



Chattooga Reflections

Winter ♦ 2024/2025

50 Years of Wild & Scenic Designation in Context



*Clouds dance across a tranquil pool of water nestled in bedrock
along the river's swift approach to Seven Foot Falls.*

Photo © Mark VanDyke

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DIRECTOR'S PAGE

Nicole Hayler

'Tis the season for reflection, contemplation, restoration and renewal. In early 2025, add trepidation to the mix for many of us. The year ahead is sure to bring escalating intensities of environmental problems, with higher stakes for long-term consequences impacting our quality of life and civil welfare.

For our beloved Chattooga River, the end of 2024 completed its golden anniversary of 50 years as a National Wild & Scenic River. This landmark year was marked by a trove of celebratory events, heartfelt acknowledgments and inspirational words. Even during these times of polemic values for preserving our natural life-support systems, nary a voice was raised against the foresight of using federal law, i.e., the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, to leverage mandates for protecting this extraordinary river.

One may think that after 50 years of Wild & Scenic designation, a stasis might exist for safeguarding the Chattooga's "outstandingly remarkable values" (ORVs). After all, within so much of the protected river corridor, the Chattooga and its immediate environs appear wild and untrammled, where visitors can soak in the timeless presence of ancient bedrock, free-flowing clear water, lush vegetation, and unfettered wildlife. The resilience of the river through the epochs appears remarkable, even after the past half-century of pressures from more modern times.

Today, however, safeguarding the river means contending with a rapidly advancing society's voracious appetite for consuming the natural world and its wondrous capacity for renewal. The path ahead for protecting the Chattooga's ORVs is tenuous and increasingly difficult to navigate in the landscape of ever-encroaching forces of degradation.

Meanwhile, with the river's landmark anniversary now behind us, the history of the Chattooga's Wild & Scenic designation fades further into the past. Indeed, passing this milestone marks the start of a new chapter. At this inflection point, we have paused to examine the circumstances and key players leading to the river's designation, explore the older history of stewarding this landscape, and look at a few contemporary issues affecting the Chattooga and its

surrounding watershed. *Chattooga Reflections* is the product of this inquiry, as follows:

Humans have inhabited the Chattooga watershed for eons, and *Reflections* begins with considering "Indigenous Land Stewardship of the Chattooga Watershed." This article examines Cherokee land stewardship and beliefs practiced within the Chattooga watershed and provides insight on how modern national forest management can learn from and honor the successful watershed stewardship of the Cherokee.



Travelers crossing the camelback bridge (site of future Hwy. 76 bridge) pause to gaze at the timeless flow of the Chattooga River.

Courtesy of Rabun County Historical Society

Next, we take a deep dive into the history of the Chattooga's designation. As described in "The Wild & Scenic Backstory" it took over seven years of persistent efforts by a broad coalition of advocates to attain the river's protection. Following this story is "Impacts," a brief outline of the effects of designation.

After designation, it wasn't long before the fragility of the Chattooga's protection was revealed, and fundamental tenets of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act were threatened and even violated. *Reflections*' "Threats and Accomplishments" explores a few prominent areas of vulnerabilities to the river's ORVs, as well as the ongoing work to protect the river corridor.

Reflections closes with "The Future of Chattooga Watershed Conservation," a call for managing the watershed's substantial acreage of national forest lands to immediately help mitigate the existential threat of our time—the burgeoning, devastating impacts of climate change.

The story of protecting the Chattooga River shows citizen advocacy at work, from its start to the present day. Even with Wild & Scenic protections, vigilance and action is necessary to prevent, or simply slow, the forces degrading the river's outstandingly remarkable values. Join this advocacy! Your support will help empower and enable successes in this new chapter of protecting the Wild & Scenic Chattooga River.

Many sources were consulted in researching this publication. Please see each article's reference list online at <https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/> or access by scanning the QR code:



INDIGENOUS LAND STEWARDSHIP OF THE CHATTOOGA WATERSHED

WHAT WE CAN LEARN

Jasmine Williams

The Chattooga River watershed has long been regarded as one of the nation's few remaining "wild" places. The trailheads leading to the Chattooga are proudly crowned with signs that read "Wild & Scenic," and if you walk down to the river's edge, the pine, maple, and oak trees along the riverbank and the birdsong carried on the wind might be enough to convince you that this place is indeed a piece of genuine wilderness, unscathed by the excesses of modern humanity. However, there is far more to the story of the Chattooga watershed than meets the eye.

Long ago, the banks of this river were home to an ancient forest of massive American chestnut trees and centuries-old hemlocks. The woods bustled not only with deer, squirrels, and the occasional bear, but also with elk, wolves, and mountain lions (Timberlake, 2006). Instead of slowing to a stop at the Tugalo Dam and stagnating into a lake, the river's path from its headwaters to the sea was an open channel. The ecosystems you see in the Chattooga watershed today, however, are a far cry from the biodiverse, stable, and ancient haven that once existed.

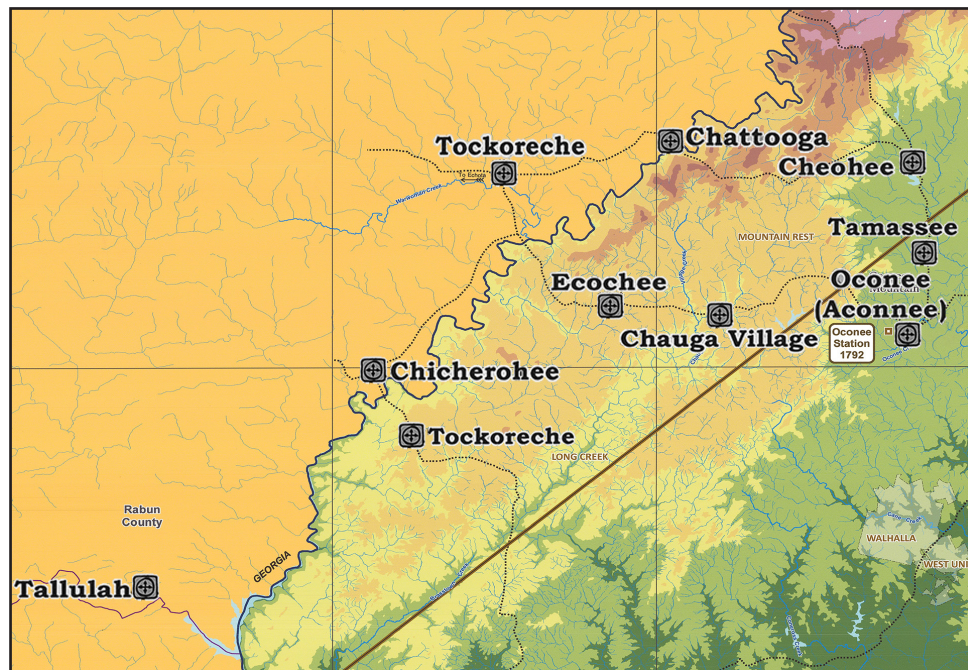
It is not difficult to identify when the stability of these ecosystems was disrupted. The extinction of species and

loss of old-growth forests directly follow the arrival of European settlers to the area, around the early 1700s. Massive logging operations in the early 1900s clearcut nearly all of the watershed's old growth and transformed the river into a floating highway for felled trees (Gennett, 2002). Unsustainable hunting practices drove many larger mammals, like the elk, mountain lion, and wolf, into local extinction. Development and logging operations, along with a lack of soil nutrient replacement, caused a great deal of soil erosion and stream sedimentation. To this day, our "forest stewards," the U.S. Forest Service, are cutting rare old growth in the headwaters, even though only 0.5% of the Southeast's old-growth forests remain standing (Climate Forest Campaign, 2024).¹ If we want to move toward a more resilient and productive watershed, we need to reevaluate the extractive practices that keep us locked in a cycle of degradation.

When European settlers arrived in the Chattooga watershed, the pristine "wilderness" they found was not due to a lack of human influence, but was the result of an intentional relationship between the Cherokee People (and other Indigenous groups) and their environment. Modern science acknowledges that intact ecosystems, communities of living organisms interacting with each other and with their nonliving environment, provide vital resources like clean air

and water. If we hope to restore the ecosystems of this watershed to their full potential, we must explore the successful stewardship practices of the Cherokee.

The Cherokee's relationship with the world around them revolved around one essential principle: humans' responsibility to maintain worldly balance. From the Cherokee point of view, the universe was divided into three realms. The upper realm held kind and benevolent spirits, while the underworld was home to spirits who brought on disease, death, and misfortune. The Cherokee lived in the middle world and were responsible for holding the forces of the upper and lower realms in balance with one another (Champagne, 1990). It was believed that if these two opposing cosmic forces became imbalanced,



Cherokee lower towns near the Chattooga River.

Map created by the Oconee County GIS Department

1. The most pressing example of this is the recent clearcutting of Brushy Mountain, which was home to scientifically verified old-growth forest. More information about old-growth clearcutting in the Chattooga River watershed and throughout the U.S. is available at <https://www.climate-forests.org/>.

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a great misfortune would ensue. Therefore, the ethos of maintaining harmony was ingrained in nearly every aspect of Cherokee society, including how the people interacted with the natural world. Our current understanding of human-caused climate disruption shows us that there is deep truth in the belief that humans have a responsibility in maintaining balance on Earth.

Anthropologist James Mooney, who spent several years living with the Cherokee in the late 1800s, extensively documented the many Cherokee beliefs surrounding

the environment. Rivers in particular, Mooney emphasized, were held in especially high spiritual regard and played an essential role in both Cherokee legend and ceremony. In Mooney's study of the Cherokees' relationship with the river, he writes, "In Cherokee ritual, the river is the Long Man (Ga-nv-hi-dv A-s-ga-ya), a giant with his head in the foothills of the mountains and his foot far down in the lowland, pressing always, restless and without stop, to a certain goal, and speaking ever in murmurs which only the priest may interpret" (Mooney, 1900, p. 1).

Water itself, according to the Cherokee, is a provider capable of washing away bad thoughts and sadness (EBCI, 2024). In fact, Mooney's journals account that the Cherokee were practicing a form of riverside "baptism" long before Europeans ever set foot in the Americas. On the fourth day of a child's life, river-dwelling communities of the Chattooga watershed would take a newborn baby to the river where a Cherokee holy man would dip the child's head in the water seven times to grant them health, a long life, and future prosperity (Mooney, 1900).² Rituals such as this illustrate the significance of water in Cherokee culture and attest to the amount of respect, care, and stewardship that would have been provided to a river's ecosystem.

