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BY BOATERS FOR BOATERS
May/June 2006



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Executive Director

The Journey Ahead

Fighting Irrational Forest Management on the Chattooga

By Mark Singleton

For the May/June issue of the *Journal*, I would like to use this space to make readers aware of an important River Stewardship issue that American Whitewater has been working on for some time. It is my hope that by raising awareness of this outrageous management plan, which singles out and discriminates against whitewater paddling, we can end this unfortunate situation.

The upper half of the Chattooga River is the only stretch of river in the entire US Forest Service system closed to whitewater boating. This boating ban has a 30-year history of resistance and status quo river management directed at limiting access for whitewater users. This 22-mile reach of river shares borders with three states: North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia. Ironically the Chattooga is a federally designated Wild and Scenic River that was selected largely for its value to the American public as a whitewater boating destination. This isolated pocket of southeastern creeking is taking the national stage in river management as American Whitewater works to compel Forest Service land managers to lift this arbitrary boating ban on the Chattooga Headwaters.

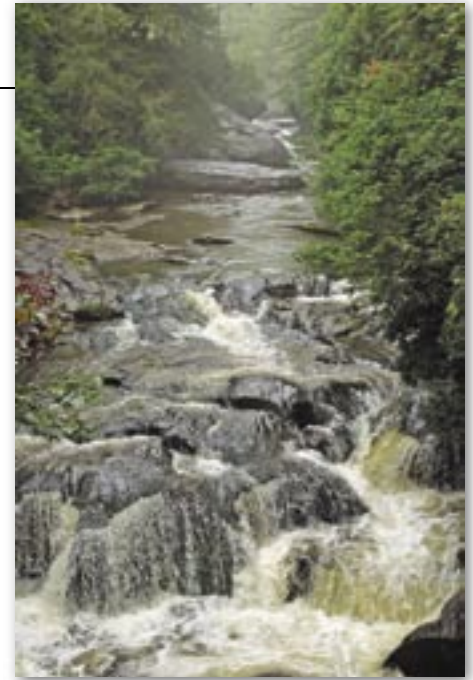
In 2004 American Whitewater appealed the revised forest plan for Sumter National Forest (SNF) which renewed the 30-year-old ban because there was no basis for the ban in USFS record, law, literature, or legislation. The Chief of the USFS agreed the record was “deficient in substantiating the need to continue the ban on boating” and concluded that “No capacity analysis is provided to support restrictions or a ban on recreation use or any type of recreation user.”

The chief then directed the SNF to conduct a user capacity analysis and amend their forest plan as necessary after two years.

This user capacity analysis is underway, but has been plagued by the SNF’s withholding critical information, singling out boating as a new use of lesser value, relying on false information (specifically regarding navigability), and refusing to adopt nationally consistent river management goals and techniques. While the analysis framework they have proposed could yield a fair study, comments from SNF staff and recent developments make it seem very unlikely. Should the analysis be implemented in an unfair manner and lead to unfair management, our only two recourses are litigation and yet another appeal (both costly and needless for everyone involved).

The SNF simply refuses to grant boaters equal consideration and equal access to the river, even though paddlers are wilderness-compliant users. Throughout this process we have requested only to be treated equally, and for the SNF to start managing the Chattooga River in a responsible and nationally consistent manner. They have no idea how many people currently are using the river corridor or what the impacts of that use are – yet they remain opposed to allowing paddling and to addressing other uses. The result is that US citizens that wish to enjoy the river by boat cannot, and that all other uses continue unmanaged. American Whitewater is advocating that the SNF:

- Ensure a fair user capacity analysis by monitoring all users rather than focusing only on paddlers.
- Compare data between user groups and assess a full range of management alternatives.
- Assess impacts associated with all types of recreational uses to ensure fairness and future river management that protects, restores, and enhances the river corridor.



The forbidden headwaters of the Chattooga River

Photo courtesy of North Carolina Rivers & Creek

- Address every user’s solitude in a nonbiased manner to comply with the order of the USFS Chief, and to ensure equitable management.
- Study Section 00 (NC section) in the same manner as Sections 0 and 1 (SC & GA sections) in order to ensure an adequate record is developed for a full range of management alternatives.

Only through complying with these recommendations can the SNF give US citizens who wish to experience the Wild and Scenic Chattooga River in a boat equal consideration, and thus prevent future legal and regulatory challenges. Likewise, only through complying with these recommendations can the SNF responsibly manage the river in a manner that protects its rich ecological and recreational values.

Gaining boating access and nationally consistent river management practices on the river that *Deliverance* made famous 30 years ago is the first step. Along with a lifting of the boating ban, AW would like to see management of the headwaters that cuts across all user groups and provides for sound stewardship of the river corridor.