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Purple leaves are pretty, but in August they are a sign something has gone wrong. Our group of Georgia ForestWatch staff and volunteer District Leaders stood in a log landing while examining the Sumac Creek Project. We knew the landing would be among the most heavily impacted parts of the project. In order to load logs on trucks, a quarter to half an acre is leveled, scraping off the upper soil horizons in the process. The red maple seedlings at our feet were struggling to survive in that degraded soil.

Ironically, we had just seen thriving red maple stump sprouts in another part of the same stand even though red maple was a main target of herbicide application. The red maples had grown in the shade of larger oaks and pines prior to the harvest. They were cut and poisoned as part of woodland restoration with the hopes that the combination of increased light and reduced maples would create an opportunity for grasses and oak saplings. While maple control was only partially successful, we noticed yellow-fringed orchids, a showy species usually surviving only on dry roadsides, were taking advantage of the new conditions.

Simply reading the plans for the Sumac Creek Project would have given an unduly positive expectation. A reader would assume that all of the red maples would be gone, and the site ready for the Forest Service’s chosen species. Similarly, looking at just one part of the project would have given an equally unfair impression. Looking at just the log landing would have missed the new habitat for yellow-fringed orchid and the good condition of the temporary roads. Georgia ForestWatch’s District Leader program is designed to gather just that kind of boots-on-the-ground information to give a complete picture of Forest Service work.

For the last few years, the District Leader program has focused on analyzing, commenting on, and improving project plans. That work will continue, but we are also beefing up our monitoring of in-progress timber harvests. To fully monitor harvests, we will need more people like you to join us. Email jriddle@gafw.org if you might be interested in participating.

Promoting majestic forests that provide high quality habitat and clean water will take not only gathering data, but also acting on that data. ForestWatch members are crucial advocates whether through commenting on Forest Service projects, talking to your neighbors about what’s going on in the forest, or introducing organizations in your community to Georgia’s Mountain Treasures. National changes (see Around the Forest) and COVID-19 are making those community connections more important.

You will find resources and background information for both field monitoring and direct advocacy in our monthly webinars. Soon we will also have an online toolkit with more resources to help you speak for our forests. The real resource though, for either fieldwork or connecting with others about our forests, will always be you.

Protecting Georgia Forests for Generations to Come

We invite you to step into the future with Georgia ForestWatch by becoming a Forest Legacy Partner (FLP). FLP is a planned giving program that supports our members who wish to include GAFW in their personal financial plans for the future.

The FLP program offers smart ways to give to GAFW through:

• Retirement planning or IRA distributions
• Life Insurance gifting
• Bequest via Will
• Charitable Remainder Trust

Detailed information on each option is available on our website (gafw.org/planned-giving/), or simply call our office and a staff member can assist you (706-867-0051).

We invite you to become a Forest Legacy Partner. If you have already included GAFW in your long-term financial plans, we would like to honor you with a small gift that recognizes how you are making a difference for our beloved Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest. Please call our office to let us know that you are already a Forest Legacy Partner. Thank you.
In memory:
Denny Rhodes
February 16, 1944 – July 10, 2020
by Marie Dunkle :  Past President

This summer a wonderful ForestWatch friend left us. Denny Starr Rhodes was a leader and activist within our organization who devoted an abundance of time, talent, and energy to conserving forests and wild lands in Georgia. He passed away on July 10 after a short illness.

Denny was a graduate of Georgia Tech, served in the U.S. Army at the rank of Captain, and enjoyed a long career in sales engineering. After retirement, he served on the board of Georgia ForestWatch as well as the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, the Benton MacKay Trail Association, and the Stewardship Council for the Appalachian Trail Conservancy.

Denny stood up to defend and support our Forest in many ways, including strengthening our alliances with other conservation organizations. He was an avid researcher and dove deeply into technical documents and history to find important information to support ForestWatch positions. Denny and his wife Lois also volunteered numerous times at outdoor recreation events to help recruit new members, sitting long hours at a table in the sun.

Perhaps we most remember Denny's passion for Wilderness. He was adamant that protecting and expanding Wilderness designations needed to be a fundamental part of the GAFW Strategic Plan ... and today it is, because of him.

