Some events of the last month got me thinking about the challenge of balancing recreation with conservation in our public parks and forests. How do we not love our public lands to death? In order to get more people passionate about the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests, and all the wild lands and rivers these forests contain, you need to get folks out to experience the beauty and natural wonder of these places. But let’s face it, not all recreationists enjoy hiking or fishing a remote trout stream, and instead, prefer a more adventurous activity. And some recreational activities are more damaging to the environment than others, particularly those with too many participants, or those occurring where infrastructure (for example, trails, roads, parking and toilet facilities) is inadequate to support these activities or level of use.

The Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest (CONF) is nationally considered an “urban forest” - one of the few across the country that receives enormous recreational use (2.2 million visitors annually) due to proximity to large population centers. The combination of metro Atlanta, and the growing cities of Chattanooga, TN, and Dalton, GA, on the west, and Greenville and Anderson, SC, on the east, creates a challenge for managers struggling to balance recreation use. Hikers, cyclists, hunters, anglers, off-highway vehicle enthusiasts and equestrians all recreate on the CONF’s 850 miles of trails. This high usage, and the area’s steep slopes, high annual rainfall punctuated with severe downpours, and highly erodible soils, all contribute to environmental degradation of existing trails.

Realizing that user-associated environmental degradation, as well as recreational user conflicts were only going to get worse with increased recreational demands, Wayne Jenkins and then CONF Supervisor George Bain in 2010 began to conceptualize a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to the management of recreation in the forest. Representatives from the major user groups were brought into this partnership, and ultimately the Collaborative Trails Initiative (“CoTrails”) was born. Since its inception, Georgia ForestWatch has been integrally involved in each step of the CoTrails process, representing the voice of conservation and sustainability. Although the long-term goal of the initiative is a diverse trail system that is maintainable and ecologically sustainable, the CoTrails process also helps mitigate potential user conflicts.

Still, issues associated with more adventurous recreational activities involving a large number of participants remain. Over the last several years, Georgia ForestWatch has responded to an ever increasing number of Forest Service Scoping Notices for large-scale, often for profit recreational demands in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Recently, the Conasauga and Blue Ridge Ranger Districts have received Special Use Permit applications to hold massive multi-hundred person adventure races on the Benton MacKaye Trail. Potential problems associated with these large races include parking issues, waste disposal, casual user displacement, intense trail use and site degradation. Darren Wolfgang has outlined some of our concerns in his “Around the forest” article this month; unfortunately, we anticipate having to respond to more permit requests, as these endurance races are becoming more popular.

Benton MacKaye Trail Association leaders are working with the Forest Service to address some of the problems these large endurance races will present, and to help minimize negative impacts on the Benton MacKaye Trail. But it is obvious that these issues will probably have to be addressed on a larger, regional scale since these races can span multiple national forests. Rest assured that Georgia ForestWatch District Leaders and staff are supporting the Benton MacKaye Trail Association in their efforts, and we hope to discuss these issues with the CoTrails working groups in the near future.

The other event that started me thinking about balancing recreation with conservation was the Upper Chattooga boating issue. As many of you know, the Forest Service opened 17 of the 21 miles of the upper section of the Wild and Scenic Chattooga River to boaters on December 1, 2012, for the first time in nearly four decades. This section of the Chattooga River winds its way through the Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area, Chattooga Cliffs, and the Rock Gorge Roadless Area. This section is especially important from a conservation perspective because of its remarkable biodiversity, which includes rare spray cliff communities. Seasonal boating is now permitted from December 1 through April 30, at river flows of 350 cubic feet per second or greater as measured at the gauge at Burrell’s Ford Road Bridge.

