Forest News

Georgia ForestWatch Quarterly Newsletter Winter 2020

Bartram Series Challenge partnership hike
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From the Director

Jess Riddle
Executive Director

In public conflicts, the side that cares the most usually wins. Over the past few months, I have been amazed time and again by how much the Georgia ForestWatch community cares about our forests.

ForestWatch volunteers have shown their dedication by wading through bureaucratic documents on the Foothills Landscape Project and then diving into the scientific references cited within to see where the research does and does not support the Forest Service's claims. Volunteers have also gone into the field to collect hard data on potential impacts of future projects and actual impacts of past projects, which provides a better basis for evaluating projects and making decisions.

Volunteers have also been critical to the human side of issues by organizing public meetings and writing letters to the editor. These activities provide a public service since many people who are regular forest users or live nearby have no idea about all the decisions being made right now that will affect the future of areas they are passionate about. Less technical help such as sealing envelopes and making donations keep ForestWatch going and focused on the issues that impact the forest.

And we are not alone. Other groups like the Chattahoochee Trail Horse Association sent out alerts about Foothills and weighed in with their own comments. Our partners add to our abilities; for example, the Southern Environmental Law Center helping us with the finer points of the Forest Service's legal obligations.

It's easy for someone who cares about the environment to pick up a newspaper and be discouraged by the headline. If you zoom in though, you will find a whole community putting their time, effort, and voices into making sure our natural areas have a bright future. As a good friend recently reminded me, science, the law, and the public are ultimately on the side of the forest.

Jess Riddle

Wild & Woolly FOREST FESTIVAL

Wild & Woolly Forest Festival is just around the corner! Join us at Sautee-Nacoochee Center in Sautee, Georgia, on Saturday, April 25, 2020 from 2 to 5 pm. There will be food and drink, music, raffle items, and a native plant sale.

POSTPONED

Representatives of the S[illegible]ncil will share Native [illegible]s for caring for t[illegible] a[illegible] w[illegible] makes a place [illegible]ld[illegible]d by a traditional p[illegible] award-winning musicians, W[illegible]en Heart.

Space is limited; register early to secure a spot. Just go to: gafw.org/ww2020 to purchase tickets at $35 per person. *We hope to see you there!*

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

This nearly 800-acre tract in Rabun County is still slated for sale.
(See Around the Forest *article on page 3.)*

Around the forest

by Jess Riddle : Executive Director

Blue Ridge Ranger District

In January, a tornado struck the Blue Ridge Ranger District, and it severely damaged trees across 60 acres near Highway 60 and the confluence of Cooper Creek and the Toccoa River. The District has proposed salvage logging this white pine dominated area, which would involve removing fallen and damaged trees. Georgia ForestWatch (GAFW) submitted comments supporting this activity where it can be completed by pulling logs to existing roads, but we opposed constructing temporary roads and log landings to support the harvesting, because they would cause more damage than could be justified.

Illegally driving vehicles off of designated roads and motor-vehicle trails continues to damage soils, impairing water quality across the forest, and Forest Service Road 42 between Suches and Springer Mountain has recently been a problem area. You can help by reporting this kind of activity to the Forest Service. The Forest Service has hundreds of miles of roads, and cannot keep track of all these issues on their own. When they know about problem areas, they can respond by concentrating law enforcement efforts and posting signage at problem spots. Signage in areas GAFW reported near Suches has helped, though more still needs to be done.

The Blue Ridge Ranger District has also issued the formal Special Use Permit that will allow Union County to move forward with constructing a target range near Brasstown Bald.

Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest

After seven years of development and numerous public meetings, the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest has released a draft of its new forest plan for public comment. A forest plan is the most important document produced by any national forest. For at least 15 years, it sets goals, such as restoring 10,000 acres of woodland, zones the entire national forest for different uses, such as backcountry recreation or watershed protection, and sets important guidelines for how management actions will be completed, such as keeping logging equipment out of riparian zones except at designated crossings. Our partners in North Carolina are poring over the more than 2,000 pages of associated documents, and we'll work with them to bring you key highlights. Comments will be due sometime after May 14th, and to find where to comment online, search for "Nantahala and Pisgah NFs Plan Revision #43545" and look for the page with that title.