The specifics of Cherokee ecosystem management practices, and how heavily those practices prioritized maintaining harmony and cultivating respect, are especially apparent in Cherokee beliefs surrounding hunting and gathering. The Cherokee ethos emphasizes that a hunter should only kill an animal out of necessity. Legend dictated that if an animal was killed for sport or through greed,

the spirit of that animal would seek revenge, often by being reincarnated as a new being that sought to inflict sickness or death on the hunter, and cosmic harmony would not be restored until the harmed being had been compensated. Therefore, special care and ritual precautions were necessary when hunting and killing animals (Champagne, 1990).³

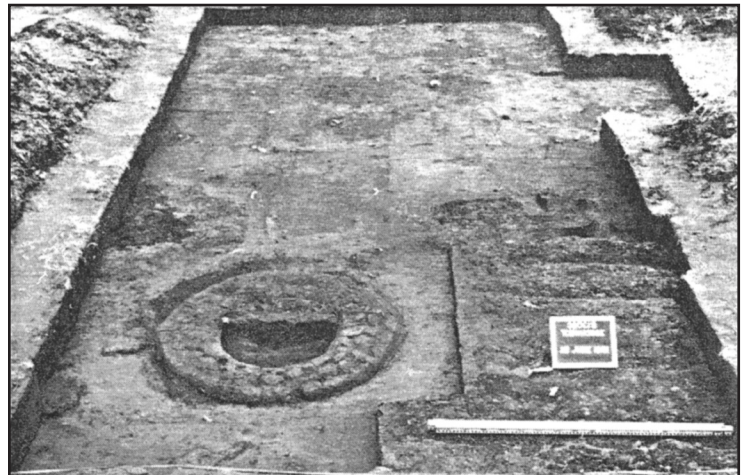
For example, the white-tailed deer was by far the most important game animal in the pre-colonial Southeast, providing anywhere from 50-90% of animal protein eaten. Early colonial reports mention herds of up to 200 deer in

the lowlands, a massive figure compared to today's herds of 5 to 20 (Hudson, 1976).⁴ While that figure can be attributed to the high reproductive rate of white-tailed deer and the extensive, uninterrupted habitat available at that time, the deer

population also showed a remarkable stability in number, which is believed to be a byproduct of the intentional predator-prey relationship that the Cherokee cultivated when hunting this animal. The Cherokee acted essentially as a population-balancing force, hunting just enough to feed themselves and keep the deer from overpopulating and becoming vulnerable to disease and famine, but leaving behind enough to allow their most integral game animal to maintain a flourishing abundance (Hudson, 1976).

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*In Cherokee ritual, the river is the "Long Man,"
written above in Cherokee.*



*Excavation of a Cherokee townhouse at Chattooga Old Town,
next to the Chattooga River. Excavation led by
Gerald F. Schroedl, University of Tennessee, 1989-1994.*

Photo courtesy of the Tennessee Anthropological Association (1992)

2. This is one of many Cherokee rituals that likely would have been practiced on the Chattooga River. More examples can be found in James Mooney's work.

3. These "ritual precautions" often included a small ceremony, where assurance was provided that the animal was killed out of necessity and a small sacrifice was made to the "chief of the animals" (Champagne, 1990).

4. The "lowlands," in this context, refers to the flat lands South of the Blue Ridge Escarpment (Hudson, 1976, pp. 274 - 275). It is unlikely that deer herds in the Chattooga River watershed reached this number.

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Certain Cherokee hunting practices yielded other positive impacts on the surrounding ecosystem. From early fall through late winter, hunters would occasionally use a method called “fire surround,” in which large groups of hunters would ignite a ring of leaves up to five miles in circumference, entrapping prey to be hunted (Hudson, 1976). This made hunting during cold months much more efficient, and it also provided a benefit to the deer in the long run, since burned areas usually regenerated into small open meadows ideal for grazing. Furthermore, the burning of small patches of forest reduced the threat of forest fires by removing excess flammable leaf litter, and it left behind a layer of nutrient-dense ashes that enhanced soil quality over time. For these benefits alone, it is suspected that the Cherokee would routinely burn small portions of the forest. Some early-colonial reporters even suggest that burning became a means of chestnut harvesting for the Cherokee, as it made chestnuts easy to find and roasted them in the process (Martin, 1973).⁵

This diverse use of fire may explain why early colonizers of the Southeast discovered small, unexpected patches of meadows dappled throughout the Appalachian forests. William Bartram, one of the first Europeans to extensively document the plant and animal life of the Chattooga watershed, illustrates this well in his writing, saying that the watershed held both “grassy hillsides,” and “groves of stately forest trees” (Bartram, 1998, p. 214).⁶

While much can be learned about how the Cherokee stewarded the Chattooga watershed from writers such as Bartram, it is important to address the context in which he and other early anthropologists and biologists were observing the Indigenous inhabitants of the area. When early explorers ventured into the Chattooga River watershed, the impacts

of colonialism had already wreaked havoc on the Cherokee way of life, and therefore it can be inferred that the specifics of their ecosystem management strategies in this area were not accurately documented in their entirety (Belt, 2009). For example, the extent that the Cherokee practiced “controlled burning” within the watershed is largely unknown; cattle had already been introduced during the early stages of colonization, and therefore a large portion of the meadows in this area could be attributed to the Cherokees’ burgeoning cattle farming practices as opposed to extensive use of fire.



A Cherokee household on the Qualla Boundary, North Carolina.

Photographed in the late 1800s by anthropologist James Mooney

It has been suggested that this possible misinterpretation has led to the U.S. Forest Service’s over-burning of the Chattooga watershed in recent years.

Furthermore, European-introduced smallpox caused a massive wave of death to ripple through Cherokee homes in the early 1700s. By 1738, over two-thirds of the Cherokee people were killed by this alien disease. After the smallpox epidemic, villages

in the lower Cherokee towns held only a fraction of their former inhabitants, and it has been guessed that many towns within the Chattooga watershed were nearly wiped out (Belt, 2009). Therefore, when travelers like Bartram arrived at the Chattooga later that century, the villages he passed through were already devastated by colonial presence.

Bartram notes that he frequently observed ruins of habitations and villages on his journey, attesting to the diminishing number of Cherokee people in the watershed.⁷ Not long after, the remaining lower towns of the Cherokee were either destroyed by colonial invasion, completely decimated by subsequent waves of smallpox, or evacuated as the remaining residents fled north. For this reason, documentations of Cherokee practices as recorded by Bartram and others paint an incomplete picture of how this watershed was cared for before European arrival. However,

5. Burning of the forest would have reduced the numbers of reptiles and insects, but we do not know whether the Cherokee recognized this when they burned the woods (Martin, 1973).

6. It is estimated that Bartram crossed the Chattooga, which he frequently called the “Tugilo” in his journals, at the mouth of Warwoman Creek (Bartram, 1998).

7. It should be noted that some of the “ruins of the ancients” that Bartram describes in his journal could also be the ruins of towns that predated the Cherokee (Bartram, 1998, p. 214).

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the belief system which created such a flourishing, symbiotic relationship between humans and the watershed still lives on.

Today, as a result of colonial destruction, genocide, and displacement, the Cherokee people have been split in two. Infamously, the majority of the Cherokee were marched to Oklahoma, and forced to walk away from their homeland on the Trail of Tears. Descendants of those who were able to stay in the Southeast are known as “The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians” (EBCI), and formally occupy 50,000 acres of land, known as the Qualla Boundary, in the Great Smoky Mountains of North Carolina—only 2% of their former homeland. Many still practice the artisanship, language, and belief system of their ancestors.

The EBCI does not own land within the Chattooga watershed, and the river is now managed primarily by the U.S. Forest Service, who have faced repeated backlash for their brand of ecosystem mismanagement and agency mandates which treat our forests as tree farms. Profit-driven clearcutting and misappropriation of Indigenous ecosystem management practices, such as excessive prescribed fire, that have largely defined the recent stewardship of the Chattooga watershed are doing a grave disservice to restoring natural ecological integrity, which is still attainable today.

Yet, hidden away in the moist, dark grottos along the Chattooga River’s swift rapids are rare tropical ferns; above the steep faces of granite domes in the headwaters, peregrine falcons still soar over the few remaining patches of old growth; through multi-layered canopies and lush forest understories, beautiful neotropical migratory birds find home and safe passage; and beds of moss on the watershed’s forest floor shelter more salamanders than anywhere else in the world. In the pastoral plains where Indigenous peoples lived in harmony with the natural world, patches of native river cane that once provided habitat for now-extinct passenger pigeons and Carolina parakeets can begin to thrive once again.

These pockets of rich biodiversity make the Chattooga watershed one of the best places in North America to restore a thriving native ecosystem that can help mitigate and adapt the effects of climate change. To truly heal this watershed’s national forest lands, we must abandon the driving forces of exploitation that almost destroyed this remarkable place, and act upon the lessons of Indigenous people who, over millennia, lived in harmony with nature.



Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians artisan Jim Long selects mature river cane for harvesting at a native cane restoration site along the Chattooga River. The cane can be used to make baskets, blowguns, and other items of importance in Cherokee culture.

Photo by Dana Cochran, courtesy Cherokee Preservation Foundation

In practice, this will require the agencies that manage our public lands to include Indigenous voices in decision-making conversations and an expansion of legislation designed to protect and acknowledge Indigenous lands. Furthermore, prioritizing the reestablishment of the old-growth forests which once thrived within the watershed and cultivating plants such as native river cane, used in a variety of Cherokee artisan work, are ventures essential to repairing the effects of colonialism on the Chattooga watershed. While it is paramount that entities like the USFS initiate these movements, citizens hold the power to challenge them to do so. Demanding that principles of ecological respect and balance be incorporated into the ethos of our watershed’s public land management is a promising path for beginning to honor the traditions and civilizations that were torn away from the land they stewarded for thousands of years.

REFERENCE LIST

for "Indigenous Land Stewardship of the Chattooga Watershed: What We Can Learn" available at: <https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/>



THE WILD & SCENIC BACKSTORY

HOW THE CHATTOOGA BECAME A PROTECTED RIVER

Isabel Blue

Fifty years on, the Chattooga River's Wild & Scenic status feels like a fundamental fact of life, but there was a time when this designation seemed anything but certain. It took the persistent dedication of several key individuals and a rising tide of public support to enshrine the quarter-mile river corridor along the Chattooga River as a protected national asset.

EARLY THREATS

In 1967, the Wild & Scenic Rivers (WSR) Act was gaining momentum towards passage in Congress, becoming law on October 2, 1968. The bill would ultimately designate an "instant eight" rivers as part of the new WSR System and name an additional 27 rivers for potential future addition.

Although the Chattooga clearly met the designation requirements (free-flowing character plus several "outstandingly remarkable values"¹), it was not considered for immediate approval as one of the "instant eight" because it lacked an official study by the Department of Agriculture or Department of Interior (Saylor, 1968).



A glimpse of recreation on the Chattooga in 1964, a decade before designation.

Photo credit: Bluford W. Muir; from USFS Archives

Meanwhile, threats to the river's ecological integrity seemed to be closing in from all sides. Construction had just begun on Duke Energy's Keowee-Toxaway Project, which would inundate portions of the Keowee, Toxaway, Thompson, Horsepasture, and Whitewater Rivers² under present-day Lake Jocassee and Lake Keowee. This new impoundment meant that in the upper reaches of the Savannah River Basin,

the Chattooga and Chauga alone remained free-flowing, precariously perched between the half-century-old Tallulah River dam system to the west in GA, and the encroaching inundation of the Keowee-Toxaway Project to the east in SC. Conservationists worried that dam construction along the Chattooga could be next (Sloan, 1966).³

Overcrowding was another concern. After decades as a forgotten river—or perhaps, a gate-kept local secret—the Chattooga had begun to attract regional visitors. Its trout-stocked fishing holes were advertised in local newspapers, summer camps from Western NC took expeditions in the watershed, and the burgeoning popularity of whitewater sports in the Southeast brought a new wave of recreationists to the river. Even more visitors were expected in the future: President Johnson had just signed a bill to extend the Blue

Ridge Parkway from its existing terminus in NC to a point just north of Marietta, GA (Whisnant et al., 2013). The proposed extension would have passed near Whiteside Mountain, at the headwaters of the Chattooga River.⁴ Public land managers and conservationists alike worried about a potential flood of visitors from this new attraction and wondered how infrastructure would stand up to the strain.