Denny always did his homework, had his facts and figures straight and understood Forest issues in-depth. He was prepared to fight for what he believed in and did not hesitate to tell the Forest Service if proposed actions were inefficient or illegal. Whether it was stopping illegal 4-wheeler activity, preventing a logging project near ecologically sensitive areas or putting a halt to plans for a gun range around the corner from his beloved Appalachian trail and the Mark Trail Wilderness area, Denny stood up to preserve the forests we love, even after his knees would not allow long hikes.

Denny will be greatly missed. We send our sincere condolences to Lois and the entire Rhodes family.
The edge of a National Forest is an interesting place. A border, it seems, between familiarity and mystery, between human frailty and nature’s power. A desolate country road and a lonely cabin to one side were oddly reassuring, while to our back an immense stand of green giants was at once intimidating and majestic. Fussing over the weight of our packs and how much water to carry in seemed more affirming than glancing up that closed Forest Service road that would take us hours into a seldom visited sanctuary. The forest seemed to be offering an invitation, though we weren’t entirely sure we were worthy. But we silently promised to tread lightly as we stepped around the gate. And so began our day hike to the center of a Georgia Mountain Treasure.

The Anderson Creek tract lies in the southwest corner of the Southern Blue Ridge cluster of Georgia Mountain Treasures. The tract encompasses 5,847 acres, about 9 square miles from east of Ellijay to near Springer Mountain, including a portion of the Appalachian Trail Approach Trail and a fair amount of old growth. It is the southernmost tract of contiguous protected habitat in the Appalachians. Its importance as a corridor for migrating wildlife, particularly as climate change brings more species northward, cannot be overstated. Our party was led by Jess Riddle, Executive Director, and Andrew Linker, Outreach Coordinator. There were just a few in the group, limited by a pandemic. We were pleased to be invited because the forest is near our own property and we could envision advocating for the forest near us in whatever way we could.

What we didn’t realize is that we were about to be introduced to an ecology that can be truly realized only by reaching in and touching it with all your senses. Our leaders provided frequent mini-lessons, efficiently sampling our complex surroundings, and peppering us with facts and figures that heightened our appreciation for the diversity and biological concert we were attending. Hardwoods and softwoods, scrubs, wildflowers, ferns and a few unwanted intruders, those plants that lack the historical smarts to get along with their neighbors.

It was overwhelming, but we didn’t mind, and neither did the forest. Between lessons we walked, and walked, deeper and deeper. The walk was long but only mildly strenuous as we stayed on the gradually ascending old road. This allowed us to focus on our surroundings instead of our lungs. The ecological show appeared to be expanding as we progressed. The ridges and coves became more mysterious, the trickling streams more unique, and the trees more individual and strangely personal. A complex interplay unfolded around us. The sunlight streaming through the canopy, the layers of shade on the forest floor, the occasional attention-demanding wildflower, and the trees, the incredibly varied and uncountable trees, each standing alone yet intertwined in mutuality.

The silence of the forest is profound and serves to amplify the sudden solo performance of an unseen warbler. The freshness of the air and the fragrances could never be duplicated in a bottle. Everything appeared to be working, yet without the commotion that typifies our human ways. A certain familiarity with the surroundings began to build. It felt like being introduced to 1,000 people all at once, and gradually realizing that you have been friends for years, you just didn’t
On September 14, 1869, approximately 25,000 onlookers gathered in New York’s Central Park to celebrate the centennial of Alexander von Humboldt’s birth. The scene was repeated all over the Americas and Europe. Humboldt was the most preeminent scientist of his time and has been described by his contemporaries as second in fame only to Napoleon. Today, 400 plants and animals are named after him, and so are more places around the globe than are named after any other person. Charles Darwin read Humboldt while on the Beagle, and John Muir aimed to retrace Humboldt’s steps when he embarked on his thousand-mile walk. Yet, today, outside of professional historians of science, few people have heard of him.

Contributing to this obscurity is the fact that there has not been a significant English language biography in many years. Fortunately, Andrea Wulf’s *The Invention of Nature: Alexander von Humboldt’s New World* (Knopf, 2015) changes that.

Though Humboldt lived to be 90, Wulf’s book revolves around the momentous 1799-1804 voyage to the Americas. Accounts of it are intense: Humboldt climbing Mt Chimborazo with no specialized equipment, ice clinging to his hair, shoes shattered and feet bleeding; driving a herd of horses into a pool of electric eels and observing the mayhem; or rafting up the Orinoco river into an unknown jungle. Yet this trip was no mere swashbuckling. It was during this time that Humboldt developed the ideas that made him a celebrity, and which to this day shape our understanding of nature.