Less than a week after the opening day in December 2012, Georgia ForestWatch’s lawyers filed a complaint and a motion to enjoin boating on the Upper Chattooga, challenging the Forest Service’s failure to protect the exceptional natural resource values which caused the Chattooga to be designated a Wild and Scenic River. Our arguments cite the Forest Service’s failure to appropriately plan access to the Chattooga Corridor, including their failure to complete a visitor capacity analysis, reliance on user-created access trails, self-registration by boaters at locations prohibited by federal regulations, and lack of a single comprehensive management plan for the Chattooga Corridor.
More recently, I attended the U.S. District Court hearing on Upper Chattooga boating that occurred on February 27th, 2013, in Spartanburg, SC. American Whitewater and other boater groups sued the Forest Service, seeking boating on the entire Upper Chattooga, without flow or season limits. They have argued that boating is an ORV (outstanding remarkable value) on the Wild and Scenic-designated sections of the Chattooga River, and as such, boating should be both protected and enhanced. They have also argued that the seasonal and river flow restrictions are discriminatory, infringing on their Constitutionally-protected right to boat on the Chattooga headwaters, upstream of Highway 28.

This hearing was a great opportunity for me to learn more about the arguments from the boating groups, Forest Service and intervenors (Georgia ForestWatch, the Rust Family and Whiteside Cove Association), particularly since the lawyers had to present their arguments to a new judge unfamiliar with the case’s long history and nuances. The judge gave the boaters ample opportunity to justify their argument of why boating should be a protected ORV with no restrictions, and why it should be prioritized over other ORV descriptors for the Wild and Scenic designation and other recreational activities. Although recreation is considered an ORV, the boating groups failed to present solid evidence suggesting that a particular recreational use (in this case, whitewater boating) can be an ORV. Throughout the hearing, the subject of balance kept coming up, and the Forest Service’s right to manage the area and set restrictions in order to protect the resource. The judge questioned on numerous occasions whether one user group should have priority over the others, and wasn’t it the Forest Service’s job to maintain balance and protect the resource?

Georgia ForestWatch’s presence in this court case is important for conservation of the Upper Chattooga because American Whitewater’s arguments challenge the Forest Service’s ability to regulate recreation. The court’s decision could result in placing the management of particular recreational pursuits above conservation as a priority on Wild and Scenic Rivers and in wilderness areas – not just on the Chattooga and in the Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area, but nationwide. That is one reason why our lawyers from Kilpatrick Townsend & Stockton LLP in Atlanta and Greenfire Law in Berkeley, California, pushed for Georgia ForestWatch to have intervener status in the boaters’ court case. As a result, Georgia ForestWatch was able to present the broader policy concerns that the boaters’ petition raises and bring up resource protection issues that otherwise would not have been discussed, such as erosion of the user-created access trails that the Forest Service is relying on for boater access.

It may take months before the judge files her opinion on the boaters’ court case, and before we get our day in court regarding our complaint filed in December. But Georgia ForestWatch will continue to work hard to ensure a balance between recreation and conservation on both trail systems and in stream and river corridors.
A walk with Ranger Hunter

by Marie Dunkle : District Leader

I first met Ranger Ed Hunter last spring at the Chattooga River Ranger District offices in Lakemont. He was brand new to his position and to our North Georgia woods. I found him easy to speak with and interested in learning about Georgia ForestWatch’s priorities and positions on matters such as plans for the Warwoman Wildlife Management Area and Locust Stake All-Terrain Vehicle (ATV) area, boating restrictions on Chattooga River, and Co'Trails projects on the Chattooga River Ranger District. As a new co-district leader for Georgia ForestWatch, I was (and still am) in heavy learning mode and was itching to hear what he had to say on these issues. Although our paths crossed a couple times in meetings after that first one, it was four months later that our lives settled down enough (for him birth of a new child and moving a family from Mississippi to Georgia) to take a walk in the woods.

On September 28, 2012, Ranger Hunter and I headed out for a noontime respite at Stonewall Falls, in the Chattooga River Ranger District just outside of my home town, Tiger, GA. We had no agenda, save getting to know each other better. With backpack lunches stashed in the back seat of my Subaru, we headed north to Old 441 and turned onto the windy dirt road that took us toward the Stonewall Falls and White Twister trails, a network of mountain bike and foot paths crossing streams and ridges.

