GEORGIA FORESTWATCH
PRESERVE PROTECT RESTORE GAFW.ORG

September 5, 2023

FORESTWATCH JOURNAL

Volume 2, Issue 31

Proposed Recreation Fee Changes

Georgia ForestWatch recently submitted comments to the USFS's proposed changes to Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest (CONF) recreation fees. GAFW understands the need for increased funding to financially support and maintain not only the most popular recreational areas but the entire CONF. Staff and maintenance costs have risen significantly, with each year costing more to achieve less and allowing the deferred maintenance needs throughout the forest to expand unaddressed.

GAFW is fully supportive of increasing the non-OHV recreation and site maintenance budget of the CONF; however, it also feels strongly that the funding should come directly from federal tax revenues distributed by the U.S. Congress, allowing all users, despite their available household resources, to enjoy our public lands. It is anecdotally obvious to everyone who lives near or regularly visit our four ranger districts a lack of visitor diversity within a state that is majority minority. Barriers to our fellow Georgians visiting our national forest lands include lack of public

transportation, misunderstanding of the status and availability of public lands, lack of knowledge of available resources, and visible unwelcomeness of rural communities exhibited by flags, symbols, and political signs.

However, the primary barrier for many potential visitors is the lack of discretionary income. A $5 charge appears to be a perfectly reasonable expense that many of us can afford without hesitation, but it can be the difference between some families eating dinner or not. If the goal is to make our public lands available to all, we as Americans must agree that public lands are truly available to everyone, not just those who can afford to visit, and certain exemptions must be implemented.

GAFW proposes the following as potential policy changes:

1. Understanding the decision lies outside of the USFS, GAFW calls for all USFS recreation fees nationally to be eliminated for all users, except established campsites with hookups, rental of cabins, commercial activities, OHV use, and other hard recreation costs such as rentals, boats, stock animals, lookouts, audio tour devices, portable sanitation devices, binoculars, or other equipment. Additionally, GAFW calls upon the U.S. Congress to fully fund the financial needs of the USFS from the U.S. general fund to address both deferred maintenance and ongoing non-OHV recreational needs in perpetuity.
2. USFS should create a needs-based exemption from most or all USFS non-OHV recreation fees for those currently registered for Medicare, Medicaid, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), those who received the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) on their most recent tax filing, those who did not earn a sufficient income to file federal income tax, families with student(s) eligible for free school breakfast and lunch, and others at similar documentable financial levels. Those in this category should be able to apply for and receive a universally accepted public lands pass at no cost to them, similar to the America the Beautiful pass.
3. The USFS CONF should create a needs-based exemption from camping fees and 14-day limits on established (non-dispersed) campsites without hookups for those with documented long-term housing limitations, such as Section 8 eligible or those receiving FEMA emergency housing support. By allowing them to stay in established campgrounds, it will allow for proper monitoring of their activities and behavior and eliminate the violations that occur from those homesteading in dispersed sites. Those who meet the criteria and are found to overstay in dispersed sites should be referred to the nearest established campground with non-hookup sites. A limit of 90 days annually should be imposed on these sites, and guests staying on these sites should be held to the same behavior and maintenance standards as all campers and be required to leave if in violation of the rules.
4. In honor of the indigenous lands the forest inhabits, the USFS CONF should exempt all non-OHV recreation fees for enrolled members of the Lower Muscogee Creek Tribe, the Georgia Tribe of Eastern Cherokee, the United Keetoowah Band of Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma, the Cherokee Nation in Oklahoma, and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians in North Carolina.
5. Formally change the name of the *Lake Winfield Scott Recreation Area* to one supported and approved by the above tribes. The USFS should also conduct a review of all place names within the CONF to ensure they are not honoring the people, actions, or events that led to the forced migration of indigenous peoples and/or in support of human slavery.
6. The USFS should enforce a rule nationally that bans all visible displays of

confederate and gadsden flags, swastikas, and other symbols of hate, including on persons, equipment, or vehicles in any format while within the boundaries of our national forest lands.

7. Increase OHV recreation fees to include a “carbon tax” to offset the climate change pollution produced by internal combustion engines. The tax should be a proportionate amount to fully offset the pollution produced during this activity.
8. Recreational use data, including camping stays, special use permits, and other recreational use assessments, should be made publicly available in a user-friendly format to allow CONF stakeholders to determine the recreational use trajectory for the forest.
9. The USFS nationally should implement a moratorium on the construction or conversion of campgrounds and sites without hookups (potable water, sewage, & electricity) to those with hookups nor increase the size of campgrounds or campsites to accommodate larger recreational vehicles and camping trailers. Our national forest public lands should be a safe haven from the RV industry's over-commercialization of camping and reserved for those most interested in having a serene natural experience.
10. Similarly, the USFS should disallow the use of internal combustion generators in all instances (including dispersed and established campgrounds) at all times other than for emergency services. Again, our national forest public lands should be preserved for those looking to get away from the over-commercialized RV industry. Within the past thirty years, the RV industry has aggressively lobbied public land managers to accommodate their needs at the expense of those seeking a natural experience. Additionally, portable internal combustion generators are polluters contributing to climate change.
11. The USFS should eliminate the practice of allowing private concessionaires to manage recreational locations such as campgrounds within our public lands. Understandably, for USFS leadership, this is a promising partnership that reduces the USFS’s responsibility and cost to manage such areas, but introducing a parallel organizational hierarchy inevitably leads to increased fees for public land users. To keep user fees to a minimum, the USFS should re-establish itself as the sole site manager within the boundaries of our national forests, and again, the U.S. Congress should fund the USFS at an appropriate level to support this policy.