Land Sales

At a public meeting in late February, the Rabun County Commissioners indicated they no longer support the Forest Service selling tracts in

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Cover photo credit: Melanie Vickers

The biggest threat yet to our most important environmental law

by Jess Riddle : Executive Director

The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ) is putting our wildlife, water quality, backcountry solitude, and public health at risk. It's doing that by proposing sweeping changes to rules for the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) that would reduce environmental review and opportunities for public involvement in government decision making. The new rules would apply to every Federal agency, including the Army Corp of Engineers, Bureau of Land Management, and the Forest Service. The proposal would affect every major Federal action, from dam building and fracking permitting to highway construction and timber harvests.

If this problem sounds familiar, that's because reducing environmental review and cutting the public out of public lands management has become a new national pastime. An early rollback came in the March 2017 repeal of a planning rule called BLM 2.0, which had increased public involvement in Bureau of Land Management decisions. Then in August 2018, One Federal Decision, a memorandum of understanding by several Federal agencies, set new policies for environmental reviews of infrastructure projects. The policy put an arbitrary time limit on reviews and shifted authority from health and conservation agencies towards infrastructure agencies.

Many of you will remember that last June the Forest Service proposed to change how it implements NEPA. That proposal was so important for our local forests because NEPA is the big brother to better known environmental laws like the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and Endangered Species act. NEPA cares about how Federal projects may impact air, water, rare species, soil, forests, and any other aspect of the environment that could significantly affect humans. It requires agencies to analyze those potential impacts, inform the public about their plans, and consider public comments. Georgia ForestWatch regularly files comments as part of NEPA reviews that lead to improvements in Forest Service projects.

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

When analyzing the impacts of the Foothills Landscape Project, the Forest Service had to consider this thinning in the same area from the Sumac Creek Project. The proposed rule changes would allow the Forest Service to ignore such "cumulative effects", which would also eliminate most climate change analysis for all Federal projects.

Wildlife groups, conservation organizations, recreation clubs, outdoor businesses, and the general public recognized the importance of the proposed changes and submitted over 80,000 comments. The Forest Service is still analyzing those comments, and we expect them to issue their final rules this summer. However, legal challenges may delay or stop implementation of the rules.

The recent proposal from CEQ is just as big a threat to the wild areas we know and love on Forest Service lands, but it is an even greater danger to government transparency and accountability because these changes would apply to every Federal agency and every major project. CEQ cannot change the law itself, but this obscure White House council is responsible for providing guidance to all agencies on how they should implement NEPA. The new rules would:

- enact new highly specific and technical requirements for commenting on projects, such as Foothills, that would be a barrier to public participation;
- replace language directing federal agencies to "encourage and facilitate public involvement in decisions" and replace it with the standard the public should be "informed";
- allow applicants, such as fracking companies, to prepare the environmental reviews;

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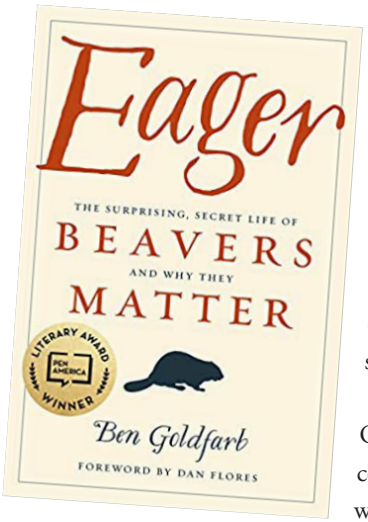
Book review

Reviewed by : Debra Mihalic Staples

Eager: The Surprising, Secret Life of Beavers and Why They Matter,
by Ben Goldfarb, Chelsea Green Publishing, 2018. $24.95, 243 pages.



Eager is a densely written book that covers an astonishing amount of history and science concerning beavers, and it's more entertaining than you might expect. Ben Goldfarb, an award-winning environmental journalist, employs a wry, often witty, writing style, evident in such chapter titles as "Dislodged, "Realm of the Dammed," and "California Streaming." Yet he writes with respect for the work of the various individuals he consults, whose policies, beliefs, and methods reflect a wide range of acceptance for Castor canadensis in the landscape.

