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Subject: Chattooga River: A fisherman and paddler's view.
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To Senators, Representatives, and Members of the Forest Service,

I know that there are a lot of people on both sides of this issue that will sound off about all the reasons to allow paddling or not to allow paddling on the Chattooga. My perspective is slightly different.

I have lived near the Chattooga (Pickens and Oconee Counties) my entire life. As a kid, my parents and I would go up there and spend many days in a canoe, having picnics, or merely hiking around. I learned to respect nature and the river itself from these early experiences. As a teenager and continuing into adulthood I have spent and will spend many hours fishing the upper parts of the Chattooga, Brasstown Creek, Eastatoe, Chauga and many others.

It was and still is very frustrating to see the level of garbage that is continually left on the river by fisherman. This is by no means limited to the Chattooga. Today in fact, I took my dog up to the Eastatoe river to let him swim and was shocked by the amount of trash along the banks and within the stream itself. The level of trash on the Chauga and Brasstown is is even worse from my experience.

I list these other rivers as examples because the only time kayakers are ever up there is during extremely high flows. It is at this time the amount of trash seems to become really evident because it gets caught in the eddies of the rivers as well as deposited on the insides of many bends.

As you can probably tell, I am both someone that loves to trout fish and someone that loves to kayak. I do not trout fish during extremely high flows due to the difficulty in reaching the better fishing spots and I do not kayak when the water is a normal flows in these streams because there is not enough water to make the run worthwhile. Low water runs involve a lot of portaging as well as do a lot of damage to hull of a kayak. I have only fished the Eastatoe, Brasstown and upper Chattooga, but I can tell you that unless there was a lot of water, I would not paddle them.

I am not a member of Trout unlimited and have only been a member of AWA one time. I am no longer a member of that organization. Both of these organizations do a lot of good for their members. Neither of these organizations are headquartered in Pickens or Oconee County. Just like in many issues across the nation, outside organizations are jumping in and the rhetoric has escalated to the point that those of us that live in the area seem to no longer have a voice in the issue.

So, what are we to do? One option is to remove all access to fisherman, campers, tourists, and hikers as well as their collective trash from any contact with the wilderness areas around the upper Chattooga. Given the fact that paddlers are not allowed there, this would make them have to be quiet about the issue because they would no longer be singled out. As you well know that option is unrealistic, but since all the groups mentioned pay taxes in some form or another, all should have access to the river.

I propose something else that may work. Allow boating in the upper sections at certain flows. Most kayakers are not going to go up there unless there is sufficient water to make it worth the trip. Very few, if any, fisherman would be there at that time anyway. It would be difficult for rafting companies to get tourists to pay on such short notice for a trip down that section so their impact on the roads with their buses would be minimal.

That section of the river would probably rise and then drop levels fairly quickly so boaters would all have to refer to the USGS gauges to determine if they had time to make the run. I would say that boaters should have 24 hours from time the gauge last reached the aforementioned level to make their runs. After that, they could be subject to fines.

Here is an example:

Lets say that the accepted flow level is 2.5 feet on the USGS gauge. (I am just pulling that level out of thin air. I do not know if that would be enough water or not.) The longer the river continued to rise, the longer boaters would have to make the run. However, lets say that the river peaks at that set level on a Monday at 11:00 am as shown on the USGS gauge. Paddlers would have 24 hours to get in the run. No more. In other words, they would have to be off the river by 11:00 am on Tuesday.

Whatever the level is, it needs to be low enough so that boaters can access the rivers regularly, but it needs to be high enough so that as it drops in that 24 hour period, boaters are not stranded due to insufficient flows and get stuck hiking out.

DO NOT add more access points. Keep the access points as is. This too could limit the people that would venture to take such an endeavor.

Is a proposal such as this one going to satisfy all sides completely? Absolutely not. Is something like this reasonable to the average person who is a trout fisherman or paddler? I think so. Will the raft companies like it? Probably not, but it is better than no access at all.

As a fisherman I would ask that paddling be restricted to the main sections of the river. I do not want to see trails up every little stream running into the river, but I would also like to see fishing restricted to those same arms. The native fish need some areas just to be fish and live out their lives without the threat of a hook and a struggle in the name of catch and release or catch and eat. Besides, I am also a backpacker and it would be nice to see some truly pristine settings as they were hundreds of years ago.

What constitutes as a main arm should be determined by a group of people from the counties around the Chattooga in both NC, Ga, and SC comprised of fisherman, boaters, and hikers as well as a Forest Service representative, someone from AWA, and someone from Trout unlimited. The rest of the group should have the right to remove anyone within the group that dared become unreasonable. That person would cause the entity he represented to lose their vote on the issue. A simple majority would determine what part of the river could be accessed.

As a kayaker, I would be thankful for the possible new runs, but the water would have to be way up before I would be willing to hike in to make the runs. My impact there would be small.

I would also say that a fee be imposed on those that accessed the area. Whether they are fisherman, kayakers, rafters, campers, backpackers, etc. The fee should last for a year at a time and those accessing the areas should be required to have proof they paid the fee on their person or they could be subject to a fine. Names, addresses, permit numbers, and other information could be collected for those using the areas. Local stores, Forest service stations, raft companies, etc. could sell the permits and they could be like fishing licenses. Let them last from say June 30 of one year through June 29th of the next. The fee should be reasonable say $5 to $10 and the money should go into a fund to support river cleanups, access road management, bear proof trash cans at the access points, information boards, etc. The money should not go into the Forest service general budget, but should be used for the Chattooga Wild and Scenic area only.

I do not think day users like the general public should pay any kind of access fee. Only those backpacking, fishing, hunting (if done in those areas) rafting, camping or kayaking.

I sincerely appreciate the opportunity to have input on this issue and I hope that the outcome is fair to all parties. As a local, I am tired of the arguments either way and would like to see this issue resolved.

Thank you.
Rick Somerville
Oconee County, SC