I’ve had a love/hate relationship with Stonewall Falls since moving to the area 6 years ago. I chose to take Ranger Hunter there because I love the many layered waterfalls, stream-crossing trails, and weekday quiet and solitude. I’m attracted to the undeniable special energy of the place, something that some attribute to the endless shards of quartz crystal that erupt from the soil throughout the trail system, inviting connection with our Earth. But, I also was reluctant to visit Stonewall because of desecration by weekend campers, who also are attracted to the solitude. Many a time I’ve hauled out bags of camp trash and trail litter, and even shoveled out wads of toilet paper and human waste left near the stream leading from the waterfall. Ranger Hunter had never been to this area of the Chattahoochee National Forest, and I did not know what conditions we might find since a cleanup visit weeks earlier.

On my last visit to Stonewall, the forest road leading to the falls was in terrible condition and required a 4WD vehicle to traverse. So we parked half a mile from the falls and hiked along the stream. We discussed the wisdom of leaving the road in poor and deteriorating condition to discourage camper traffic. This seemed a practical and low budget approach to forest management. As we hiked past camp sites and inspected stream shores along the way, I noticed that my last cleanup efforts appeared to have paid off. Recent campers and mountain bikers had left scant traces of their time in the area. Perhaps cleanup really did set a standard for other visitors to follow. My heart was a little lighter.

From the waterfall, Ranger Hunter and I hiked up the mountain on the trail that ran roughly parallel to the cascading stream. We pressed on until we arrived at the first significant water crossing. Since the water was knee high that day, we decided to head back down for lunch. At the falls, we chose my favorite rocks to sit on and dine. He brought out his standard pb & j on wheat, and I unwrapped my turkey and romaine sandwich. We talked about our families - he has daughters and I have a son - and we discussed the desire to share our love of the forest with our children. Since my son is long grown, I reflected on how much easier it was 20 years ago to get kids into and excited about the woods—before the internet was so prevalent. Ranger Hunter could relate.

When I asked Ranger Hunter how a city guy from Mississippi had ever found a career in the US Forest Service, he shared his story. After high school, he headed to Tuskegee University on a football scholarship, but serious illness befell him when he first arrived on campus. Unable to report for football practice, he lost his athletic scholarship. As he prepared to head back home to consider his options, Ranger Hunter

(continued on page 13)
I am not a place.
I am not a sensation.
I am not a person.
I am not a thing.
I am not the sum of all
the information I am
taking in with my senses.

I am a relationship.
I am an interaction.
I am a subtle response
to elements.
I am a continually changing
inter-relationship of my own
elements in concert and
contrast to these shifting
elements wherever I am.

I am an act of faith,
in reverence to beauty.
Every step I take, each
breath, a savoring of it all.
Every movement a knowing,
a deepening of this
relationship to the wholeness.

I cannot walk into the same
woods, the same house, the
same river twice. I can never
take the same route or follow
the same path again.
Coming back it will all be
different. I will be different.

Photographs and words
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Montane longleaf pine restoration
by Darren Wolfgang : Forest Ecologist

Over the past few years, the Conasauga River Ranger District has been in the process of enhancing two isolated relict longleaf pine populations on Taylor Ridge, which is in the Armuchee Ridges province of northwestern Georgia. The district is also artificially planting longleaf pine seedlings across several hundred acres of land on Taylor Ridge. The Forest Service’s stated goal of planting the seedlings is to increase longleaf pine habitat in the area. While a considerable amount of research has been conducted on the pre-settlement range of longleaf pine in the deep southern Coastal Plain, little work has been done on remnant montane (mountain) longleaf stands. Therefore, the true extent of historic montane longleaf populations is, and will likely remain unknown. Early 20th century accounts of what remained of the virgin forest near Rome, Georgia, described longleaf pine as being, at the very least, a component of ridge top forests (Harper 1913; Andrews 1917).