He describes how beavers help create and sustain wetlands, which provide habitat for other wildlife, filter surface water, and regulate flooding. Given that the United Nations Framework on Climate Change says wetlands are vanishing three times faster than forests, it would seem like common sense to tolerate, even welcome, the presence of beavers.

But not everyone Goldfarb introduces us to is a Beaver Believer. Despite research that shows how beavers ensure clean, plentiful water and build structures and systems that help recharge aquifers, fireproof the landscape, and control floods, there is still strong anti-beaver sentiment across the country.

While providing in-depth natural history of the beaver that spans from prehistoric time, through fables and literature, to what we know about it today, Goldfarb establishes how the story of the beaver is also the story of water. He also delivers sobering histories of how governments and individuals have used beaver trapping to make fortunes, manipulate land values, and destroy communities of indigenous people. After hunting and habitat destruction took its toll, it's remarkable that beavers survived past the nineteenth century, much less became recognized by scientists as a keystone species.

We learn about efforts to assist humans and beavers to coexist in the landscape, including the pros and cons of flow devices, relocation, and other methods. In some parts of the continent, reintroduction of beavers has been more successful than expected. One example: Goldfarb details how, despite popular narrative, the return of wolves to Yellowstone National Park, and their effect on the elk, were not solely responsible for the recovery of the park's riparian ecosystems; beaver played an integral part in the process, too, migrating south into the park from an area where they'd been reintroduced.

As this book shows, when there is conflict between beavers and humans, it stems from the beaver's messy, chaotic, constantly shifting methods of shaping the landscape. This doesn't mesh well with a human tendency for control and stability when it comes to land and water use.

Goldfarb's writing is captivating, whether he's composing complex research summaries, outlining ethical dilemmas, or weaving poetic descriptions. *Eager* will appeal to readers who appreciate fine writing about the natural world and those who wonder what this continent would look like if we allowed beavers to flourish. ■

TAX BENEFITS OF DONATING STOCK

By : Melanie Vickers, Board Secretary

Did you know you can donate stock directly to Georgia ForestWatch? If you donate stock that you have held for more than a year and has appreciated in value, you can deduct the full market value AND you pay no capital gains tax! That means you're actually donating up to 20% more than if you sold the stock and then made a cash donation. It's as easy as calling your financial advisor and asking them to make the transfer.

Foothills Landscape Project update

by Jess Riddle : Executive Director

On December 4th, the public filled every seat, and uniformed Forest Service staff lined the walls at the Clayton Foothills Landscape Project meeting. The Forest Service presented for half an hour about how wonderful the Foothills Collaboration has been and outlined challenges the agency is facing. They did not talk about how the project would authorize over 60,000 acres of commercial timber harvests and over 70,000 acres of herbicide application. They acknowledged that the project was taking a new approach by describing the kinds of places where particular management treatments would be done rather than identifying specific locations, but they did not mention that the project has no end date. Since then, they have claimed that they have provided site-specific information, even though they have not identified locations where they will or won't log, have not shown where new prescribed fire units would be, and have not specified which trail segments would be rerouted.

Attendees we spoke to after the meeting were not impressed, and official comments on the project were over 90% critical. Over 2,000 dissatisfied citizens registered their concerns, and they were joined by a variety of environmental and recreation organizations. Of course, project reviews are not votes, which is why Georgia ForestWatch joined with the Southern Environmental Law Center, Georgia Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Chattooga Conservancy to submit over 200 pages of comments detailing ways to improve vegetation treatments, gaps in the analysis, and legal shortcomings in the project design.

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

The Forest Service has expanded the Foothills Project Boundary to take in some of this area near DeSoto Falls and Boggs Creek, but how much the Forest Service will focus activities in this area – or any other part of the Foothills – remains uncertain.

One of the biggest issues remains the lack of information on the actual locations where this project would take action. At the public meetings last December, the Forest Service answered that District Rangers would probably hold annual public meetings to keep people up to date on the project. While some District Rangers have a track record of transparency and listening to the public, the answer came across noncommittal and lacking in thoughtful planning, even though over a year ago we had clearly communicated this was a major concern for us. The decision to hold the comment period over the holidays and the refusal to extend it even two weeks undermined the Agency's claim that it is committed to keeping the public involved.

