookes said. Brookes is picky about who he represents. "I don't take every case that comes to me," Brookes said. "I'm not anti-development or no-growth at all. We just want it done right. "I'm helping them comply with the rules and do things the right way."

...Brookes' first job as attorney was for a Miami firm in 1988. Then, in 1990, he became assistant county attorney for Sarasota County. In 1992, Brookes went to Morgan and Hendrick in the Keys as an associate.

There, he worked as land use counsel to Monroe County, the city of Key West, other local governments and private clients. "He's got a legacy there," said Richard Grosso, executive director of the nonprofit Environmental and Land Use Law Center at Nova Southeastern University Law School. Grosso said Brookes defended the county's comprehensive plan that dictates what can develop where.

"The Monroe County plan does some things that are really restrictive," Grosso said. Restrictive meant Brookes had to defend the plan in court.

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In 1995, Brookes made partner and the firm became Morgan and Brookes until 1998. That's when Brookes took an opportunity to do something a little different. He worked as a business consultant and analyst in the oil, gas and chemical industry for Cambridge Management Consulting.

In 2000, Brookes looked for a good place to set up his own law firm and settled in Cape Coral.

Brookes also works on real estate projects here. He said he would love to see the city have a pedestrian friendly shopping area where people love to socialize. "I'm trying to work on something like that in Cape Coral," he said.

Those who know Brookes praise his environmental law know-how.

"Ralf is easily one of the leading, more talented, public interest lawyers in the state of Florida," Grosso said. "He's really good. He knows every aspect of the environment."

Grosso met Brookes about 10 years ago, then worked with him in the Keys.

Florida Wildlife Federation representative Nancy Payton praises Brookes' knowledge of panther and permitting issues. "An environmental lawyer who has a science background makes it quite effective because he can understand the scientific language," Payton said.

Brookes said he believes more people will be fighting for the environment as the next generation matures. "I really think our best hope is the next generation - the people who are learning about the environment in schools," Brookes said. "Today's kids are getting it in kindergarten. You can ask a third grader 'Why is an estuary important?' They can give you a 15 minute answer. You ask legislators and they're learning as they go along."