Finally, there was the threat from within: by late October 1967, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) had completed construction on Burrell's Ford Bridge, allowing the agency to open a large swath of public land to timber harvesting ("Sumter," 1967). As Greenville, SC, conservationist

1. Outstandingly Remarkable Values (ORVs) may include "scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values" (Wild and Scenic Rivers [WSR] Act, 1968, SEC. 1(b)).

2. The impoundment also buried the archaeological sites of historic Keowee, a former Cherokee town, and Fort Prince George, a former European settler military and trading outpost (Jocassee Real Estate Co., Inc., n.d.).

3. Numerous potential dam sites were considered along the Chattooga, with up to 4 reservoirs proposed in studies from 1944-1970 (Forest Service [USFS], 1973).

4. This extension never materialized. It stalled in the early 70s due to commercial development in the proposed route plus environmental and cost concerns. In the late 60s, however, its anticipated impact was a crucial consideration in regional planning.

THE WILD & SCENIC BACKSTORY

C. Thomas “Tommy” Wyche reflected bitterly at the time, “It is ironic to me that with the thousands of years the Chattooga River has been there, my efforts to have it declared a wilderness area coincide within a space of several months with the National Forest Service efforts to have it opened up for logging purposes” (C. T. Wyche, personal communication, November 7, 1967).

Seven years after this despairing remark, the Chattooga River would be added to the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act. What transformed the bleak outlook, that perfect storm of coalescing threats, from November 1967 to the Chattooga’s designation on May 10, 1974?

KEY EARLY PLAYERS

First, there were the interventions of several individuals who turned their concern for the Chattooga into action. Wyche, for one, sought out allies in conservation, writing letters to state and national representatives, and delivering presentations in support of the Chattooga’s designation. Another powerful advocate in South Carolina was Ted Snyder, Chairman of the Carolinas Group of the Sierra Club, who, among other efforts, recruited support by leading canoe excursions on the river.

Meanwhile, on the Georgia side, Robert “Bob” Hanie, executive director of the Georgia Council for the Preservation of Natural Areas, helped mediate discussions about the Chattooga’s conservation, including an informal “seminar” in November 1968 in Dillard, GA, “to plot ways to have the Chattooga included in the top category of the scenic rivers bill now pending in Congress” (Sparks, 1968).

From the North Carolina contingent, Fritz Orr, Jr., executive director at Camp Merrie-Woode in Sapphire, NC, facilitated many crucial canoe trips down the Chattooga to drive home its eligibility. As evident across these conservationists’ efforts, the captivating nature of the Chattooga River was an important selling point, and field trips (camping, canoeing, and fishing) were central to the campaign for designation.

Beyond individual players, entire user groups and organizations participated in the effort. Whitewater paddling

organizations were crucial advocates: the newly formed Georgia Canoe Association connected several individuals to the cause, and later, commercial rafting companies would likewise draw attention to and espouse the designation.

Meanwhile, summer camps in Western NC produced many canoeing experts whose support was critical in achieving designation. In fact, when Bob Hanie organized a trip down Chattooga Section II for then GA governor Lester Maddox in 1969, Fritz Orr, Jr. and fellow camp instructor Hugh Caldwell served as guides. [Notably, young female campers accounted for all other canoeing experts on that trip (Bryans, 1969).]

Another ally to the cause was Trout Unlimited, whose SC president L. Jerome Alexandre expressed early in the designation effort, “It appears to me that you canoeists and T.U. want pretty close to the same thing” (Alexandre, 1968). Trout fishermen, facing the loss of cold-water trout habitat from the Keowee-Toxaway impoundment, wanted to prevent similar inundation on the Chattooga. Moreover, state agencies had a tradition of trout stocking along the Chattooga to meet demands of recreational fishers.

Further, several local and national environmental organizations advocated to have the Chattooga designated Wild & Scenic. Such groups included the Izaak Walton League, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, and the newly established Georgia Conservancy.

Adding to this growing chorus, it became evident that even in the business sector, interests aligned in favor of the Chattooga’s WSR designation: Georgia Power Company, which owned about 40% of the potential river corridor at the time, did not intend to pursue dam construction on the Chattooga, believing that its hydroelectric development would be “marginal” (Harrell, 1970).⁵ Instead, the company supported inclusion in the WSR Act and was amenable to conveying their Chattooga River land ownership to the USFS through sale or exchange. Later, federal hydropower interests would also back away from dam projects on the Chattooga River: a district engineer from the Army Corps of Engineers allayed many conservationists’ fears when he issued a public statement in 1970 supporting the Chattooga’s designation.

"It is ironic to me that with the thousands of years the Chattooga River has been there, my efforts to have it declared a wilderness area coincide within a space of several months with the National Forest Service efforts to have it opened up for logging purposes."

-Tommy Wyche, 1967

5. For context, see “How the Drought of 1925 Saved the Chattooga River” in *Chattooga Quarterly*, Winter 2018/2019.

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WILD & SCENIC RIVERS ACT OPENS THE DOOR

Diffuse conservation efforts focused towards a single path after the National Wild & Scenic Rivers Act was signed into law on October 2, 1968, naming the Chattooga one of its 27 “study rivers.” The first step? A USFS study (as required by the Act) to determine eligibility for designation. During this process, it would be important to shore up public support and subsequently convince Congress to approve adding the Chattooga River to the new WSR System.

On December 5, 1969, the first of two “public listening sessions” about the Chattooga’s WSR designation took place in Highlands, NC. The overwhelming majority of attendees favored designation, but some local participants expressed concern about what they saw as a government “land grab” and emphasized private development rights (Sargent, 1969).

The second public listening session took place in Clayton, GA, on March 17, 1970, corresponding with the release of USFS’ *Proposal: The Chattooga*, “a wild and scenic river.” The *Proposal* broached an important concern about Stekoa Creek: initial pollution surveys indicated sky-high counts of *E. coli* from this major tributary, which enters the Chattooga on Section IV approximately 3 miles upstream from Lake Tugalo. Bacteria loads from the City of Clayton’s sewage discharge into Stekoa Creek made all waters downstream of the Stekoa confluence (including the famous Five Falls) ineligible for “wild” or “scenic” river status. Designation of this stretch of the Chattooga therefore hinged on a new sewage treatment plant under construction in Clayton. The USFS *Proposal* suggested a “conditional” status for lower Section IV, provided the city sewage plant would clean up bacterial loads in Stekoa Creek (USFS, 1970).

Over the study period, USFS regional staff also pursued public land acquisition to facilitate designation. Private land in a WSR area was not disqualifying, but it would complicate administration. Consequently, the USFS entered into a pivotal land exchange agreement with Georgia Power, committing to trade USFS land around Georgia Power’s North Georgia lakes in exchange for around 9,000 acres of land along the Chattooga River.⁶ With this acquisition, completed by the end of 1972, approximately **85% of the proposed WSR Corridor became public lands administered by the USFS** (USFS, 1973).

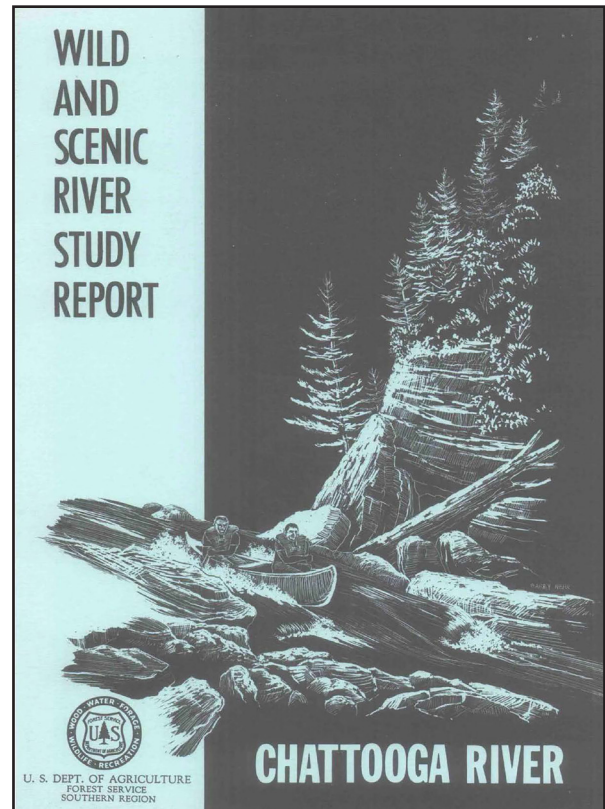
Given the mounting public and private support for designation, the State legislatures of GA, NC, and SC each ratified resolutions endorsing WSR status for the Chattooga River in 1971. While these resolutions were critical, designation still relied on an act of Congress.



Transformative legislation: President Lyndon B. Johnson signing the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act in 1968.

Image from Rivers.gov.

On June 15, 1971, USFS published results from their study in the *Chattooga River Wild and Scenic Study Report*, recommending designation, and the governors of all three states subsequently added their approval. The most sounding endorsement came from GA governor Jimmy Carter, who not only supported the Chattooga’s addition to the WSR System, but urged specific provisions designed to strengthen the river’s protection (Carter, 1971).



USFS published the Wild and Scenic River Study Report for the Chattooga River on June 15, 1971.

6. Of the 9,000 acres obtained by USFS, approximately 5,700 acres fell within the proposed WSR Corridor boundary.

THE WILD & SCENIC BACKSTORY

A LULL IN PROGRESS, A BOOM IN POPULARITY

Progress on the Chattooga proposal temporarily stalled from late 1971 through mid 1973, during which time several changes swept over the river: Wildwater Limited became the first commercial rafting company to offer trips down the Chattooga, followed soon after by Nantahala Outdoor Center (NOC) and Southeastern Expeditions. James Dickey's novel, *Deliverance*, became a blockbuster movie released on July 30, 1972.⁷ Whitewater scenes from that movie (filmed on the Chattooga) catapulted both whitewater sports in general, and the Chattooga River in particular, into the national consciousness. Meanwhile, the 1972 Summer Olympics in Munich, Germany, became the first Olympic Games to feature whitewater events, further amplifying paddling sports. The Chattooga River's popularity soared.

Throughout this year and a half, it was important to maintain public momentum for designation. Enter Doug Woodward and Dr. Claude Terry, whitewater paddlers and co-founders of Southeastern Expeditions. These two guided Governor Jimmy Carter in an iconic canoe trip down the Chattooga's Section III, in August 1972. Although Carter was already an advocate for WSR designation, this trip helped focus statewide attention on the issue.