GAFW is planning to pursue a seat on the soon-to-be-developed **Region 8 Recreation Resource Advisory Committee** and looks forward to continuing the discussion on expanding the equitable availability of our national forests and eliminating recreational practices that contribute to climate change.

Partner Spotlight

For those of you who participated in the **GAFW Book Club**meeting this past week, you are familiar with **author Brent Martin**. But did you know that Brent is also the Executive Director of The **Blue Ridge Bartram Trail Conservancy** (BRBTC) with a mission *to recognize and honor the Philadelphia-born naturalist, William Bartram, who traveled through the southeast between the years 1773 and 1777, writing exact and vivid descriptions of the plants and animals he saw and the native tribes he encountered* along with *establishing and maintaining a 110-mile memorial trail, following a route as close as possible to Bartram's original route through northeast Georgia and western North Carolina*.

If you love GAFW and the Chattahoochee Oconee National Forest, you should also be aware of the BRBTC and its great work. Please consider subscribing to their newsletters and/or **becoming a member** to support their important work.

Like GAFW, the BRBC also hosts various scheduled events, including the following upcoming opportunities to learn, enjoy, and work to protect our forests.

9/9: Second Saturday Workday - Please join us for a great day volunteering on the Bartram Trail. No experience needed; we'll supply all the tools and know-how.

9/12: **Birding 101 with Highlands Plateau Audubon Society**- This free program will be held at the Hudson Library at 7 pm in Highlands. "Recognizing Our Local Songbirds, Raptors & Waterfowl" by Ed Boos is open to all birders from beginner to advanced. Ed is a noted wildlife photographer. His work will also be on display at the library in September. You can find more information on the **Highlands Plateau Audubon Society** website.

9/15: Third Friday Workday - Don't be shy; we'll provide everything you need to enjoy your day while making a huge impact on the future enjoyment of the Bartram Trail. The hard work of our volunteers is what keeps the 110 miles of trails open and usable all year long.

9/26: **Trailhead Tuesday** - This program is for those looking to get involved but with limited time. We will meet in the early afternoon to divide and conquer some minor

clean-up and trailhead maintenance. We're looking for folks to visit a set of selected trailheads to re-stock Bartram Trail information cards, complete a trailhead condition report, pick up any trash in the area, and chat with hikers as they start their day hike.

9/29: **Walking with Bartram from Lake Nantahala to Appletree Campground** - This hike picks up from last month's Wayah Bald to Lake Nantahala hike. It's .7 miles on Wayah Road before entering the forest for another 5 miles to Appletree. The trail follows old roadbeds and skirts the upper gorge for spectacular views of the lake and the river.

Upcoming GAFW Outings & Outreach

Saturday, September 9 - **Outing! Foxfire Museum Guided Tour**

Sunday, September 10 - Come see us at the **Elachee Wildlife Festival**, 10 am - 2 pm.

Saturday, September 16 - Come see us at **Dahlonega Trail Fest**

Saturday, September 23 - Come see us at **Patagonia Beltline**, 10 am - 2 pm

Thursday, September 28- **GAFW Book Club Meeting**, Zoom (*Deliverance*, by James Dickey)

Saturday, September 30 - **Outing! Project Chimps Private Group Tour**

Saturday, October 14 - **Save the Date!** GAFW Annual Retreat at Red Top Mountain. **SPONSOR US NOW**

Saturday, October 21 - **The Second Wurst Festival Ever**, Fannin Brewing Company, Blue Ridge, GA **Tickets are on sale now!**

Thursday, October 26 - **GAFW Book Club Meeting**, Zoom (*Haints on Black Mountain* by Ann Hite)

Friday, October 27 - Outing! Core Preserve at Lula Lake Land Trust

Thursday, November 30 - **GAFW Book Club Meeting**, Zoom (*Literary Field Guide to Southern Appalachia,* Edited by Rose McLarney, Laura-Gray Street, and L. L. Gaddy)

Thursday, December 28 - GAFW Book Club Meeting, Zoom (*The Lost Book of Eleanor Dare* by Kimberly Brock)

GAFW Outings on Meetup

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Thank You

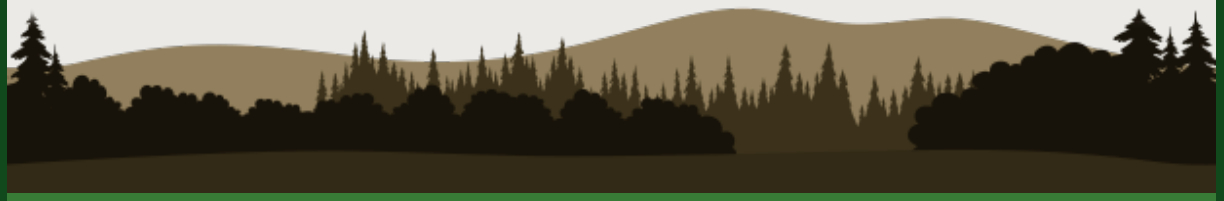
Georgia ForestWatch is the only nonprofit organization with a mission solely dedicated to ensuring the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests remain healthy and available for future generations, and we can only pursue our mission with the support of the community.

Please support our mission by ensuring your **membership is up to date** and providing **additional support** as you are able.

On behalf of our entire national forests in our beautiful state, we thank you for your support.

Our Mission

Our mission is to preserve and protect our national forests.



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