From: FishonJMB@aol.com
To: comments-southern-francismarion-sumter@fs.fed.us
Subject: Chattooga River Management Plan
Date: 08/18/2008 01:42 PM

Dear Sir or Madam:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the future management of the Chattooga River. I have followed this issue with interest and a great deal of concern since the boating community filed their lawsuit to gain access to the upper 21 miles of this fragile natural area. As a fisherman, hunter, wildlife enthusiast, and occasional boater, I would like to express my opposition to allowing boating on the upper Chattooga.

During my more than 40 years of roaming the rivers and streams of western North Carolina, I have witnessed the impact of increased human use on these limited resources. Especially over the last twenty years, I have witnessed the increasing popularity of whitewater boating. With the advent of new technology, I now see kayaks on streams previously thought to be inaccessible to this form of recreation. Unfortunately, along with increasing encounters with kayaks have come decreasing opportunities to enjoy what I consider the greatest pleasure of fishing, hunting, and wildlife viewing: solitude. Fly fishing is known among its enthusiasts as "the quiet sport." Much of the time it is no longer quiet in the Green River Gorge, the Nantahala tailwater, lower Wilson Creek, the Pigeon River, Overflow Creek, or the lower 36 miles of the Chattooga River. Those of us who enjoy solitude and quiet have largely abandoned those areas, as well as others, due to the overwhelming influx of boaters. The fish are still in the water, but the quality of the human experience is gone.

This is not a new problem. It first arose in the early 1970's when the Chattooga was "discovered" by whitewater enthusiasts. Because of conflicts between boaters and fishermen, the Forest Service wisely adopted a management policy that included segregation of these user groups, which has resulted in a world-class whitewater destination on the lower 36 miles of the river, and a world-class trout fishing destination in the upper 21 miles. That management strategy was, and still is, a brilliant and highly successful concept.

Unfortunately, the boaters now find that they have fouled their nest on the lower river, where there are over 60,000 "boater days" each year. Now the boaters want unlimited access to the last stretch of high-quality trout water in North Carolina's National Forests that is currently protected by regulation from their incursion. Their appeal of the current successful management plan threatens the balance of users that has kept this area magical for all manner of wilderness, wildlife, fishing, hunting, and whitewater enthusiasts.

Your comprehensive Visitor Use Capacity Analysis has without doubt shown that the upper Chattooga is near the limits of its ability to naturally assimilate human users. Now your task is to determine how best to control human use and its impact on this fragile, unique, and incredibly valuable natural resource. Each of your Alternatives in your Environmental Assessment offers ways to accomplish this goal. I believe that the only alternatives that will protect the Chattooga wilderness and its wild inhabitants, while at the same time preserve the values that the majority of human users have come to enjoy, are Alternatives 1, 2, and 3. Alternatives 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 are unacceptable due to their inclusion of whitewater boating on the Upper Chattooga.

Any incursion of plastic boats into this environment would adversely affect the experience for

thousands of other users, and there is also ample evidence that the addition of this new group of users will also adversely affect the environment itself. New trails for boater access and portaging will result, and large woody debris will be removed. Despite the determination of the Forest Service to prevent this, I know of no current popular small-stream boating destination in North Carolina where this has not occurred.

In addition, new boat-building technology has made it possible for so-called creek boaters to access sections of streams previously thought to be unboatable. There are many marginally skilled boaters who would not have thought about tackling some sections of the Chattooga in the past, but now find that the newer boats tempt them to do so. Because of crowding on the lower sections of the river, many of these boaters will want to move to the upper river, and the Forest Service will have a very difficult time enforcing limitations on users. Fishermen, hunters, birdwatchers, and other wildlife enthusiasts limit their use of areas like the Chattooga River simply because of the aforementioned need for solitude. That is not a need that whitewater boaters share. The Forest Service will have to devote limited enforcement resources to ensure that permits are properly issued and observed.

Considering my concerns as stated above, I am convinced that allowing boaters to access the Upper Chattooga River will adversely affect the enjoyment of the majority of human users, and has serious potential to adversely affect the resource itself. Zoning of conflicting users has been a successful management tool on the Chattooga for over 30 years. Abandoning this management tool because of the selfish demands of whitewater boaters to “have it all” could have profound implications for other managers of public lands in the Southeast as well as other areas of the country.

I hope that the Forest Service will stand up to this challenge to good management practices which have preserved a quality wilderness experience for thousands of people, while preserving the wilderness itself. The majority of the human users support you in this endeavor.

Thank you for what you do for our public lands.

Sincerely,
John M. Benbow, MD
Immediate Past President
North Carolina Wildlife Federation
Concord, NC

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