Besides the two isolated pockets of older trees on Taylor Ridge, two other longleaf pine populations exist in the region, both near Rome, Georgia: in the Marshall Forest Preserve and on Lavender Mountain on the Berry College campus. A dendrochronological study of longleaf pine in Marshall Forest found that five out of 47 trees sampled originated in the late 1700s (Sakulich 2011). While this indicates that longleaf was historically present near Rome, Georgia ForestWatch questions whether vast contiguous swaths of longleaf pine dominated forests in the Ridge and Valley Provinces of northwestern Georgia. We do, however, recognize that montane longleaf communities did exist, and do not object to small scale experimental projects aimed at restoring some component of this forest type to the landscape. The ages of the oldest longleaf trees from the Sakulich study are as follows:

<table>
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<th>First Year</th>
<th>Last Year</th>
<th>Age (No. of Years)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>252</td>
</tr>
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<td>1774</td>
<td>2009</td>
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<td>2009</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1784</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The Forest Service’s benchmark for montane longleaf pine restoration on Taylor Ridge is ongoing restoration work on Lavender Mountain that began several years ago. Cognizant of growing concerns about the dramatically reduced range of longleaf pine throughout the southeast, Dr. Martin Cipollini, a biology professor at Berry College, spearheaded a study of mountain longleaf pine in 1999. His research and collaboration with other Berry College scientists led to the development of the Berry College Longleaf Management Plan, a guide for restoration of the Lavender Mountain montane longleaf population. The Forest Service is using this work as a standard for longleaf restoration on the Chattahoochee National Forest.

In the Berry College study, the longleaf pine population on Lavender Mountain is described as being fairly substantial prior to a severe ice storm in 1960. The ice storm and several other unfortunate events have dramatically reduced longleaf prominence on this site in more recent years. The Berry College Longleaf Management Plan states the following about the history of the Lavender Mountain population: “According to Birkhead (1995), 50% of the mountain longleaf pine population on Lavender Mountain was destroyed in 1960 by an ice storm and by a snowstorm in 1993. In 1995 a windstorm from hurricane Opal damaged the populations again. An accidental fire in 1999 made a number of the remaining longleaf susceptible to insect attack (they are generally highly resistant to insects because their thick resinous sap normally blocks the entry of such pests). Due to the damage from the fire, coupled with intense drought conditions, a number of fire-damaged trees did not have enough internal pressure to force beetles out and consequently died. Despite these disturbances, many of the longleaf that have survived on Lavender Mountain are well over 150 years old, with the oldest trees around 200 years old. These trees indicate that parts of the forest predate the white settlement of Rome in 1832 and therefore qualify as “old growth forest”. These sites therefore represent a rare opportunity to study virgin patches of longleaf forest.”


The enhancement work currently being conducted by the Forest Service on relict longleaf pine stands in the Conasauga Ranger District includes:
• Raking leaf litter away from the base of existing trees to encourage natural seedling establishment and to reduce the risk of bole scorch from future prescribed burning activities in these stands. Longleaf pine is strongly associated with forest disturbance, fire, and tolerance to drought. Experts believe that sporadic and ongoing fire is necessary to facilitate seedling recruitment in both montane and coastal longleaf forest communities due to longleaf pine’s high shade intolerance.

• Removing all competing overstory trees adjacent to existing longleaf pine stems to facilitate reproduction by increasing light on the forest floor.

The establishment of longleaf pine on 413 acres via planting activities in the Conasauga Ranger District includes:

• Removing dominant overstory trees in stands targeted for planting. These planting units are currently dominated by chestnut oak and other dry upland oak species. Because we believe that montane longleaf pine forest communities have a more heterogeneous species composition and distribution than coastal longleaf pine communities, we urged the district to retain patches of existing mature upland oak forests. We feel that retaining aggregated clusters of mature hardwood forest amongst patches of planted pines will improve forest resiliency and provide maximum benefits to local wildlife.

• Administering mechanical and herbicide release treatments to kill hardwood sprouts that would shade out plantings of longleaf pine seedlings and plugs of warm season native grasses such as little and big blue stem.

• Using prescribed fire to release established seedlings, and to facilitate their health and vigor by maintaining an open forest condition.