Humboldt presented a new way of understanding the natural world. While his contemporaries studied specimens in isolation (often in their comfortable city rooms), Humboldt saw all of nature as interconnected. He studied distribution of plants in relation to geography, noting that when traveling up a mountain, one observes vegetation typically found in higher latitudes. Humboldt pioneered the use of exact measurements as the basis for scientific inquiry. Even on his most dangerous outings, he (and hired locals) carried a plethora of scientific instruments and continually measured pressure, magnetism, and even the color of the sky.

Readers of this newsletter will appreciate Humboldt’s understanding of the importance of forests to soil and water conservation. One can even trace a connection between Humboldt and Georgia ForestWatch.
Welcome to our new board members

KATHY STEGE has been a GAFW member since 2004, attending hikes and events regularly. She attended Co-Trails training 10 years ago and helped maintain trails. She got far more involved when she retired in 2017, and helped plan and lead a hike, attended some GAFW board and district leader meetings, has been the lead planner for the Athens Community Action Group, arranged numerous tabling and presentation opportunities in the Athens area, and helped remove invasive plants in the Chattahoochee NF.

Kathy graduated from the University of Georgia with a degree in chemistry and worked for 40 years in Georgia water resources. Ten years of her career were with the Athens government in wastewater sampling and testing. For 30 years, she managed an environmental group for a large civil engineering company and was a consultant for issues related to watersheds, wetlands, landfills, water supply and testing, environmental grants, wastewater treatment, spills, and landfills.

She is past president of the Georgia Wilderness Society and Central Georgia River Runners, and has led many hikes and river trips for these groups. She enjoys whitewater paddling, backpacking, and hiking over much of middle and north Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. She is currently converting her 1/2 acre lot to a native plant pollinator refuge, complete with a frog pond.

NICK NICHOLS has provided professional planning and environmental services to governments, public agencies, municipalities and private sector clients for land and natural resources planning and management projects over the past 45 years. He has a thorough understanding of the issues and opportunities surrounding the planning, development, use and management of land and other natural resources. He has prepared land and water use and management plans; prepared environmental documents and permits to comply with federal, state and local rules and regulations: managed planning departments and budgets, complex projects, and written multi-disciplinary environmental and planning documents and local comprehensive plans. His background in engineering, planning, environmental science and geology, combined with over 45 years of direct governmental and private industry experience provides a broad combination of engineering, business management, environmental, permitting and natural resources planning knowledge directly applicable to a variety of proposed project needs.

Nick purchased property and relocated between the Mark Trail and Brasstown Wilderness Areas in the Chattahoochee National Forest in Union County, Georgia in 2014. He has been a proactive stakeholder and avid user of the Chattahoochee National Forest and is keenly interested in the judicious use and management of this unique natural resource. Nick has been actively involved in Georgia ForestWatch (GAFW) for less than two years. In that time he has collaborated and participated with GAFW in response to Forest Service proposed National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) revisions, scoping notices (SOPAs), Environmental Assessments, Special Use Applications, restoration plans and actions, and a variety of other support activities to the GAFW. His knowledge and background in environmental regulations in this challenging environment could be an asset to the GAFW as it continues on its mission to preserve and protect the Chattahoochee National Forest lands.
Around the forest
by Jess Riddle : Executive Director

National Issues

Forest management is being pushed back towards the bad old days of logging for the sake of logging. Over the last 30 years forest management has significantly improved as people saw the damage caused by forest exploitation and demanded greater ecological consideration. Some timber beasts are still around, but now they work with and often report to colleagues who have a broader perspective and want to help ecosystems for the sake of the ecosystem.

People who don't like that shift now occupy powerful positions, and they are doing everything they can to speed the conversion of our public lands and forests into commodities without regard for the myriad other benefits natural areas provide. Case in point: In June, Secretary of Agriculture Sunny Purdue issued a memo to the Chief of the Forest Service directing her to “increase the productivity of national forests and grassland” and “expedite[e] environmental reviews.” Among several directives, the Forest Service is to “increase America’s energy dominance,” “reduce regulatory burdens to promote active management,” and “improve customer service by modernizing and simplifying forest products permitting and the Forest Service land exchange process.” These were not mere suggestions. In August, Purdue bypassed the Chief and wrote directly to Regional Foresters demanding progress reports and work plans for further activity.

