



Divers travel into the underground aquifer at Peacock Springs near Live Oak.

Jill Heinerth (right) sits amid her underwater camera and diving equipment.

WATERS JOURNEYED

BY MIKE MITSEFF

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JILL HEINERTH



Photograph by Jennifer Chasteen

I *magine scuba diving several hundred feet underwater, swimming through a small passageway with barely enough room to maneuver and blanketed in total darkness except for the illumination from a diver's light.*

Jill Heinerth, one of the top women cave divers in the world, understands the dangers of cave diving and has learned that such danger can be mitigated by meticulous preparation and redundancy of vital scuba systems, such as extra air tanks and backup regulators.



Divers use hand-mounted lights to navigate through tight spots and dark waters in underwater cave systems.

“Ever since I was a child, I’ve loved the water world, above and below. When I was a lifeguard in a swimming pool as a teenager, I had my first opportunity to scuba dive, and I was hooked,” Heinerth said.

Cave diving is a dangerous specialty among a select group of scuba divers whose love of exploration outweighs its inherent dangers. An equipment malfunction inside a cave system can cost a diver his or her life, as can inexperience. In the early years of cave diving, too many inexperienced divers lost their lives inside of one of the many caves found in North Florida.

In response to the unnecessary deaths, survivor rules were formulated by pioneers of the craft and a certification process outlined that has since saved many lives that otherwise would have been lost.

As a result, only certified cave-divers are allowed inside of Florida’s system of underground tunnels, sink holes and springs that make up the Floridan Aquifer that supplies the drinking water for North Florida.

“I was certified in Canada, in the Great Lakes and had many, many years of cold water diving experience before I ever had any warmer experiences,” says Heinerth. Originally from Toronto, she is a 2000 inductee to the Women Divers Hall of Fame, Canadian Technical Diver of the Year and possessor of the women’s world record for deep cave penetration.

She also owned and operated a Toronto advertising agency that she started some years before, when scuba diving was just a hobby, before it became a pleasant obsession.

Longing for new diving experiences, Heinerth joined a few diving friends for a trip to North Florida’s system of springs, “and warmer dives,” Heinerth chuckled.

“We all piled into a van and went to Ginnie Springs and to Crystal River.

“I was captivated, absolutely captivated by the beauty of the Santa Fe River and the life in the river. It left an indelible stamp on me.”

Heinerth was so enthralled with the springs and the rivers that she sold her ad agency and moved to High Springs in 1995, right across the street from her beloved

Ginnie Springs, that flow into the Floridan Aquifer.

“For the people who grew up here, live here, I don’t think they realize what a precious resource this is,” Heinerth said, speaking about the proliferation of springs in and around North Florida. “I grew up in a land of wonderful natural resources, but I moved here for these springs because there is no other place like this on the planet.”

Heinerth and Robert McClellan, her husband of less than a year, live in a home designed and built with recycled materials. It is situated on a crown of earth at the end of a dirt road within a stand of Florida pine, hardwood hammock and Palmetto scrub.

In addition to photography, Heinerth did a little writing for her ad agency. She was shocked when neighbor, fellow explorer and owner of Karst productions, Wes Skiles encouraged her to write and produce a documentary film for an upcoming expedition to Antarctica.

“He actually contacted me about handling the technology for the expedition, first of all, and really to teach him how to use rebreathers for the project,” Heinerth explained.

“He really pushed me to write and produce the film too, and there is really nothing like getting on an expedition where you are on a boat and there is nowhere to call for help, so you’ve just got to perform and do it,” Heinerth laughed.

The diving expedition to Antarctica took Heinerth and Skiles to the largest iceberg known to man.

Heinerth and Skiles strapped on their air tanks and cold water equipment and silently explored the underside of the iceberg. They also climbed to its top and found it was riddled with caves in its interior, that begged to be explored.

Heinerth wrote and co-produced the resulting Karst Productions film for the National Geographic documentary named, “Ice Island.”

She also made significant contributions to the United States Deep Caving Team’s Wakulla 2 project, mapping underwater caves in three dimensions, using technology

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Snorklers float freely as tea-colored river water swirls into clear spring water at Devils Ear Spring. The Ichetucknee head spring (right) is peaceful at first light.



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that has changed the way underwater mapping is done.

“So from there I formed Heinerth Productions and started more seriously emphasizing my creative work underwater,” she said.

Heinerth travels all over the world to dive in often hostile environments below ground, consulting on expeditions for the BBC, National Geographic and PBS among many others.

Among Heinerth’s diving, film and photography credits, she added Underwater Unit Coordinator for the Sony Pictures feature film, ‘The Cave,’ filmed in mid 2000.

“I really enjoy the technical challenges of figuring out what sort of technology we need to use for a particular dive,” Heinerth said.

“I’ve always had a curiosity and fascination for science and technology and problem solving, and that all comes together really well in cave diving.”

Since Heinerth has made North Florida her home, she has come to understand the necessity for protecting its water resources and she doesn’t hesitate to promote its unique features and its popularity with divers from all over the world.

“I travel all over the world to cave dive and explore, but this is the place.

“It’s a complete Mecca for international cave diving.

“I’ve had students in the last year

from Russia, Switzerland, Germany and Belgium and they come to High Springs to dive,” Heinerth said.

“There are more people who train right here, across the street at Ginnee Springs, than anywhere else in the world.

“So it’s not just this incredible natural resource, but it’s a wonderful draw for tourism, and those people that come return time after time, and they are the great kind of tourists, because they come and spend a lot of money, and don’t make a lot of impact — they have an appreciation for the area.”

Heinerth has also collaborated with Skiles on a series of award-winning films titled, *Water’s Journey*.

Each film documents the path that Florida’s drinking water takes from the moment it splashes to earth as a rain drop, soaks into the ground and eventually emerges as drinking water.

“Each one of the ‘Water’s Journey’ series that Wes and I made represents a year of our life,” Heinerth said. “We learned a lot in the production and making of those films.

“Once you learn about all these aspects of water conservation, you can’t help but change the way you live.

“I really think that after making the movies, it highlights that every individual can do a little bit, and if everyone does do that little bit, it can make a huge difference for all of us.”