Literature Cited:


Georgia ForestWatch

Around the forest
by Darren Wolfgang : Forest Ecologist

Forest-wide

Multi-hundred person adventure racing Special Use Permit Applications: Georgia ForestWatch has responded over the last several years to an ever increasing number of Forest Service Scoping Notices for large-scale, often for-profit recreational demands on our forests. These responses include a number of observations and suggestions for ways the agency could improve its recreational oversight and protection of our forests. Recently the Conasauga and Blue Ridge Ranger Districts have received Special Use Permit applications to hold massive multi-hundred person adventure races on the Benton MacKaye Trail. We are very concerned that the districts are setting serious precedent by potentially sanctioning these large and ever increasing adventure/endurance races on the Benton MacKaye Trail. We are particularly concerned about using the Benton MacKaye Trail for such events because it is one of Georgia’s, and Appalachia’s great recreational treasures. Like the Appalachian Trail, it begins at Springer Mountain, and from there it goes through eight Wilderness and Wilderness Study Areas on a 300-mile course that ends in the Great Smoky Mountains. It is a footpath in the tradition of the Appalachian Trail, and there are few like it in the eastern U.S. Because of this, we feel it is extremely inappropriate and irresponsible for the agency to promote and condone a multi-hundred person event on the Benton MacKaye Trail.

Working collaboratively with Benton MacKaye Trail Association, we filed a detailed letter articulating our concerns, offering suggestions for relocation, and insisting the agency implement more rigorous permit analysis prior to rubber stamping these events. Following closure of the comment period for the races, the leadership of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association met with the leadership of the Forest Service to discuss our concerns in greater detail. Preliminary meeting notes suggest the Forest Service is indeed aware of the issues and is willing to address our shared concerns by requiring race organizers to move substantial portions of the race route off of the Benton MacKaye Trail and onto other more suitable trails and forest roads. We will continue to diligently follow these issues to help ensure a vibrant but sustainable recreation program on our national forests.

Conasauga River Ranger District

Tumbling Creek Aquatic Habitat Improvement Project: The district is proposing to improve aquatic biota passage and reduce

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sedimentation on Tumbling Creek in Fannin County, Georgia. Tumbling Creek is in the Toccoa River drainage, and is a popular rainbow trout stream with good potential for restoration as a native brook trout stream. Tumbling Creek also is one of the few streams in Georgia with a population of the rare eastern hellbender salamander (Cryptobranchus alleganiensis), which is a candidate for federal listing as threatened or endangered.

Tumbling Creek Road (Forest Road # 22) parallels Tumbling Creek and crosses it and its tributaries multiple times via culverts. Several of these culverts are very old, undersized, and in poor condition. During high water events, the culverts are routinely blocked by debris, causing water to flow over and down Tumbling Creek Road, resulting in sediment-laden runoff that goes back into the stream. These culverts are also barriers to passage by aquatic organisms (fish, hellbenders, and other species) due to their position as well as their condition. Approximately 4 miles of stream above the barriers are largely unavailable to these species.

To mitigate these impacts, the Forest Service is proposing to replace two culverts on Tumbling Creek Road with open-bottom “arch” type culverts. Both above and below the culverts, the streambed will be restored to its natural condition; the natural streambed will also be restored within the culvert.

Georgia ForestWatch and colleagues at Trout Unlimited fully support agency efforts to improve stream health and secure populations of rare aquatic organisms while simultaneously improving forest recreational opportunities such as fishing.

**Chattooga River Ranger District**

**Upper Warwoman Landscape Management Project:** Since our last newsletter report on this project, we’ve been busy conducting field inspections and developing detailed comments to proposed activities outlined in the first draft of this project proposal. Our efforts and concerns focused on a variety of issues including:

- Management recommendations for a forest stand targeted for thinning that was directly above the impaired Tuckaluge Creek.
- Evaluating whether proposed actions would impact the future Inventory Roadless Area eligibility of the uninventoried Windy Gap roadless area.
- Field inspection, modification, and relocation of agency forest management prescriptions and project locations. Our goal here is to productively advance mutually agreed upon forest goals such as thinning with the goal of improving tree species composition, wildlife habitat, and water quality.

**Blue Ridge Ranger District**

**Frick Creek Culvert Replacement:** Similar to the Tumbling Creek culvert project on the Conasauga District, the Blue Ridge District is proposing to replace two inadequate/failing culverts on Frick Creek and an unnamed tributary to Frick Creek on Forest Road 251(Hickory Flats) near Noontootla Creek. The purpose of the project is to improve water quality and facilitate passage of fish and other aquatic biota. This road is heavily utilized for recreation and Frick Creek is home to populations of native brook trout, which require mobility and more importantly, low stream sediment levels.

