

From restoring animated figures to Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year

John Nelson Harris

is a self-taught artist with a wide range of talents

By Andy Lindstrom

I really feel “the force” when I’m out in the natural, wild world. For me, these great scenes always seem to spark the most awesome seeds of inspirational creativity

John Nelson Harris has come a long way in his 21-year career as a wildlife artist – from crafting fake snakes and baboons for Walt Disney World’s Epcot Center to winning the State Waterfowl Stamp competition not once, but three times, among numerous awards and other honors. His latest project, helping to save Florida’s heavily threatened natural resources, may be the most ambitious yet.

“We’ve got a beautiful state here and a lot of beautiful wildlife that we need to preserve for our children and children’s children,” said Harris, a signature member of Artists for Conservation, until recently known as the Worldwide Nature Artists Group. “Today, what I’m trying to do is save and protect what we have through my wildlife art.”

Over the years, Harris said, his donated artwork has helped raise thousands of dollars for local conservation and educational groups around the state. As an elected official of the Lake County Soil and Water-



Conservation Board, he’s also heeding his civic responsibility to uphold the quality of life in Florida’s rural communities.

“I live in a place called Green Swamp in the Central Florida town of Groveland, about 40 miles west of Orlando,” Harris said. “I really feel ‘the force’ when I’m out in the natural, wild world. For me, these great scenes always seem to spark

the most awesome seeds of inspirational creativity.”

Born in Jacksonville and a graduate of Terry Parker High School, Harris grew up with a love of the outdoors after hiking and fishing trips with his older brother along the St. Johns River. The first largemouth bass he ever caught, at a family summer home near Keystone Heights, became the subject of his first wildlife painting.



After earning degrees at the University of Florida in ceramics and sculpture, however, Harris had to put his painting talents on hold for several years while he went to work at Epcot Center as an artist preparator. "That's what they call the people who make the animated figures," he said. "I started as a temp, working weekends while I was in school. After graduation, one of my professors recommended I apply for a full-time job, and I was assigned to restore animal models on the Jungle Cruise."

Harris remembered his first assignment was to mold a baboon's broken arm. Later, he did part of a snake. Then he was laid off.

"That's when I got back to watercolors," he said. "I needed to do something to make some money. But most of them, I sold to my mom."

Eventually rehired by Disney, Harris still works in



Epcot's Engineering Services Department. He and his wife, Tamara, have two children: son T.J., 14, who likes to make three-dimensional paper sculptures; and daughter Heather, 12, who is talented at drawing.

Harris' interest in painting waterfowl began as an after-work hobby. For the most part, he added, it still is.

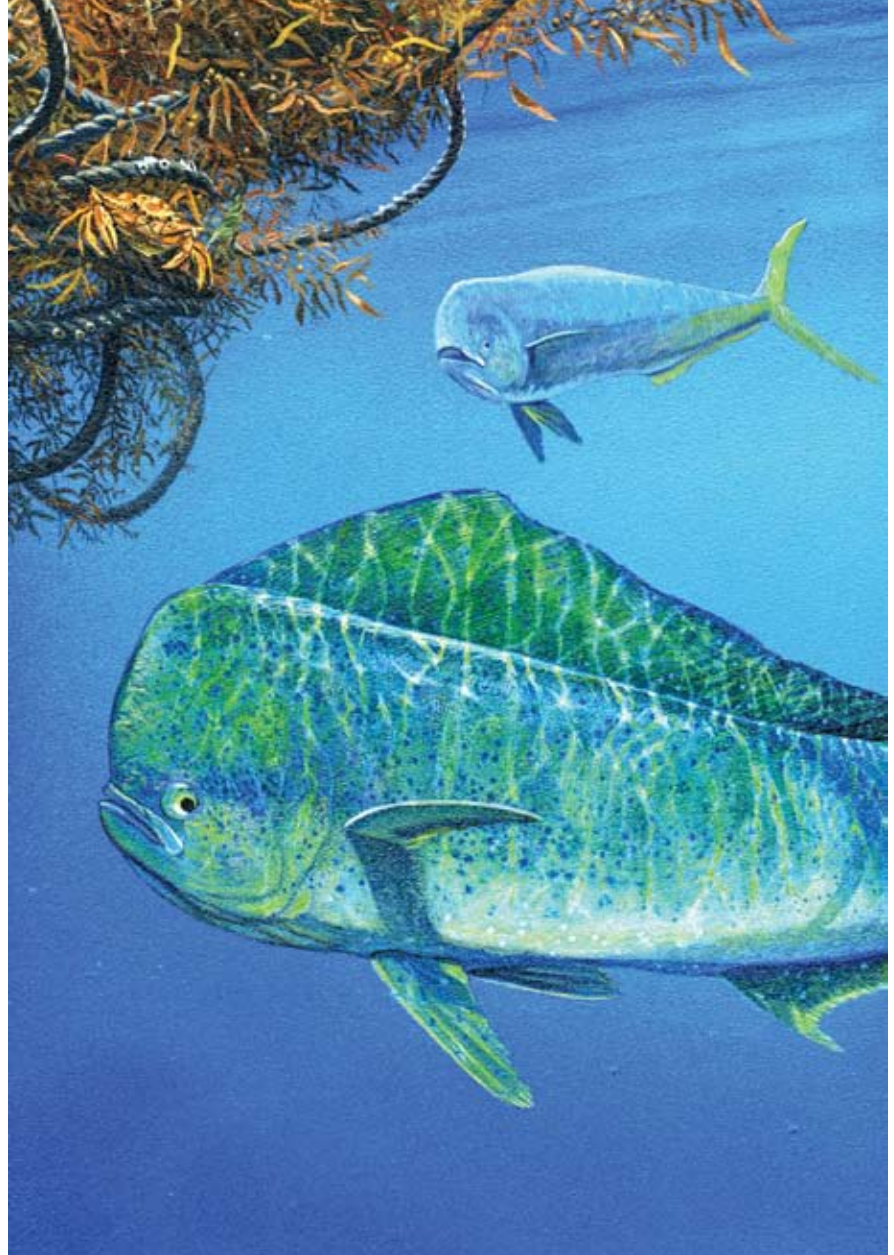
"I don't sell too much or go to a lot of shows," he said. "Generally I give pieces to



conservation groups and such to help them raise money for their work. Years ago, when the kids were younger, I might do a dozen or so a year. But now it's only three or four."

Working mostly in acrylics, Harris said he spends about 50 hours meticulously rendering each subject just as it would appear in nature. Although the majority of his pieces involve ducks in various settings, his favorite is a ruby-throated hummingbird he came across in his own front yard. "I call it Humm-Bee," he said. "I like to call my artistic style a form of naturalism (because) I'm usually trying to render my subject matter in ways that are very close to things I've observed. In other words... I like to involve the viewer with natural lighting and the use of warm and cool colors."

Self-taught as a painter despite his three-dimensional art degrees, Harris has managed to accumulate a number of prestigious honors including display at the nationally acclaimed Birds in Art exhibit at the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisc. In addition to winning the Florida Waterfowl Stamp competition



three of the past five years, he was the state Ducks Unlimited Artist of the Year in 2002. "Misty Morning," depicting a pair of black ducks, won the competition to become the 2007 Michigan Ducks Unlimited Sponsor Print and Stamp. Similar duck-stamp accolades have come his way from Wyoming and the Canadian territories of Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick.

Harris can be reached at 2705 Carter Jones Rd., Groveland or by phoning (352) 429-4821. His e-mail address is FloridaDuckArt@aol.com. For more of his artwork, go to www.natureartists.com/artists/artist. **FW**