CONGRESS TAKES ACTION

Legend has it, the exact legislation that would finally add the Chattooga to the National Wild & Scenic Rivers System germinated from one well-placed nudge by another key player: businessman and Chattooga whitewater enthusiast



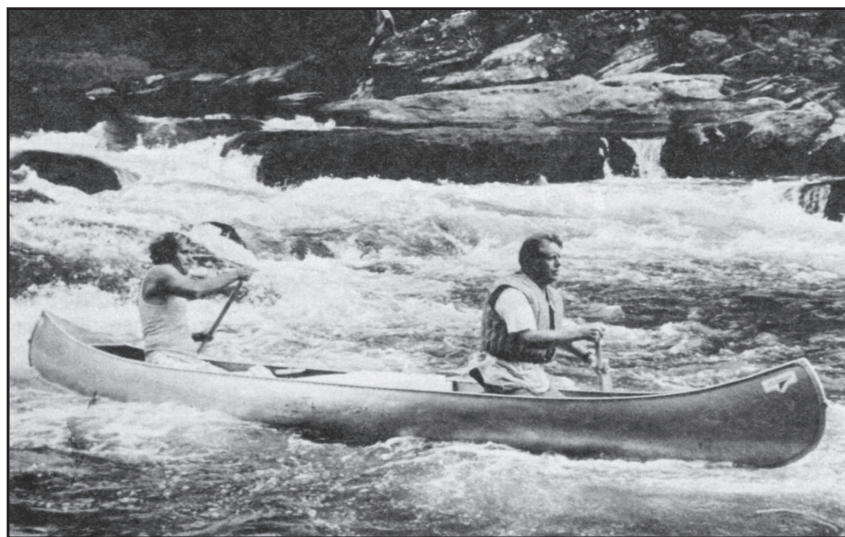
*Filming **Deliverance**, 1971. Visitation to the Chattooga increased dramatically after the film's 1972 release.*

Ervin Jackson. Jackson, meeting NC Representative Roy A. Taylor one day on a golf course, encouraged the congressman to author the Chattooga's designation bill (Gary, 1973). Taylor introduced H.R. 9492, co-sponsored by William Jennings Bryan Dorn and James Mann (SC), and Phil Landrum (GA), on July 23, 1973.

To drum up support for the bill, legislators Mann and Taylor, as well as other members of the National Parks and Recreation Subcommittee, agreed to a rafting trip down the Chattooga on August 7, 1973. Other attendees included Ervin Jackson, as well as Dr. Gordon Howard, a Clemson professor and avid Chattooga conservationist who had conducted one of the first studies of Chattooga water quality back in 1969.

Reporters and representatives from various canoe associations flocked to the event; there were so many guests that the group split into two commercial trips.

The night before the excursion, torrential rains created some concern about river safety and road conditions, but both groups still elected to launch the next day at Thrifts Ferry, on a muddy and rising river. The first group, led by Jim Greiner, founder of Wildwater Ltd—with other guides including Jeanette Greiner, safety kayaker Dr. Claude Terry, and young kayaking phenomenon Kim Goertner—ran the entire planned trip down to Woodall Shoals; while the second group, led by NOC founder Payson Kennedy, took out early at Highway 76 due to rising water.⁸ The legislators emerged from the trip deeply impressed by the power of the



Jimmy Carter and Claude Terry run Painted Rock Rapid, August 1972. Carter was an emphatic and consistent advocate for the Chattooga's WSR designation.

Photo credit: Doug Woodward/American Rivers

7. Dickey was another early advocate for the Chattooga. Reportedly, the author capitalized on a 1970 visit to the SC State Capitol to urge Governor Robert E. McNair to support WSR designation.

8. The river had reached 3 feet on the USGS gauge, an unprecedented level for such early commercial trips.

THE WILD & SCENIC BACKSTORY

Chattooga. Said Representative Paul W. Cronin, from MA, “I don’t believe you’ll have difficulty getting our support. It was one of the finest experiences of my life” (Gary, 1973).

After the rafting trip, progress on WSR designation flowed (more or less) smoothly through the legislative course. Public hearings were held in Washington D.C. on October 29, 1973. Claude Terry, Ervin Jackson, and Ted Snyder were among those who testified in favor of the Chattooga’s designation, along with NC canoeing pioneer Frank D. Bell and Margaret Tucker, president of the Georgia Canoeing Association (*WSR Act Amendments*, 1974). Among government agencies, only the Federal Power Commission opposed.⁹ With endorsements already on the record from the state legislatures and governors of GA, NC, and SC, passage was a matter of procedure.

Finally, after years of dedicated efforts from conservationists, whitewater enthusiasts, fishermen, and other invested individuals and groups, Public Law 93-279 was signed into effect on May 10, 1974, amending the list of approved rivers in the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act to include the Chattooga River (and 7.3 miles of the river’s West Fork). In addition to a general description of the new WSR area, the Act stipulated funding parameters for further land acquisition and development (Act designating the Chattooga, 1974).¹⁰

NEXT STEPS

According to WSR Act requirements, USFS would create and publish more detailed plans for the newly designated corridor: these became the 1976 Classification, Boundaries, and Development Plan and the 1977 *Chattooga Wild and Scenic River Management Plan* (revised 1980). Further regulations, like floating permit, camping, and motorized access rules, were published as Forest Service “Orders,” later codified in the Code of Federal Regulations in 1978.

While it’s tempting to draw a line under the Chattooga River’s 1974 WSR designation, no system is static. The



NC Congressman Taylor and other participants in the 1973 legislative raft trip running the Chattooga River at high water.

Photo courtesy of Wildwater, Ltd.

Chattooga’s addition to the Wild & Scenic Rivers System delineated certain protections, while leaving other issues unresolved. Management plans would be made and remade, land ownership would shift, recreational demands would grow, and entities from private developers to the USFS would form and transform plans for land and water use that couldn’t be imagined 50 years ago.

The idea put forth by one journalist in 1969 that the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act would function “somewhat like a time capsule” feels naive, if aspirational (Sargent, 1969). Change is constant; therefore, the conservation effort surrounding the Chattooga River watershed is never complete. In order to remain true to the spirit of the Chattooga’s WSR designation, we must exercise vigilance. If we, like the early advocates for protecting the Chattooga River, keep reaching out to broaden our conservation coalition, who knows what strides we can make in the years to come.

REFERENCE LIST

for “The Wild & Scenic Backstory: How the Chattooga Became a Protected River” available at: <https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/>



9. The FPC, predecessor of today’s FERC, was interested in the Chattooga’s hydropower potential and did not want to eliminate the possibility of future dam construction. In a bid at compromise, the agency proposed inundating “approximately one-half of the river reach,” leaving the other half free-flowing (Nassikas, 1971). This proposal would have submerged Sections III and IV of the Chattooga River.

10. Congress tacked on a handful of other, unrelated WSR Act amendments to the Chattooga bill; these largely beneficial provisions strengthened protections offered to “study rivers” under the Act (Thomas & Diedrich, 2014).

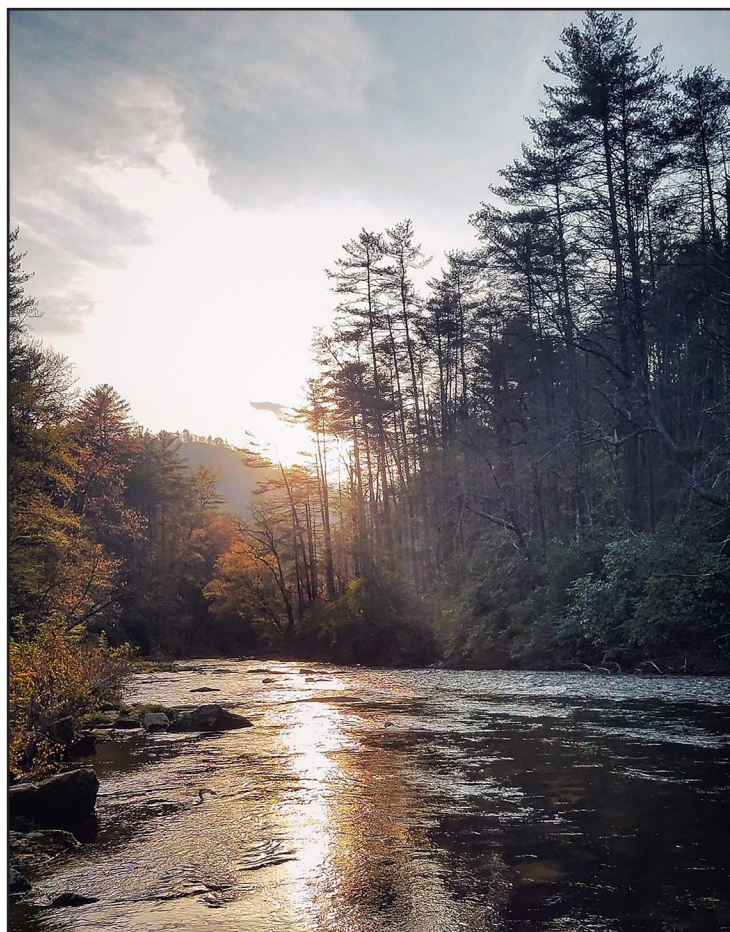
IMPACTS

WHAT DID THE CHATTOOGA RIVER'S WILD & SCENIC DESIGNATION DO?

- ◇ Wild & Scenic River (WSR) designation preserved the **free-flowing** nature of approximately 57 river miles on the Chattooga's two main branches: the main stem of the Chattooga River from Cashiers, NC to Lake Tugalo (about 50 miles); and about 7 miles of the West Fork, from 1.3 miles above Three Forks in GA down to its Chattooga River confluence (Act designating the Chattooga, 1974). Streambed alteration and bedrock modification were also prohibited.
- ◇ Geographic boundaries were established in 1976 for the Chattooga's **Wild & Scenic Corridor** extending about 1/4-mile on each side of the river (16,424 total acres). Management directives within the Corridor aimed to "protect and enhance the values" for which the Chattooga was recognized (Chattooga Development Plan, 1976, p. 11849). For instance, commercial timber harvesting was prohibited, and most motorized use was curtailed. *However, these resource protections extended only as far as the designated corridor boundaries.*
- ◇ Designation prioritized **water quality**, encouraging "measures to reduce causes of siltation and turbidity from tributaries and the river," and prohibiting solid waste disposal within the Corridor boundary (Chattooga Development Plan, 1976, p. 11850). Management directives acknowledged that tributary waters flowing into WSR segments from outside the protected boundary must be addressed, although they were rather fuzzy on specifics.
- ◇ The **U.S. Forest Service (USFS)** was given **administrative authority** over the newly designated WSR area, which later enabled them to implement a permit system and enforce safety regulations for the river. Beginning July 1, 1975, the Sumter National Forest Supervisor (SC) was assigned the lead in administering the tenants of the National WSR Act, in coordination with the Nantahala (NC) and Chattahoochee (GA) National Forests.
- ◇ Federal **funding appropriations** accompanied designation for public land acquisition and infrastructure development in the new WSR Area. Thanks to these funds, USFS acquired hundreds more acres in the Chattooga watershed, which, as public land, became insulated from the ecological harm of private development. USFS also used the funds to establish parking areas outside the Corridor boundary and create new trail segments, many of which would ultimately combine to become the Chattooga River Trail.
- ◇ Finally, as required by the WSR Act, USFS classified the entire river into **wild, scenic, or recreational** segments by 1976. These tiers of protection corresponded to the levels of development and access in each segment at the time of designation. "Wild" river areas denote the least evidence of human development and/or access (and thus benefit from the highest protection), while "recreational" areas have the most development/access (and least protection). Note: these segments *do not align* with the numerical "Sections II, III & IV" commonly used by the whitewater community and others to describe the river. *For a map of the "wild," "scenic," and "recreational" sections of Chattooga River, refer to the back cover of this issue.*

REFERENCE LIST

for "Impacts: What did the Chattooga's Wild & Scenic Designation do?" available at: <https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/>



Sunset on Chattooga River Section I, near Licklog Creek confluence.