**Boggs Creek Stream Habitat Improvement:** As you may recall, a rash of tornadoes peppered north Georgia in 2011, leaving behind swaths of downed timber on the national forest. In some cases, damage occurred over several hundred contiguous acres. The Boggs Creek area in the Chestatee River watershed in Lumpkin County was particularly hard struck by the tornadoes. Georgia ForestWatch toured the area with Forest Service personnel to discuss clean up and timber salvage activities in the summer of 2011.

Boggs Creek is a heavily used recreational area with a campground and a popular trout fishery. This stream habitat improvement project seeks to improve trout habitat by creating new habitat and enhancing existing stream pools with native logs. According to the Scoping Notice, “Where available, recently blown over trees near the stream will be utilized for the work. The majority of the work will be completed by hand using volunteers from Trout Unlimited and North Georgia Trout Online. A rubber-tired farm tractor may be used to help move and place some of the larger logs. The work will be completed in 2013-2018 and will improve habitat conditions and fishing opportunities in Boggs Creek.”

**Virginia pine clearcut in Warwoman**
Book Review:  
**The Forest Unseen: A Year’s Watch in Nature**  
by Diane Freer : Office Manager


Every once in a while you get a Christmas gift that is unexpected, but turns out to be just what you need. This past Christmas I was given a copy of David Haskell’s *The Forest Unseen*. I hadn’t heard anything about this book, but the title and a brief look moved it to the top of my reading list. It is a read that is spot on – a wonderful collection of short chapters, essays really, on forest life. As I read on during the Christmas break, each chapter was like opening a present in itself.

Dr. Haskell’s year-long nature watch centered on life in a square meter of old growth forest in Tennessee. He visited this forest microcosm almost daily, making observations of the plants, insects, birds and other animals as the year progressed. These observations, along with microbial-level discussions, give us deep insight into the workings of the unseen parts of the forest and their relationship to the parts we do see.

Dr. Haskell also relates how that small, meter square working part of the forest affects other parts of the forest and the world around us. He tells of birds’ need for food and shelter in a single place during a storm while on their annual migration across continents. And while we all understand that everything is connected, he makes the beauty and tragedy of that connection come alive by giving us the details of the interactions. For instance, he vividly describes the relationship between fungal hyphae and tree roots that nourishes both the tree and fungus, detailing this interaction between an organism that is so small it cannot easily be seen by the naked eye and an organism that is so large it cannot all be seen in one glance.

One of my favorite passages reads, “My snail vigil ends when the sun breaks out from behind a cloud. The morning’s soft humidity has lifted, and the snail heads toward El Capitan, or a smallish rock, depending on how you see the world. Here the snail touches a tentacle to the rock, then turns its entire head upside down and stretches up. The neck and head rubber-band into a giraffe’s, farther, a little farther, then the chin hits the rock, spreads itself into a pad, and the whole snail lifts up from the ground in a no-handed chin-up”. It’s as if I was seeing it myself.

Dr. Haskell’s descriptions of the settings, the weather, and his perceptions are moving and engaging. I find his word choice and the flow of his narrative approaching poetry. I think of the wonderful people I have come to know through Georgia ForestWatch and feel the same spirit, the same care, the same engagement in this writing.

This book, as well as being lyrical, is grounded in science and has an impressive bibliography for those who would like to learn more. Dr. Haskell is a biology professor at University of the South, in Suwanee, Tennessee. He graduated with honors from Oxford and earned his Ph. D. at Cornell University in New York.

*The Forest Unseen* won the 2012 National Outdoor Book Award for Natural History Literature.

I encourage you to find and read this book.
Thinking big about small scale:
My journey from global to local conservation

by Brian Wills : Board Member

I have a vivid memory of a meeting in Chicago during the summer of 2011. As a staff member for The Nature Conservancy, I had been invited to a strategic planning meeting to discuss global freshwater conservation. It was a fascinating discussion. The agenda that day focused on identifying rivers that should be targeted for long-term conservation investments. These weren’t just your run-of-the-mill rivers. These were the world’s largest river systems — like the Yangtze, Murray-Darling, Congo, and Mississippi.