Since commenting, we have had discussions with Forest Service staff, and many of the specialists are reading comments carefully and trying to marry suggestions with Forest Service goals and constraints. Reactions from those higher up in the Forest Service and responsible for the overall approach have been more mixed. Some have indicated a willingness to listen while others have publicly sought to delegitimize concerns and public opinion. In fact, the Forest Service has indicated it will release additional publications to "clarify" plans, as if frustrations with the project were merely misunderstandings. We are not sitting idle, either. We are continuing to meet with the Forest Service, and, with our partners, we have submitted a Freedom of Information Act request for documents pertaining to timber production goals, condition based management, monitoring, and temporary roads.

Foothills can still be put on the right track. The first step would be for the Forest Service to complete an Environmental Impact Statement, a thorough analysis of effects that Federal agencies are required to prepare whenever a project will have significant impact (which Foothills clearly will). The other critical step is to provide site-specific information before decisions are made, so that the public can provide information on whether a particular ridge is appropriate for restoring woodland or what the tradeoff would actually be if a particular trail were used as a firebreak. ■

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Donor spotlight: Bob Kibler

by Brent Martin : Director for GA/NC Bartram Trail Society

Dr. Robert F. Kibler, or Bob to his many friends, first became involved with Georgia Forestwatch thirty years ago. It was 1990, and he had just retired as Head of Neurology at Emory University. A lifelong hiker and lover of the outdoors, he was seeking to give something back to the Chattahoochee National Forest after his many years spent there on weekends and vacations. He volunteered with the Atlanta office of The Wilderness Society (TWS), which at the time was beginning the research and ground truthing of what was to become the first edition of *Georgia's Mountain Treasures*. Atlanta's TWS office was also leading a campaign for a Wilderness bill with then north Georgia congressman, Ed Jenkins. Bob worked to distribute surveys across the north Georgia mountains, as Jenkins wanted to know what his constituents thought of the proposed bill. It was around this time that he first met James Sullivan, one of the founders of Georgia Forestwatch (GAFW), and one of the groups that birthed GAFW, Friends of the Mountains. Bob became very involved with GAFW after meeting with James, Shirl Parson, and other District Leaders at the time, and over the next several years worked with GAFW and TWS to map areas, explore them, and write up descriptions. He became president of GAFW in 1996, after serving on the board, and worked to merge the organization Armuchee Alliance with GAFW, which led to the hiring of GAFW's first Executive Director, Brent Martin. For the next decade, Bob worked to build GAFW and to assist in GAFW's leadership role with the forest plan revision that was going on during that period. At 96, Bob is limiting his hiking to the Atlanta Botanical Gardens and his mountain home in Flowery Branch, Georgia. Thanks Bob for your many years of commitment to GAFW! ■

Photo credit: Angela Martin

Bob Kibler and Brent Martin

The Biggest Threat Yet

(continued from page 4)

- and impact Forest Service activities from leases to meetings to watershed impact evaluation in ways that could make the Agency less aligned with public interests and less considerate of environmental impacts.

The change to eliminate requirements to consider "cumulative" and "indirect" effects, which might sound minor, would even do away with climate change consideration. No single project is responsible for climate change, so climate change impacts would never be considered. This change would also mean that when the Forest Service proposes logging part of a watershed, they wouldn't have to consider other logging in that watershed. Ultimately, agencies could avoid grappling with many severe impacts by simply splitting up large projects into smaller projects.

NEPA has been an effective tool. It has allowed the public to push back against bad decisions, improve planning, and reduce harms. In the southern Appalachians, it consistently improves Forest Service timber projects. The Southern Environmental Law Center estimates that in North Carolina one out of every five project acres was either added or removed in response to public comments. NEPA, as it has been implemented, promotes government transparency and accountability.