Photo credit: David Sibilio

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

WORKING TO PROTECT THE CHATTOOGA RIVER, 1974–TODAY

Isabel Blue

The conservation triumph of the Chattooga's Wild & Scenic River (WSR) designation was a remarkable achievement from across a broad coalition of advocates. Yet as the Chattooga's management continues to evolve, optimizing protection for this unique river corridor remains difficult.

The Chattooga's "outstandingly remarkable values" (ORVs) establish the parameters for evaluating protection. These are the river corridor's geologic, biologic, scenic, recreation, and historic values. Ongoing threats to the Chattooga's ORVs originate from both national forest and private land management activities, against which the slender WSR corridor protection can seem frighteningly fragile. Encouragingly, however, interwoven through the history of persistent and evolving threats to the Wild & Scenic Chattooga are significant conservation successes, which have helped preserve the river and its WSR corridor, while highlighting the importance of continued advocacy. What follows is by no means a comprehensive discussion, but rather a sampling of the issues that have jeopardized the Chattooga's ecological integrity in the 50 years since designation, with references to actions taken by the Chattooga Conservancy and other conservationists to address these threats.

LIMITED SCOPE

The most obvious challenge inherent in the Chattooga's WSR designation is its limited area compared to the watershed as a whole. At 16,424 acres, the WSR Corridor constitutes **less than 10%** of the Chattooga's approximately 178,000-acre watershed.

Why is the Chattooga's WSR protection so limited? For one thing, the 1968 Wild & Scenic Rivers Act confines its protections to *no more than 320 acres per river mile*. The Chattooga River's designated corridor largely follows natural ridgelines and averages 288 acres per river mile (Chattooga Development Plan, 1976). Moreover, designation covers *only the Chattooga's main stem and West Fork*. As a result, Chattooga watershed area *unprotected* by either WSR status or Wilderness Area designation totals approximately 152,000 acres,¹ of which about 100,000 acres is public land.

The high proportion of public land in the watershed undoubtedly contributes to the ORVs of the Chattooga River, but most national forest land outside of the WSR boundary is constantly subjected to Forest Service timber harvesting,

road construction, and other intensive management projects. Meanwhile, private land in the watershed is vulnerable to development and its oftentimes negative impacts on environmental quality and ecological connectivity.



Intensive timber harvesting and clearcutting under the guise of "ecological restoration" occurs on national forest lands bordering the WSR corridor.

Photo of USFS "Loblolly Pine Removal Project" along Turkey Ridge Road. Credit: Buzz Williams

The division between the Chattooga's WSR corridor and the rest of the watershed was a given under the limitations of the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act, but it is artificial – the entire watershed ecosystem is interconnected and interdependent. Effects of poor land management practices outside the WSR boundary impact the ecological integrity of the WSR corridor. (Learn about the importance of ecosystem connectivity in "The Future of Chattooga Watershed Conservation," p. 19.) For this reason, the Chattooga Conservancy's mission encompasses a watershed-scale approach, integrating advocacy for the WSR corridor and the rest of the watershed.

WATER QUALITY

The interconnectedness of the Chattooga watershed and WSR Corridor is perhaps most evident in water quality issues. There are known red flags in the Chattooga's water quality; for example, poor water quality in Stekoa Creek was an issue during designation—and still is. Further, the states of GA and SC have classified several tributaries to the Chattooga as "impaired" (polluted) from excessive levels of fecal coliform

1. Ellicott Rock Wilderness and the Overflow Wilderness Study Area offer protection to about 10,000 additional acres of watershed area outside the WSR corridor, bringing the total protected area within the Chattooga watershed to approximately 26,000 acres.

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

bacteria and sediment. More recently, escalating private land development and disturbance in the Chattooga's NC headwaters has degraded water quality from excessive erosion and sediment runoff. Finally, specific facilities, such as the wastewater treatment plants in Cashiers, NC and Clayton, GA, are permitted to discharge treated sewage into the Chattooga drainage. *For locations of impaired tributaries and permitted wastewater discharges, see the map on this issue's back cover.*



Sediment-laden point source discharge into Fowler Creek, 2020. Chattooga Conservancy challenged this pollution with a successful Clean Water Act lawsuit.

Photo by Buzz Williams

direct action, monitoring the water quality of several Chattooga tributaries using Adopt-a-Stream methods.

Threats to water quality are constant and ever-changing. Vigilant local engagement is necessary to prompt and ensure state and local agencies cite point source polluters, enforce meeting nonpoint source standards, and turn stream improvement goals into realities. While the burden is heavy, the Chattooga Conservancy is committed to unrelenting action, and our members are a critical asset in noticing and reporting water quality violations.

The Clean Water Act of 1972, which mandated water quality standards for all surface waters in the United States, is a potential reconciliation here. The Act aims to reduce both point source pollution (specific, localized discharge, like from a wastewater treatment plant) and nonpoint source pollution (diffuse discharge, like stormwater runoff). More stringent thresholds exist for "outstanding resource waters" such as the Chattooga's headwaters in NC. Crucially, however, meeting these standards relies upon vigorous action by the state and local agencies charged with enforcement; in reality, these entities often fall short or fail to act entirely when problems arise.

Thus, the burden of monitoring and holding regulatory entities accountable for water quality standards, and intervening to implement solutions, often falls to individuals and organizations eager to promote clean water. For instance, when a Cashiers development caused massive erosion and sedimentation into Fowler Creek, a NC tributary to the river, the Chattooga Conservancy allied with a private landowner and a pro-bono attorney to prevail in a Clean Water Act lawsuit (2022). Litigation, however, is a last resort in the fight to maintain clean water. The Chattooga Conservancy also works to restore impaired water quality under an EPA grant program that involves developing and implementing "Watershed Management Plans" (WMPs), and to date has completed WMPs for the Stekoa Creek and Warwoman Creek watersheds in GA. WMPs are critical to the stream improvement process; they move the needle forward from *identifying water quality problems* towards *enacting solutions* by enabling future water quality improvement projects—such as restoring eroded streambanks, installing green infrastructure, repairing septic systems, etc.—to qualify for competitive state and federal funding. As resources allow, the Chattooga Conservancy also takes

ACCESS

Where water quality links the entire Chattooga watershed, a different, yet equally persistent challenge pertains specifically to the Wild & Scenic corridor. Because remoteness and a sense of solitude were major reasons for the inclusion of the Chattooga River into the WSR system, *access* is a prominent and often delicate issue within the corridor. Post designation, the Chattooga has been periodically embroiled in contentious debates over what private and commercial special uses are permitted within its reaches and how access would be obtained. Many groups whose collaboration was essential in achieving WSR status later found themselves at odds in these debates. Increased river visitation continues to heighten tensions, as overuse threatens to degrade the ORVs for which the Chattooga was originally designated.



The Low Water Bridge across Section II was an early access point, dismantled after WSR designation.

Photo courtesy of Rabun County Historical Society

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Road Closure Disputes: A few months after designation, on October 1, 1974, USFS closed motorized access within the WSR Corridor, converting portions of prior jeep roads to hiking trails (“Chattooga Accesses,” 1974). While motorized closures were supported by many recreationalists, others were frustrated, having been accustomed to direct vehicle access to the riverbanks. USFS received numerous complaints about the policy, and there were instances of arson attributed to protest over road access (Oney, 1976).

Meanwhile, despite contradicting the Chattooga’s 1976 WSR

Development Plan, the two county roads leading to Earl’s Ford and Sandy Ford in Georgia remained open. Forest Service authors of the Plan understood Rabun County must volunteer to close these roads, since the original Wild & Scenic Rivers Act (1968) did not override “existing rights of any State, including the right of access” to rivers in the System (WSR Act, SEC. 13(f)). The 1976 directives therefore outlined an intention to close Earl’s and Sandy Ford roads *when allowed*. In 1982, Rabun County Commissioners denied the Forest Supervisor’s road closure request, and the goals of the 1976 Plan went unrealized.

Over the subsequent decades, and especially at Earl’s Ford, ever-increasing vehicle traffic has caused major damage along the GA riverbank and throughout the surrounding landscape inside the WSR Corridor. Trash has accumulated, with anything from plastic garbage to human waste left behind. During this time, environmental degradation creeping outward from the Earl’s Ford access road continued unchecked by USFS managers. Today, thanks to the Warwoman WMP authored by the Chattooga Conservancy, USFS has finally recognized the environmental damage occurring along the Earl’s Ford Road and its terminus at the river. USFS is working to rehabilitate the land and is making much-needed progress to address decades of soil, water, and biological degradation.

User Group Disputes: A more complex access challenge centers on user group disputes, though this discussion will focus on only one example. Even

as whitewater groups played a crucial role in achieving designation, unsurprisingly, perhaps, the Chattooga saw an overwhelming explosion of boaters over the 1970s. Floating use surged from an estimated 300 users in 1969 to nearly 37,000 in 1979 (Craig & Lindenboom, 1979). Commercial rafting companies accounted for a great deal of this growth, with commercial use-days surpassing use by private boaters starting in 1976. Much of this increased use was perhaps inevitable, but from the perspective of local residents and fishing enthusiasts, the Chattooga’s WSR designation was tied to a swarm of new boating users.



Severe damage to the river bank has occurred from vehicle access to Earl’s Ford on the GA side of the Chattooga River.

Photo from April 2021, by Nicole Hayler

In 1975, the Forest Service instituted floating safety regulations, limits on commercial river use, and a permit system for boaters (“New Boating Regulations,” 1975; Craig & Lindenboom, 1979). These new rules aimed to mitigate a surge in river fatalities and ideally, preserve the WSR experience for participants. In 1978, the permit system for private and commercial floating use was codified in the Code of Federal Regulations. While limits on the number of private boating permits were once discussed as a future possibility, this never materialized.



Early Chattooga rafting. Whitewater use on the Chattooga River dramatically increased in the decades after designation.

Image from USFS Chattooga WSR “Proposal,” 1970

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Initially, floating permits only applied to sections of the river downstream of Highway 28 (i.e., Sections II, III, IV, and the West Fork) because the 1976 Development Plan prohibited all floating use upstream of the Highway 28 Bridge (USFS, 2006). However, whitewater paddling and equipment innovations over the next decades meant that many more boaters were interested in attempting to float the upper Chattooga River by the 1990s. Controversy arose over access to these upper reaches, with the central disagreements between fishing interests, who valued the absence of boater disturbance in their stocked trout waters; a growing paddling contingent, who argued that floating restrictions unfairly limited public rights to the waterway; and the owners of a private tract spanning across the river, who contested boating access within this stretch. The issue came to a head in 2005 and led to years of contentious proceedings. In 2012, a USFS Environmental Assessment (EA) Decision Notice provided for floating access to the upper Chattooga River, subject to seasonal, flow, craft, and group size restrictions.