The list of rivers grew as the day went on. The group discussed the politics, industrial stresses, and current conditions of each river. But as the day wore on, I never got past the first thought I had that morning — how on earth does an organization, even the biggest conservation organization on the planet, begin to install a conservation plan for a massive, continental river? What can you really do to protect a river system that serves the commerce, transportation, and industrial needs of millions of people? I still have trouble visualizing the scope of such an effort.

I know that if any group could put together an effective strategy at this scale, it would be The Nature Conservancy. They would reach out to governments, pull together other local conservation groups, and raise extraordinary amounts of money. That’s the vision of TNC — big, large-scale projects and solutions. And I’m grateful such an effective organization works at this level.

For me, however, focusing on an effort this size was a bit overwhelming, and it was easy to get discouraged. For every positive step forward, how many steps would be lost to leaky petroleum engines, nitrate runoffs, terrestrial overdevelopment, temperature alterations, dams, or unauthorized disposal? Frankly, the thought of all that can make you just want to give up.

A couple of months went by and I found myself in a conversation with a philanthropist from Maine. Over the years, he and his wife had invested millions of dollars in conservation efforts around the world. The wife had focused on big projects. The Nature Conservancy was her organization of choice and the entire world, it seemed, was her area of concern. He, on the other hand, was on the other end of the spectrum — something I learned when he commented that he was concerned only with “15 miles of river in Maine.” The comment really stopped me in my tracks. A small conservation organization that focused entirely on a local river had captured his interest and involvement. Actionable results could be seen firsthand by donors and volunteers, most of whom knew the staff members personally. It was a community effort and the stakes were extremely high to the members of that community. He had committed his philanthropic and volunteer efforts to a backyard project that brought him great satisfaction.

Small-scale focus has big impact - particularly when you consider all the small-scale projects collectively. Instead of cluttering your mind with the overwhelming thought of global environmental degradation, think about protecting your favorite 7-mile stretch of trail. Think about protecting a single creek or a grove of hardwoods.

Seeing results is always satisfying, especially when you are an eyewitness to the progress. I’m really proud to be part of what we’re doing at Georgia ForestWatch. What’s more, I feel our work is do-able.
CoTrails update: Step 3, issues and opportunities underway, and another award
by Audrey Moylan : Board Advisor

CoTrails is once again in the USDA Forest Service limelight. You may recall that CoTrails was a significant factor in the selection of former Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest Supervisor George Bain as 2012 Federal Land Manager of the Year for the USDA Forest Service, and it was also one of 15 winners of the 2012 USDA Forest Service Regional Forester Honor Award. CoTrails volunteers recently received the 2012 USDA Forest Service National Volunteer Trail Group Award, one of eight volunteer categories included in this nationwide competition. The award honors CoTrails volunteers for coming together from “disparate and sometimes competing trail user groups to overcome barriers and find ways to exceed the capabilities of the Forest Service alone.” Volunteers participating in CoTrails-specific activities, such as trail assessments, chalked up approximately 6,000 volunteer hours in 2012, while individuals and organizations participating in on-going trail maintenance and rehabilitation contributed an impressive 30,000 volunteer hours. Collaborating with each other and the Forest Service, all of these dozens of volunteers, worked to further the mission of CoTrails: to identify and maintain a diverse, quality trail system in Georgia’s National Forest. USFS Region 8 had another winner in this competition, with the 2012 Individual Trail Volunteer Award going to a volunteer on the Mt. Rogers National Recreation Area in Virginia.