At the same time, regulations that protect against ill-conceived products are being gutted. Whenever a federal agency takes a major action – from building a dam to permitting a pipeline to logging a forest – the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) requires them to analyze potential environmental impacts, disclose plans to the public and consider feedback, and consider alternatives. The Council on Environmental Quality (CEQ), which makes the regulations for how all agencies implement NEPA, has just changed the rules in the name of improving efficiency, but has paved the way for development (see our April article for more on CEQ and NEPA changes).

For instance, the new rules allow applicants to help prepare environmental reviews, whether they are a fracking company wanting to drill a well or a county planning to lease public land for a new target range. The changes also remove consideration of “cumulative effects,” such as previous Forest Service logging in the same watershed or how a project would contribute to climate change. New page and time limits for preparing environmental reviews will produce other gaps in analysis of environmental impacts, which is particularly frustrating because the Forest Service already has a tendency to oversimplify complex ecological issues.

The Southern Environmental Law Center is representing several environmental organizations challenging the rule changes. The new rules go into effect September 14th unless the courts

(continued on page 8)
issue a stay, in which case they would only be implemented if the government wins the case.

The Forest Service must follow CEQ NEPA rules, but the agency also has its own directives for implementing NEPA. Last June, the Forest Service proposed updates to its rules that would have reduced public participation and environmental review. The Forest Service’s revisions could be released any day, but conflicts with the new CEQ rules may delay their release.

A national bright spot: The recently passed Great American Outdoors Act will supply funds for overdue work in national parks and national forests. It also permanently funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund, which allows the federal government to purchase land from willing sellers. Georgia ForestWatch has long supported greater funding for the Land and Water Conservation Fund.

Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forest

COVID-19 forced the Forest Service to close campgrounds, many trails, and other recreation facilities, but they have now reopened all of them. Trails have seen holiday-weekend-size crowds every weekend. Many of these visitors are new or infrequent forest users who haven’t had a chance yet to learn how to enjoy the forest safely and responsibly. They may present challenges for the Forest Service, but they deserve warm welcomes and good examples from veteran forest users.

On the other hand, most Forest Service offices are nearly deserted with staff either working from home or going directly to the field. The Forest Service has still been working though. Recreational facilities closures were an opportunity to complete some backlogged maintenance, like painting fences and repairing picnic tables. Some
recognize them at first. Indeed, the forest was wrapping itself around us, physically and emotionally. It was planting itself in our hearts.

We stopped for lunch and surveyed a former recreational site ravaged 20 years prior by off-road vehicles. We learned about the important work of Georgia ForestWatch that was instrumental in closing the area to such activity, allowing the forest to heal. As we progressed to our destination, we learned about cherished hemlock stands, and saw the destructive fury of a tiny bug and the benefits of scientific intervention. We paused in a particularly picturesque pocket as the road curved sharply. To our left, a steep slope that some chose to ascend to glimpse deeper into the treasure. To our right, a lush valley beneath an immense canopy. We had arrived at the center. We rested, and lingered, content to simply be in the presence of something that cannot really be described. Only in afterthought did we realize that we were experiencing something beyond a fun day hike in the woods; we were experiencing a relationship with a mountain treasure.

The return hike was simple and lighthearted, and downhill! The day had grown long, and distant thunder reminded us of the forecast. The luck of our timing became real as we climbed into our vehicles. The rain came, heavy and hard. The forest filled with mist; the leaves clapped loudly as the huge drops poured down. The agenda had changed. It was time for water, that precious resource the forest manages. The forest took on a serious appearance, darker, distant, and preoccupied. The forest was busy. It had work to do. We were not really needed there.
new projects have been slowed by closure of State Historic Preservation Organization and Tribal offices that the Forest Service is required to consult. A combination of low mill capacity due to COVID-19, a weak timber market, and wet weather has slowed timber harvests for approved projects.

As the Forest Service developed new processes to deal with COVID-19, they also worked to refine their process for land sales (see Fall 2019 article). They have committed to go through the NEPA process for each of the 30 tracts they consider selling. So far, only Fannin and Rabun Counties have moved towards actually selling parcels. Rabun County is formally supporting the sale of two out of seven potential tracts, including a nearly 800-acre parcel that is contiguous with other Forest Service land. ForestWatch is continuing to survey the tracts, and we have visited almost all of them.