A kayaker descends the upper Chattooga, officially permitted (with restrictions) by a USFS decision in 2012.

Photo credit: Kevin Colburn - American Whitewater

In 2015, another EA evaluated creating new access in the headwaters for boating put-in locations. The Chattooga Conservancy was involved throughout this process and proposed an alternative, not supported by the opposing factions. We did, however, prevail in getting USFS to build rock steps for river access at the base of Bull Pen Bridge rather than pierce an invasive new trail through the Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area. The upper Chattooga access rules were finalized in late 2023; thus, management of the WSR corridor reached its most current iteration.

Conflicts over access and overcrowding will persist, however, as the Chattooga's beauty, unique ecology, and recreation opportunities continue to attract ever more visitors. It is important in all conversations about access to consider the carrying capacity of the land itself, or we risk destroying the very qualities that make it so compelling. USFS put it best in their 1970 *Proposal*:

“public demand cannot be used as a planning or regulating factor. To preserve the qualities that make the river suitable for inclusion in the System, the **saturation level** will be considered instead. Saturation level is defined as *that amount of recreation use which can be supported within the boundaries of the river without damage to or impairment of these qualities*” (p. 26, emphasis added).

RIVER SEGMENT CLASSIFICATION

Different standards of protection allocated to segments classified as “wild,” “scenic,” or “recreational” further complicate the Chattooga's WSR management. Chattooga segment designations were finalized in 1976 (*see back cover map*); once established, classifications have governed management and development in each segment going forward. These differences *matter*. For example, the “wild” segment classification of Bull Sluice rapid was critical in stopping a misguided, 1979 Forest Service proposal to construct a large rock retaining wall and observation platform at the top of the rapid's SC shoreline.²

Most of the Chattooga River is “wild,” with short sections of bridge crossings set as “scenic,” leaving three segments named merely “recreational.” Among these “recreational” segments is the Headwaters section—the first 5.5 miles of the river. While, according to USFS, “the Headwaters section provides some of the most dramatic scenery to be found on the river,” it was most likely downgraded to “recreational” class due to private land ownership within the WSR corridor (Chattooga Development Plan, 1976, p. 11848).



Early morning misty sun greets a solitary fly fisherman on the upper Chattooga.

Courtesy of Doug Adams - Rabun Trout Unlimited

2. This ill-conceived project was ultimately defeated by an informal group of river folk known as “Friends of the Chattooga,” which included individuals who later founded the Chattooga Conservancy (see “Bull Sluice: ‘The Rock Wall’” in *Chattooga Quarterly*, Fall 2009).

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In 1979, however, the Forest Service acquired a portion of the Headwaters section, spanning the Chattooga River on both sides from Green Creek to just above Norton Mill Creek. Because it can no longer be subdivided and developed, this 1.4-mile stretch of the Headwaters section is now more suited for management as a “wild” corridor segment. However, to date, requests by the Chattooga Conservancy urging reclassification have been tabled by the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest. Therefore, this outstanding segment of the Chattooga’s headwaters remains incongruously classified “recreational,” leaving it less insulated from potential development and degradation.



The 1.4-mile stretch of the Chattooga River between Green Creek and Norton Mill Creek should be reevaluated and reclassified as "wild."

Segment (re)classification is an ongoing issue. USFS land acquisition initiatives offer a unique opportunity to build increased protection for the Chattooga’s WSR corridor. But to optimize these important gains, USFS should act to revise outdated classifications, and redesignate the Green Creek to Norton Mill Creek section in alignment with its present public ownership and wild qualities.

THE TYRANNY OF SMALL DECISIONS

Finally, while certain limitations in the Chattooga’s WSR designation – such as its segment classifications, access disputes, and boundaries – have been present since designation, other vulnerabilities have arisen in the intervening decades, as the original WSR directives are revisited and revised. Individually, these changes seem small, but in aggregate, they constitute a threat.

Forest Plan Revisions: Many micro-degradations stem from the 2004 *Revised Land and Resource Management Plan, Sumter National Forest (Revised Plan)*, the most recent comprehensive set of management directives for the Chattooga. Take, for example, prescribed burning in the corridor: while no provisions addressed prescribed fire in the original plans for the Chattooga, the 2004 *Revised Plan* took advantage of this omission to **explicitly authorize prescribed fire**. Further, the 2004 *Revised Plan* rolled back

original blanket prohibitions on mineral leasing throughout the WSR Corridor, switching to more permissive standards based on segment classification.³

Bedrock Alteration: In addition to the 2004 *Revised Plan*, case-by-case reinterpretations of the Chattooga’s WSR management directives have the potential to eat away at its protections. For instance, there have been challenges to the original 1976 directive that “alteration of the stream bed or modification of bedrock will not be permitted” (Chattooga Development Plan, p. 11850). In one hugely controversial episode, the Forest Service authorized drilling holes in the river’s bedrock at Raven’s Rock to establish a temporary cofferdam during the 1999 recovery of drowning victim Rachel Trois.⁴ This was a renegade action, made under pressure from Senator Strom Thurmond, and ultimately unnecessary to the recovery. It indicates, however, how especially in moments of heightened emotions, tragic events, and unforeseen circumstances, single decisions could have enduring effects. Similar proposals to alter the Chattooga’s bedrock (notably at Crack-in-the-Rock rapid⁵ and in the previously mentioned Bull Sluice “wall” project) have arisen multiple times, and been beaten back multiple times, since use of the river corridor expanded in the 1970s. Ultimately, the Chattooga is a dangerous river, which cannot be sanitized for human safety without degrading the wild qualities for which it is prized.

3. The 2004 *Revised Plan* allows Federal mineral leasing in “scenic” and “recreational” area segments, subject to “a no surface occupancy (NSO) stipulation” and further, allows “mineral material authorizations” on “recreational” segments (pp. 3-16, 3-17).

4. See “Recovery at Raven Chute” in *Chattooga Quarterly*, Summer/Fall 1999.

5. See “CHATTOOGA the Dangerous River” in *Chattooga Quarterly*, Summer 1996.

THREATS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Many other proposed but unrealized actions in the Chattooga's WSR corridor over the past 50 years would have degraded the Chattooga's "Outstandingly Remarkable Values," if not for the intervention of conservationists, especially the Chattooga Conservancy. This litany of near misses further proves how fragile the river's protection can be:

Woodall Shoals Airport: In 1987, Rabun County officials proposed installing a local airport just outside the corridor boundary at Woodall Shoals. The proposed site was located on national forest land and would have involved a land exchange or special use permit from USFS. Additionally, airplanes using the site would pass directly over a "wild" area of the Chattooga corridor. USFS was ready to cooperate, and Rabun County even obtained a federal grant to study the site in 1988 (Holcombe; Horan, 1988). Thankfully, in 1990, the airport proposal was rejected due to public outcry, and the Rabun County Commissioners promised "to take no action to build an airport while they were in office" (Wallace, 1990).

Southern Appalachian Farmstead: In 2009, ill-advised development loomed again: the

"Southern Appalachian Farmstead" proposal aimed to create a tourist theme-park attraction out of the 19th-century Russell House farmstead along Section II in SC, involving parking lots, structures, and agricultural plowing adjacent to the river. The Chattooga Conservancy allied with overwhelming public opinion that such artificial and unnecessary development would be unsuitable inside a WSR Corridor, and the proposal was abandoned.⁶

Commercial Ultra Foot Race: In 2022, a commercial ultra foot race sought a USFS special use permit that would have brought about 400 participants into the WSR Corridor along the Chattooga River Trail and other protected public lands.

The Chattooga Conservancy was alerted by concerned citizens and, upon further inquiry, opposed the commercial venture as incompatible with management directives for the Chattooga's "wild" river areas. Subjected to increasing controversy and public scrutiny, USFS ultimately refused to permit the race course because it would have violated Wilderness Act (1964) rules pertaining to the Overflow Wilderness Study Area and Ellicott Rock Wilderness Area, and the ultra race was simply re-routed.

Clearly, without vigilance in adhering to WSR directives, collective management revisions and reinterpretations could

erode the Outstandingly Remarkable Values of the Chattooga River. Therein lies the need and indeed, the imperative, for continued advocacy. One of the primary goals of the Chattooga Conservancy is to align disparate factions together under a unified, watershed-scale focus. We exercise oversight over public land projects put forth by each U.S. Forest Service district, field concerns from private landowners, monitor private development, and attempt to balance the priorities of special use groups with preserving the natural ecological integrity of Chattooga watershed ecosystems. Your participation is crucial to these efforts, from attending public meetings like those

that stopped the Woodall Shoals airport; to voicing opinions to the USFS on issues like reclassification; to observing water quality and alerting the Chattooga Conservancy of changes within the watershed. We have achieved some remarkable accomplishments in the past decades, and together, we will continue to withstand future threats to our fragile, resilient, incomparable Chattooga River.

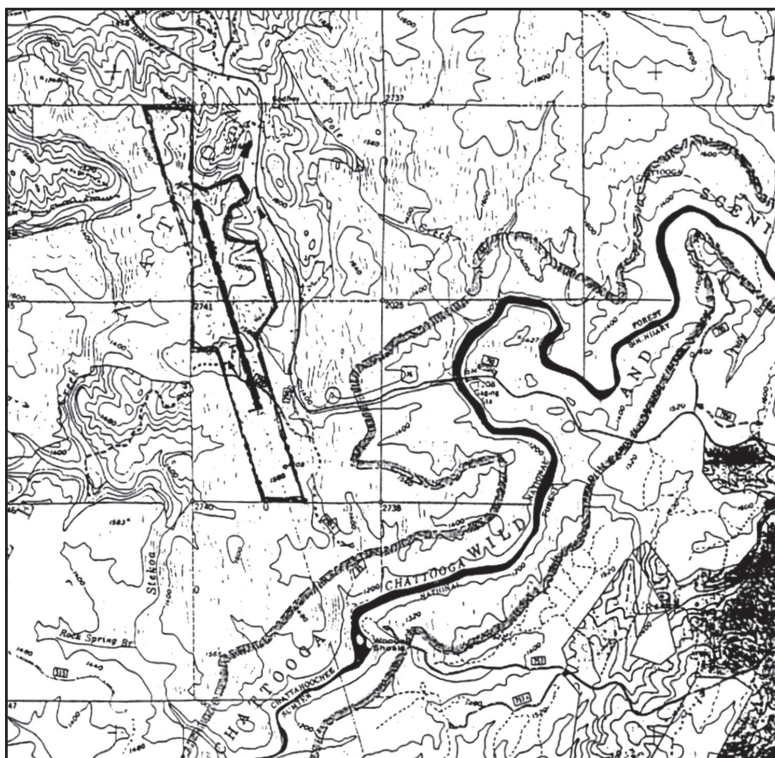


Diagram of the proposed Woodall Shoals Airport location, perpendicular to the Chattooga WSR corridor (1987).