The January 26, 2013 annual CoTrails kick-off event was held at the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area. It was a day of visiting displays of several trail organizations, walking trails, learning to use a two-person crosscut saw, lunching on hot dogs and fixings near the river, and having a mid-afternoon general meeting of CoTrails volunteers. The well-attended meeting focused on volunteer recruitment and training and the issues and opportunities process. Recent Forest Service retiree and new CoTrails volunteer, Larry Thomas, presented a schedule of 2013 volunteer events and went over requirements for becoming a trail maintenance crew leader. Forest Service CoTrails leaders, John Campbell and Alan Polk, explained the process of compiling an extensive data base from the professional and volunteer trail assessments. They then outlined the lengthy procedures involved in developing proposals for closing a trail, adding a trail, or changing the managed use of a trail (see the Forest News Winter 2012 CoTrails Update discussion of data base development and issues and opportunities).

During the last session of the meeting, attendees broke into four district-level groups to meet with the Forest Service recreation officer(s) who will assist in developing the issues and opportunities proposals on each respective Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest ranger district. Participants were able to examine and practice identifying issues and opportunities on a large printed map developed from the Forest Service digital maps of designated trails on each district. Georgia ForestWatchers Ben Cash, Christine Ramsey, Vicki Miller, and I met with the Chattooga River Ranger District’s CoTrails representative Bill Elliott and Ranger Ed Hunter. We discussed some of the trails we had evaluated, and Bill Elliott pointed out areas where issues and opportunities are already in the proposal stage.

The issues and opportunities step in the CoTrails initiative is an open process in which trail user groups, individuals, and the Forest Service may submit proposals on any trail in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Georgia ForestWatchers who have volunteered to lead issues and opportunities efforts on the three other ranger districts are: Kathy Stege on the Oconee Ranger District, Robin Hitner on the Conasauga Ranger District, and Tom Colkett on the Blue Ridge Ranger District. These volunteers, along with Ben Cash representing the Chattooga River Ranger District, will meet with Executive Director Mary Topa to develop plans for Georgia ForestWatch’s forest-wide involvement in the issues and opportunities process.

Deadline for submitting issues and opportunities proposals is May 1, 2013. Those selected by District personnel to go forward will be sent to Forest Service headquarters for evaluation by Forest Service CoTrails leaders and working group volunteers. Proposals selected during this final evaluation will be presented to the general public.
A Walk with Ranger Hunter
(continued from page 4)

learned about a scholarship being offered by the US Forest Service. He could stay in school if he would try forestry studies for a year. The summer of that first year the Forest Service sent him on an internship to a western forest district, and that is where his passion for the woods, the land, and rivers blossomed. Similarly, when I was about the same age and in school in central Pennsylvania, unanticipated exposure to deep woods and mountain ridges kicked off my own love affair with the forest. I was a journalism broadcasting major and had taken on a project to produce a documentary about a forest camp where special needs kids learned to use all their senses in the woods. That experience shifted my interest to environmentalism and taught compassion as well.

This led us to a discussion about the Stonewall Falls area challenges, including visitor trashing habits, pine beetle damage, trail conditions and stakeholder access. We ended up discussing ways to teach and encourage the “leave no trace” ethic, and he indicated that he would encourage Chattooga River Ranger District volunteers to help advocate this concept, as well as protection of water sources and safe hiking practices.

Of course our conversation also touched on US Forest Service policies. Ranger Hunter frankly explained that nowadays policies promulgated at the national level in Washington, D.C. influence 75% of US Forest Service direction and decisions. Most decisions made by local Forest Service management generally adhere to the broad policy guidelines emanating from Washington, while addressing site-specific circumstances. In all cases at the local level, input from stakeholders and partners of the Forest Service helps guide and drive specific land management practices and priorities. Many diverse stakeholders demand the attention of Ranger Hunter, and he maintains an open-door policy. He encourages Georgia ForestWatch dialog, inviting contact with him and his staff about our priorities, concerns and positions. Georgia ForestWatch comments and initiatives on such matters as plans for the Locust Stake ATV trails and Warwoman Wildlife Management Area are considered important to the process that this federal agency must go through when decisions are to be made.

The 90 minutes we spent walking, talking and nibbling on sandwiches went quickly but Stonewall Falls had worked its magic. As we hiked back to my Subaru and drove on to Ranger Hunter’s headquarters in Lakemont, we were both renewed in body and spirit and shared a connection with a special place in the woods.

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(Our apologies if we inadvertently omitted anyone.)

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