The FS has also focused on the Foothills Landscape Project, processing the over 2,000 comments they received in January in response to the draft Environmental Assessment. They have not yet indicated any changes they will make to the project in response. The courts have recently thrown out the Prince of Wales project in Alaska, which took a very similar approach to Foothills by describing general activities the Forest Service planned to complete but failing to identify the actual locations.

How the Forest Service proceeds with Foothills will depend in part on who leads the Forest Service in Georgia. The Forest Service has been operating with an Acting Supervisor for several months, but they expect to fill the Forest Supervisor position any week now.

Blue Ridge Ranger District
The District is moving ahead with the Toccoa Salvage project, which involves harvesting fallen and broken trees (salvage logging) in an area between Suches and Blue Ridge that was hit by a tornado. Disappointingly, they are including an area that will require bulldozing in “temporary” roads and scraping off log landings in order to haul out timber. The District justifies the project as reducing insect attack and wildfire risk, but the chance the project will actually have any influence on either of those issues is slim. The District’s next project will likely be thinning a few dozen acres of upland white pine forest in the Rock Creek watershed west of Suches. ForestWatch is continuing to monitor the construction of a target range on FS land near Brasstown Bald to ensure the environmental safety plan is strictly adhered to.

Chattooga River Ranger District
The Chattooga River is beautiful, provides habitat not found elsewhere on the Forest, and is a major economic resource for local communities, but it also attracts some of the least responsible forest users. The District is working on ways to better manage use at some popular access points so that people can continue to enjoy the river for generations to come. The District has also focused on treating invasive species this summer, especially in campgrounds and at a potential site for native river cane restoration in the Foothills Landscape Project. Developing new prescribed burn plans, rare plant and forest health projects, and working on Foothills have also been priorities this summer.

Conasauga Ranger District
The District recently approved the Johns Mountain WMA Proposal, which will establish new wildlife openings in a valley southeast of Villanow. Georgia ForestWatch usually opposes wildlife openings because the lawn-like openings in the woods are artificial and benefit many fewer species than natural habitats. This project, however, minimizes damage by using already disturbed habitats (log landings and pine plantations) to create the openings, and will allow parts of them to grow up for a year or two between maintenance, which will better mimic natural habitats. The openings will still be simpler than natural habitats and the access roads will have negative impacts, but this project is a clear improvement over past similar projects. The District is currently reviewing plans for a new gravel parking area for the Pinhoti Trail at Mulberry Gap, and continuing timber harvests for the Sumac Creek (approved 2013) and Fightingtown Creek (approved 2018) Projects.
THANK YOU FOREST GUARDIANS! (January – June 2020)

Mike Bales
Janet Chapman
Coastal Community Foundation of SC, Obediah Fund
Barbara C. Cocherell
Community Foundation of Central Georgia, Inc.
Bradley Currey
Mark & Lucy Dickerson
Ted & Lynda Doll
EarthShare of Georgia
Susan Harmon
Robin & Janet Hittner

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Nick Nichols
Patagonia Headquarters
Denny & Lois Rhodes
Doug & Elaine Riddle
Louis Schweizer
Southern Environmental Law Center
Margaretta Taylor
Turner Foundation, Inc.
Jim & Patricia Walker
William Witherspoon & Rina Rosenberg

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Bryan Coalley
Janice Cochrane
Dorinda Dallmeyer
Kyle Daniel
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Lee Graham
Don Hackett
Kim Hall
Larry Hample
Eric Hartford
Jessie Hayden
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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS! (January – June 2020)

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Kelly Jordan
Judith Kaplan
Kevin Karel
Mary Kramer
Sandra Kruger
Carol Krych
Dan MacIntyre
Kris & Don Martin
Patricia Merson
Denise Miles & Ken Cox
Martha & Ethan Morris
David Parkin
David Phraner
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Becca Risser
Mason & Kathleen Rodgers
Alejandra Rodriguez
Tony Sideris
Tony Stanley
Barry Straus
Ken & Fran Strickland
Ellen Surrency
Diana Thomas
Stephen Weber

Photo credit: Andrew Linker

ForestWatch volunteer District Leaders monitor the Sumac Creek Project.
Georgia ForestWatch Membership Form

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How did you hear about us? _________________________________

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Did you know a $2,500 President’s Circle membership now entitles you to a half-day consultation with our Field Ecologist or other qualified GAFW volunteer to assess the condition of your forested property? Call GAFW for more info.

JOIN NOW!

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