Image from Associated Consulting Group

REFERENCE LIST

for "Threats and Accomplishments: Working to Protect the Chattooga River, 1974–Today" available at:

<https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/>



6. See "Watershed Update" in *Chattooga Quarterly*, Fall 2009.

THE FUTURE OF CHATTOOGA WATERSHED CONSERVATION

A CLIMATE CHANGE IMPERATIVE

Jasmine Williams

Today, fifty years after the Wild & Scenic Rivers Act bestowed its protections to the Chattooga, the river has maintained its reputation as the crown jewel of the Southeast's Wild & Scenic Rivers system. The Chattooga River corridor contains at least a dozen different ecosystem types; receives enough rainfall in the headwaters to be considered a temperate rainforest; and is home to rich and unique biological diversity, including many federally endangered species. Both locals and visitors alike flock to its banks year after year to experience what is perceived as one of America's few remaining wild places. But keeping it that way is an evolving battle.

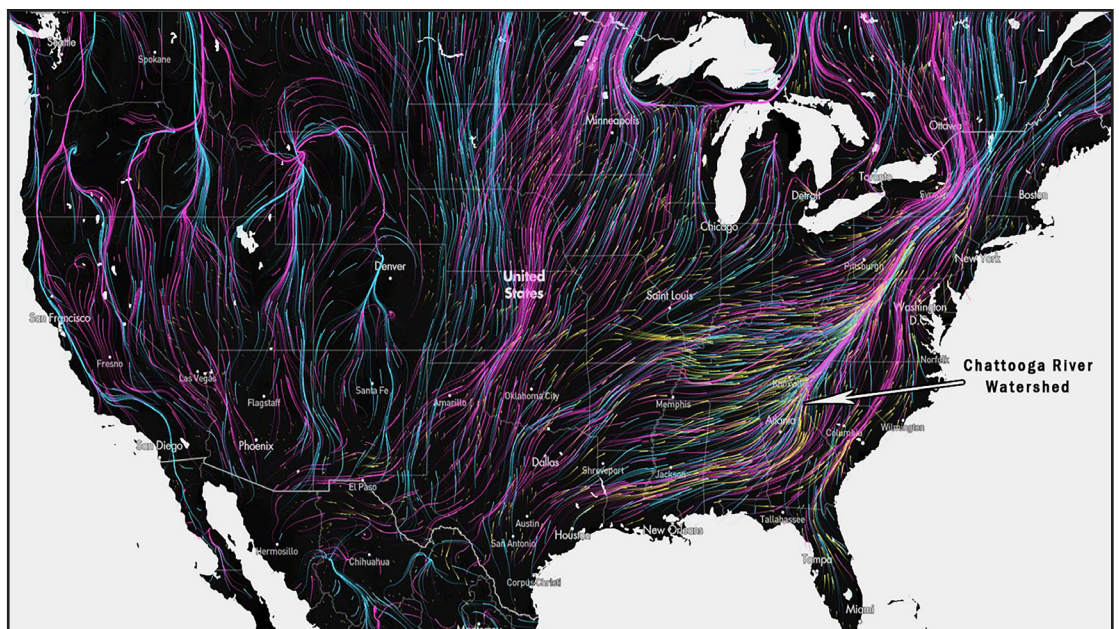
The threats that face our planet and the Chattooga today are far different than they were in 1974; as our world changes, the reasons for protecting the Chattooga, and the means by which we do so, must change as well. Fifty years ago, terms like "climate change" and "global warming" were not part of the conversation about why certain rivers should be preserved. In recent years, however, it has become increasingly clear that our conservation strategies must be rethought and revised to address these evolving and urgent challenges.

At the local level, it can be hard to imagine how a small area like the Chattooga River watershed could have any significant impact on a global issue like climate change. The watershed covers about 178,000 acres, with only a small portion—16,424 acres—protected by Wild & Scenic designation. Yet recent climate projections suggest that this relatively tiny watershed could be the keystone to climate change mitigation efforts in the Southeastern United States.

In 2024, the global temperature was 2.45° higher than the pre-industrial average, and a byproduct of this warming has been

tragically reflected by a skyrocketing species extinction rate (NASA, 2024). Some scientists predict that 33% of the world's plants and animals could go extinct by 2050—a percentage that will likely grow in the following years (National Parks Service, 2024).¹ If humanity proceeds on a "business as usual" path, even the most conservative climate models predict an average global temperature increase of about 3.5°. A global temperature shift of this magnitude would drastically affect Earth's ecosystems and leave our species with only two options: adapt to this rapidly changing world or die trying.

The majority of our planet's species have spent thousands of years adapting to survive within a specific temperature range and a specific seasonal cycle. But as the average annual temperature creeps upwards, many plants and animals are faced with a significantly warmer range. Global warming is taking place far quicker than the rate of adaptation. Therefore, many species are beginning to move or expand their habitat ranges to accommodate for climatic disruptions. Both projected and documented shifts in species ranges show that, in general, species in North America are moving northward to track cooler weather (Lawler, 2013). In the Southeastern United States, species have already been observed modifying their ranges in response to shifting climates, and the projected migratory paths of displaced species all seem to point to one place: the Blue Ridge Escarpment and the Chattooga River watershed.



Climate-driven migrations of birds, mammals and amphibians within the next 100 years.

Map created by The Nature Conservancy based on studies by J. J. Lawler et al. (2013) and J. L. McGuire et al. (2016)

1. Most estimates of species extinction due to climate change generally predict that 33% of species may die out before 2050. However, some projections range between 15% and 50% extinction, a variation that is mostly dependent on the success of climate change mitigation efforts.

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The Chattooga River watershed was most notably identified as an area likely to experience high concentrations of climate change-induced species migrations in a 2013 study by J. J. Lawler, which projected climate-driven shifts in the distributions of 2,903 vertebrate species in the Western Hemisphere for the next 100 years. It was determined that the relatively cool temperatures and diverse ecosystems of the Appalachians make them a key refuge for many different animals seeking new suitable habitats, and the Chattooga watershed serves as their southern gateway. In fact, this same study placed the Chattooga watershed within the top two most integral areas in the entire Western Hemisphere for facilitating species movement in the face of climate change (Lawler et al., 2013).²

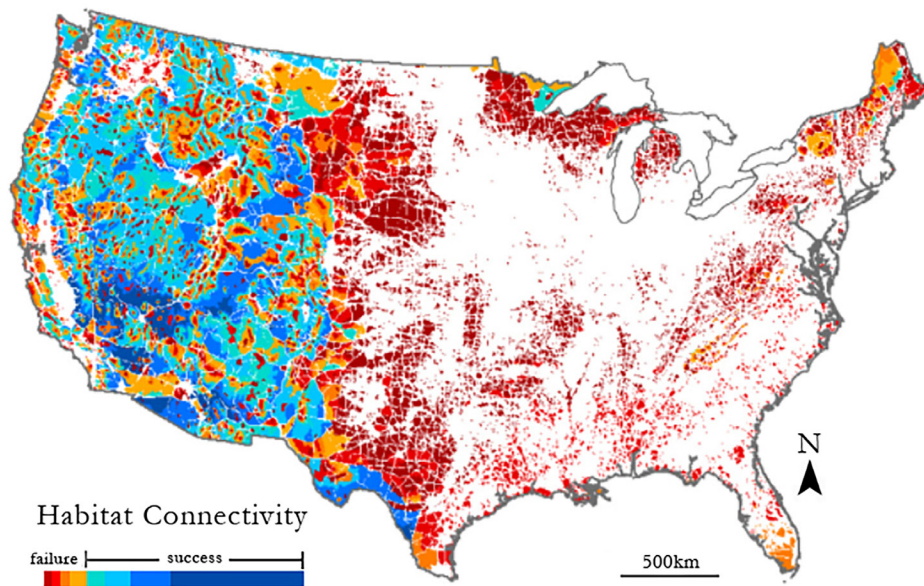
While a massive movement of species towards a single convergence point sounds dire, this does not mean the neighborhoods of the Chattooga River watershed will be flooded with climate refugees overnight. Much like climate change, species displacement is a slow, steadily occurring process that becomes noticeable through gradual shifts. Some

of these shifts, however, are already becoming apparent in the biota of the Southeast. Long-term range documentations of both migratory and non-migratory birds in the Southeast have recorded a colonization at the northern leading edge of breeding distributions beginning as early as the 1970s (Rushing et al., 2020).³ Although shifts such as these have been occurring at a slow rate, species displacement is predicted to become more intense in the future. Studies on the rate of tree migration due to climate change predict that many tree species in the Southeast will expand their northward ranges anywhere between 20 to 500 kilometers within the next 100 years (Iverson et al., 2004).⁴ Especially in a predicted epicenter of species movement like the Chattooga watershed, ecosystem management priorities must account for an impending influx if we hope to mitigate the disruption that climate change is inflicting on Earth's biota.

The largest obstacle between displaced species and a new habitat in the Southeast is both glaringly obvious and painstakingly widespread. For species to be able to track suitable habitats, they must be able to *move*. Currently,

organisms attempting to relocate must contend with a fragmented habitat, riddled with extensive agricultural landscapes, road networks, dammed rivers, and human settlements, to reach cooler and ecologically suitable climates. Recent estimates suggest that in the entirety of the Eastern United States, less than 2% of natural land area is sufficiently connected to accommodate climate change-fueled species movement (McGuire et al., 2016). This is one of the lowest habitat connectivity statistics in the entire Western Hemisphere. But despite this dismal statistic, there is still potential for change.

While the Southeast currently harbors a discouragingly small amount of well-connected natural land, it is also the area of the United States where habitat corridors could be the most effective at increasing habitat



Remaining natural land area in the contiguous United States and the success or failure of habitat patches to facilitate climate-driven species movements based on their connectivity. White areas are not considered natural land area due to a large degree of human influence.

Map adapted from the study "Achieving Climate Connectivity in a Fragmented Landscape" by J. L. McGuire et al. (2016)

2. The second area predicted to have high concentrations of species movement was the Atlantic Forest in Brazil (Lawler et al., 2013). It is worth noting that most areas identified by this study were "gateways" to mountain ranges, a trend that highlights the importance of prioritizing mountain ranges in species conservation efforts.

3. This northward range shift was exhibited by most temperate-wintering species. Neotropical migrants, however, have only experienced a *reduction* along the southern edge of their range, and have yet to exhibit any ability to expand their range northward, suggesting that neotropical migrants are particularly vulnerable to climate change (Rushing et al., 2020).

4. It is highly likely that tree species in the Southeast will migrate at least 20 km northward in the next 100 years. However, the predicted capability of species to expand their range farther than 20 km was largely dependent on species abundance. This study emphasizes that tree species with a lower abundance are far more likely to die out in the face of climate change (Iverson et al., 2004).

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connectivity. This is especially true for lowland areas ranging from Florida to the base of the Southern Appalachians. Connecting adjacent natural land areas with habitat corridors—even if these corridors were limited to 10 km—would increase habitat connectivity in the Eastern United States by 27%, which could mean the difference between survival and extinction for countless species (McGuire et al., 2016).⁵ This suggests that the impact of even a small area of natural land should not be underestimated or ignored in our fight against species extinction. Local-level conservation efforts hold more gravity than ever before, and in globally significant hubs for displaced species, like the Chattooga River watershed, the conservation and connection of even the smallest habitat fragments could be invaluable for species preservation.



Trees deemed unfit for lumber production left to rot atop Brushy Mountain, a small fragment of the old-growth ecosystem destroyed by the U.S. Forest Service's logging project.

