



## A Snappy Comeback



BY **WENDEE HOLT CAMP**  
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*Tush Hog, Ormery Turtle, and their curmudgeonly friends fight to preserve a beloved Texas landscape*

As she hiked through East Texas's Big Thicket National Preserve last year, 77-year-old Maxine Johnston, the Big Thicket Association's chief cook and bottle washer, fussed to a friend about the red tape required to run an organization. Why not form a new one with no bylaws, no meetings, and no treasury reports? The only requirements? Wit, age, and 25 years of battle scars fighting for their beloved thicket.

But what to call themselves? After rejecting Mossbacks, Bearcats, and Curmudgeons, they settled on the Big



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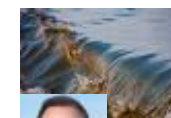
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Thicket Alligator Snapping Turtles. "A bit long and unwieldy, but so what?" jokes Johnston. "It doesn't have to fit on a letterhead." Longtime volunteer Ann Roberts became the first member, and naturalist Geraldine Watson accepted the title of Ornery Turtle -- one step above honorary. Johnston's partner on that hike, 81-year-old writer Howard Peacock, would be known as Tush Hog.

Johnston, a librarian, has been a driving force behind Big Thicket conservation for decades. Watson solo-paddled 80 miles down the Neches River at age 63, writing about it in *Reflections on the Neches*, then repeated the journey with two friends at age 80. Her earlier book, *Big Thicket Plant Ecology*, had brought the region global recognition; the United Nations designated it a Biosphere Reserve in 1981.

In the United States, only the southern Appalachians rival these less celebrated woods in terms of biodiversity. The Big Thicket has a stunning 1,747 vascular plant species -- weird things like toothache trees with spiky bark and frilly, fringed, and snowy orchids. Some call it America's Ark -- a crossroads where eastern forests, southwestern deserts, southeastern swamps, and central plains converge.

The fight to preserve the Big Thicket took 50 years and 28 unsuccessful congressional bills before the national preserve was established in 1974. "When I first got involved I was very naïve," says Watson. "I thought that everybody would be thrilled to see a Big Thicket preserve and that we could all work together. It just didn't happen that way."

This part of deep East Texas has a colorful history of profit over preservation. Home to the infamous Spindletop oil well, the region spawned the black gold rush and birthed our nation's oil economy. After World War II, lumber companies tore up the area. As Watson writes in *Reflections*, "There were no laws, either moral or legal, which stood in the way of their getting what they wanted and Profit was their God."

Even today, each of the Alligator Snapping Turtles stays involved in Big Thicket conservation in some capacity, for much remains to be accomplished. Of Big Thicket's original three million acres, the preserve protects only 97,000 acres in isolated fragments. "Timber companies sold off over one million acres that formerly served as buffers to protect skinny, vulnerable units," says Johnston. "We have threats from highway expansion, oil and gas activity, water projects, urban sprawl, and an underfunded, understaffed preserve." As long as they can, the old-timers will keep snapping at people who would harm their beloved Big Thicket. Given what they endured to save it, that these folks have a sense of humor at all speaks volumes.

*Maxine Johnston (seated), Geraldine Watson (center), and Ann Roberts (right) hang out at the Big Thicket with Archie the Turtle. Photograph for OnEarth by Pam Francis*

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Over the past year, Houston-based freelance writer and photographer Wendee Holtcamp has traveled on assignment from Australia to the Peruvian Amazon to the Galapagos Islands. Her work appears in such publications as Scientific American, National Wild... [READ MORE >](#)

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