The deadline for commenting was March 10th. Industry groups spurred tens-of-thousands of comments in favor of the changes, but tens-of-thousands of people also spoke up to defend the environment and public participation. It will take the CEQ months to process comments, and litigation will likely follow. We do not know what the final outcome will be, but we seriously doubt this will be the final attack on environmental safeguards and public participation in land management. We all need to remain ready to speak for our public lands. ■

Around the Forest

(continued from page 3)

the county, except for the 800-acre Boggs Mountain tract. That tract lies adjacent to the county landfill and the county is interested in purchasing it. Attendees at the meeting overwhelmingly opposed the land sales. GAFW remains neutral on the land sales overall, but certain tracts concern us, including the Boggs Mountain tract. It's size and location help it function as a coherent ecosystem and support plant and animal movement. GAFW is in the process of surveying all the tracts proposed for sale.

Prior to the 2018 Farm Bill authorizing the sale of 30 tracts totaling close to 4,000 acres, most land sales on the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest occurred through the Small Tracts Act. Surveying and other errors fairly frequently lead to adjacent private landowners building sheds, driveways, and other structures a few feet onto Forest Service land. The Small Tracts Act allows the Forest Service to sell small tracts to deal with those situations, and includes some provisions to try to prevent abuse by private landowners. The Forest Service is proposing to change the regulations implementing the Small Tracts Act to broaden the definition of structures that would trigger sale of tracts less than 10 acres and to allow the Forest Service to sell tracts of up to 40 acres that are "physically isolated, inaccessible, or have lost their National Forest System character". Comments on the proposed changes are due April 27th and can be made by going to federalregister.gov/d/2020-03639 and clicking the green "submit a formal comment" button near the top right. ■

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The Georgia ForestWatch Directors, Advisors, District Leaders and Staff say "Thank You!" for your generosity and support in helping preserve, protect, and restore Georgia's national forests. We would not be able to accomplish this important work without each one of you.

(If you have made a donation of $100 or more in 2019 and your name is not listed, please accept our apology and contact us so we can correct our records. Thank you!)

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Patricia Willis
William Witherspoon & Rina Rosenberg
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Frank & Deborah Zimmerer
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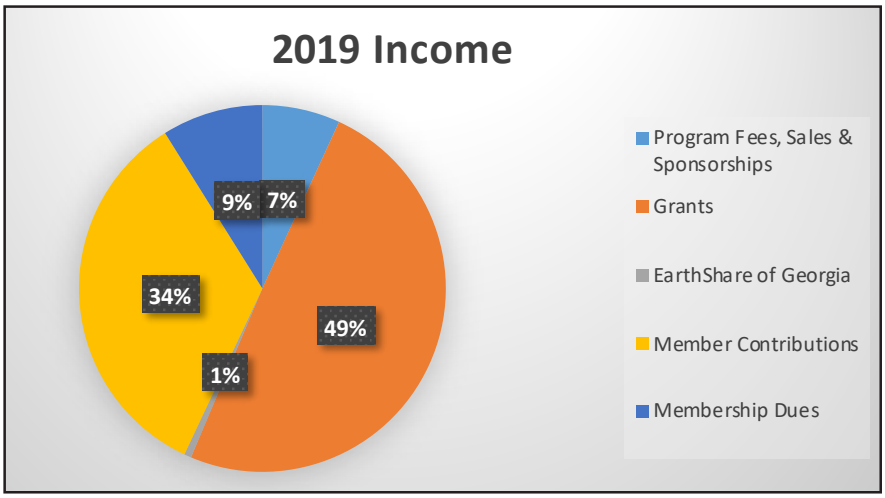
Ted Doll
Marie Dunkle
Leslie Edwards
Sue Harmon
Patricia Kyritsi Howell
Stacie James
Peter McIntosh
Helen Meadors
Dan Rawlins
Becca Risser
Cliff Shaw
Donna Shearer
Kathy Stege
Taylor Strayhorn
Jim Sullivan
US Forest Service Staff
Matt and Amanda
Melanie Vickers
Hannah Warner
Mark Warren
Bill Witherspoon

Photo credit: Georgia ForestWatch

Volunteers planting a hemlock tree at Grassy Mountain to revegetate a trout stream in a Georgia's Mountain Treasure area

Photo credit: Jess Riddle

On a Georgia ForestWatch hike, a member admires a stream cascading through a Georgia Mountain Treasure.



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