Photo by Jasmine Williams

Now is the time to reassess our conservation measures with the oncoming effects of climate change in mind. Looming impacts of climate change on the region's ecosystems make it clear: safeguarding isolated corridors of habitat is not enough. Although the Chattooga's Wild & Scenic River (WSR) designation protects the river corridor, the vast majority of the surrounding watershed—where much of the critical ecosystem lies—still remains unprotected and at risk from clearcutting and poor land management (See “Threats and Accomplishments”). About 70% of the Chattooga watershed is publicly owned national forest, and unlike private land—which is harder to influence through environmental policy—the management of this public land could be the deciding factor in how the region adapts to climate change. The entire national forest must be afforded the same priority and preservation efforts that have been bestowed to the WSR corridor.

Unfortunately, this sentiment is not embodied by the current stewards of our national forests, the U.S. Forest Service (USFS). Despite strong opposition from environmental advocacy groups, the USFS continues to carry out intensive logging operations on public lands, many of which include the harvesting of mature and old-growth forests. Just last fall, USFS completed the logging of Brushy Mountain, a culling that decimated the plant and animal life of a prominent mountain in the Chattooga headwaters. Brushy Mountain was home to an ancient and complex old-growth ecosystem,

verified and studied by researchers from the Highlands Biological Station, and it held a population of imperiled green salamanders.⁶ These kinds of logging operations are counterintuitive to climate change mitigation efforts, not only because they are a means of habitat fragmentation, but also because they release centuries of sequestered carbon held by old-growth ecosystems and therefore further contribute to the warming of the planet.

According to the Climate Forests Campaign, the USFS alleges that projects like Brushy Mountain are intended to “restore ‘structural diversity’ and improve wildlife habitat by creating ‘clearings’ in forest stands” (Climate Forests, 2024). However, the scientific justification for these destructive logging projects rests on a foundation of sand. In a study exploring the importance of natural forest stewardship in U.S. adaptation planning, researchers concluded that “most of the inference about [heavy-handed] intervention options has been drawn from theory rather than empiricism,” and that while a direct approach to managing forests (e.g., mechanical thinning, prescribed burns, species selection, pre- and post-disturbance salvage/planting, and other fire-suppression tactics) is appropriate in some forests intended for resource production, experiments, and human safety, “accepting the capacity of natural systems to adapt and be self-sustaining with natural stewardship is a critical and cost-effective approach in other forest contexts” (Faison et al., 2023).

5. These projections were made under the A2 emissions scenario (i.e. a temperature increase of 4.86°) (McGuire et al., 2016).

6. For more information about the logging of Brushy Mountain, and other USFS logging projects that include old growth, visit <https://www.climate-forests.org/>.

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While clearings and early successional habitats are important for ecosystem diversity, *there is no reasonable, scientific justification* for sacrificing a rare old-growth ecosystem to create a meadow: old growth makes up *less than 1%* of forests in the Southeast, whereas early successional habitat is far more abundant.

The discrediting of unfounded claims made by the USFS regarding their “forest management” tactics raises questions about the ulterior motives behind large, destructive, and fragmenting clearcuts, like those seen in the Brushy Mountain logging operation. In a recent op-ed, former deputy chief of the USFS Jim Furnish argues that private interests alone, such as profit, do not justify the fragmentation of our ecosystem and the elimination of old growth, even by the USFS’s own standards, writing, “Slicing and dicing our healthiest forests at taxpayer expense for short-term private profit fails ‘the greatest good for the greatest number in the long run’ mantra that the Forest Service is sworn to honor” (Furnish, 2024).⁷ Yet the harvesting of timber is *mandated* by the USFS through the agency’s self-imposed “timber targets,” quotas for forest cutting with no consideration for released carbon or habitat destruction.⁸ As the climate changes, it is more important than ever to shift the paradigm of our ecosystem management tactics away from misinformed, politically motivated, and profit-driven ventures, especially in areas essential to climate change mitigation efforts, such as the Chattooga River watershed.

In 1996, the Chattooga Conservancy published the “Chattooga Conservation Plan” (CCP), a document intended to serve as a citizen’s alternative in the USFS Land and Resource Management Plan revision process for the three national forests in the Chattooga River watershed. It was determined that the survival and flourishing of biodiversity in the area would require both “protection and restoration of forest interior and old-growth habitat for endangered and

threatened animal and plant species,” and “maintenance and restoration of critical wildlife corridors linking adjacent natural areas within the watershed, and outside of the watershed along the Blue Ridge Escarpment” (Chattooga Conservation Plan, 1996, p. 6). To accomplish this, the CCP

proposed a holistic approach to conservation, creating a blanket standard of ecosystem management guidelines that would theoretically apply to all three ranger districts that make up the watershed and prioritize protecting and promoting adequately large, healthy, diverse, and connected habitats.⁹

Now more than ever, adopting approaches to ecosystem management such as the Chattooga Conservation Plan is imperative if we hope to have any chance of effectively preserving the current and future biodiversity of this area. At the state and federal level, this will require entities like the USFS to move away from their current ideology and instead prioritize ecosystem management practices that explicitly account

for the impacts of climate change and are grounded in robust scientific research. On an individual level, we must use the full range of our voices to demand that the stewards of our public land look after our shared environment responsibly, and we must take personal, voluntary commitments to ensure the environmental protection on our private lands through conservation easements, management plans, and land trust agreements. Today, as the world balances on the brink of countless ecological tipping points, both individuals and organizations hold the power to meet the oncoming threats of climate change with our actions and policies. If we refuse to do so, we risk watching our wilderness, communities, and ecosystems unravel before our eyes.

REFERENCE LIST

for “The Future of Chattooga Watershed Conservation: A Climate Change Imperative” available at: <https://chattoogariver.org/chattooga-reflections-references/>



A green salamander clings to the opening of a rocky crevice.

Photo credit: Frank Gebhard

7. Jim Furnish passed away on January 11th, 2025. This op-ed was one of his many writings advocating for changing ecosystem management standards on public land.

8. In recent years, the Forest Service and Department of Agriculture have set the national timber target “as high as 4 billion board feet – or enough lumber to circle the globe more than 30 times” (Southern Environmental Law Center, 2024).

9. The Chattooga Conservation Plan is accessible through the Chattooga Conservancy website, and even more information about the plan’s development can be found in the Winter 1996 issue of the *Chattooga Quarterly*.

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Mark VanDyke Photography
Website: www.markvandyke.net
Instagram: @markvandykephoto

The Chattooga Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Mission:

To protect, promote and restore the natural ecological integrity of the Chattooga River watershed ecosystems; to ensure the viability of native species in harmony with the need for a healthy human environment; and to educate and empower communities to practice good stewardship on public and private lands.

Goals:

- Monitor the U.S. Forest Service's management of public forest lands in the watershed, and work cooperatively to develop a sound ecosystem initiative for the watershed
- Promote public choice based on credible scientific information
- Protect remaining old growth and roadless areas
- Promote public land acquisition by the Forest Service in the watershed
- Educate the public
- Promote sustainable communities
- Promote conservation by honoring cultural heritage

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Executive Assistant
Christa Wilson

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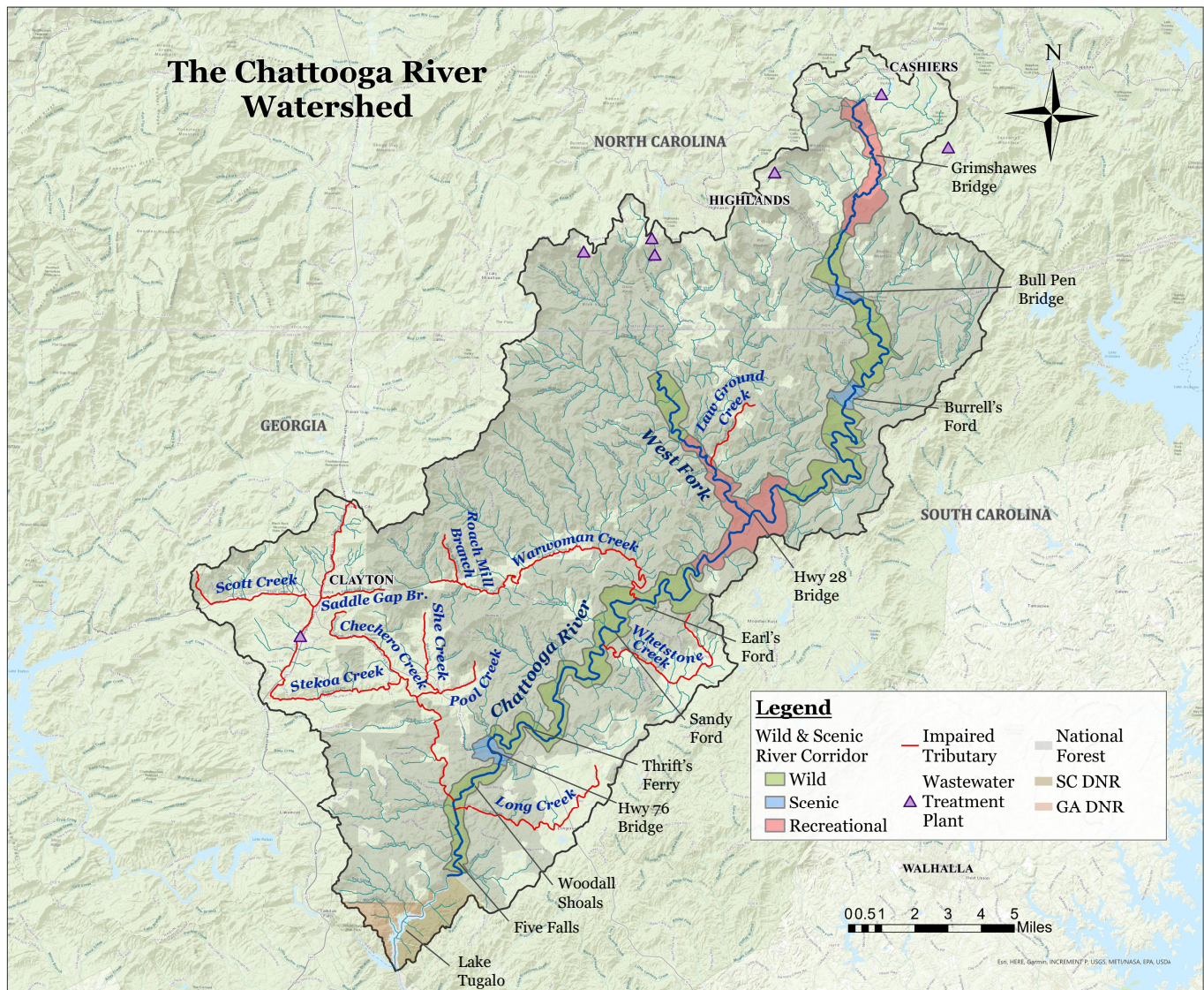
Chattooga Conservancy

867 Chattooga Ridge Road, Mountain Rest, SC 29664

tel.(864)647-9849

info@chattoogariver.org

www.chattoogariver.org



Chattooga Conservancy
867 Chattooga Ridge Rd
Mountain Rest, SC 29664