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Chattooga Coalition Tracks Success of River Species

By [Gwyn Ingram](#) on Oct 10, 2010



The Chattooga Coalition and its volunteers at work.



Variety of species, including brown trout, in live cage.



Turquoise Darter, a species of conservation concern.

The findings of an unusual scientific partnership exceed its original intent.

About every other year, on a sleepy section of the upper Chattooga River, an invasion of sorts takes place.

A wall of wader-clad biologists, students and anglers spread across the waters of the wild and scenic river, armed with electricity-generating backpacks and dip nets. At the upper end of their selected stretch of river, an independent curtain of electric current restricts the intended quarry from escape. Then, the wall of people wade slowly forward, netting every fish that had been stunned by the electric prods.

No, these are not the actions of a rogue group too lazy to wet a line for dinner, nor one bent on utter destruction. In fact, it's quite the opposite.

The Chattooga Coalition, a remarkable partnership comprising state and federal agencies from South Carolina, North Carolina and Georgia, as well as members of Trout Unlimited (TU) collects the stunned fish to monitor their population status in the river. Species, size, numbers, and distribution data are recorded and studied to help determine the general health of the river.

The coalition was formed in 1986 after a group of fishing enthusiasts from the Georgia and South Carolina Trout Unlimited Councils noticed a dramatic decline in the trout fishery in the Upper Chattooga. They asked the federal and state agencies responsible for the river's management to investigate the decline. The management agencies include the Sumter National Forest of South Carolina, the Chattahoochee National Forest of Georgia, the Nantahala National Forest of North Carolina and the Department of Natural Resources from all three states.

"Prior to that there really wasn't a coordinated effort to do field work and sampling, or meetings to coordinate management," said Dan Rankin, Region 1 Fisheries Coordinator for the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources. "Forming the coalition began the first real on-the-ground work involving state agencies and the Forest Service from all three states and Trout Unlimited members getting out there and starting to sample--to collect fish--and see what was going on in the river and what the status of the fishery really was."

Because there were no creel surveys or monitoring data at that time, the only indication of the fishery's decline was anecdotal evidence from the anglers. Designation of the river as 'wild and scenic' more than 10 years earlier, and the subsequent designation of the Ellicott Rock Wilderness, subsequently necessitated changes in river management. Those designations and the increased popularity of whitewater boating also facilitated a significant spike in the use of the river.

"Looking back, it's pretty evident what happened in that backcountry area. After designation, roads accessing the river used to stock adult-size trout were closed, which was probably a really good thing for water quality, but not so for the fishery," explained Rankin.

"The coalition quickly learned from the sampling that there wasn't much of a wild population to support the fishery. When the roads were closed and stocking ceased, the fishery went south," said Rankin. "The fishery was dependent on the stocking that had been occurring prior to the wild and scenic designation."

Today, said Rankin, selective stocking has restored fishing opportunities on the Upper Chattooga. But the coalition sampling has proved valuable in many more ways.

"It started with an emphasis on just trying to determine what was going on with the trout fishery. Had things really dramatically declined? If so, why? And could we improve the management from a fishery standpoint? Although our original coalition focus was to address the game fish concern, increasingly the community sample --which comprises all species, both game and non-game--has proven tremendously important," Rankin explained.

"Of the 15 species we found in the July 2010 sample, several species were of conservation concern (SCDNR designation). We had two high-priority conservation species and five moderate-priority species," said Rankin. "We track those, and we can look all the way back to 1986 when we established the initial baseline and compare how populations have changed over 25 years. It's important to be able to validate that we're not losing these conservation species. Just like the trout, they're good indicators of water quality and management of the river."

In fact, the coalition has sampled downstream of the trout waters as well, with native species specifically in mind. There the group monitored the success of native redeye bass, one of the highest-priority conservation species in the Chattooga. In addition, Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests' Fisheries Biologist Jeanne Riley, in conjunction with the coalition, implemented a macro invertebrate survey of the Chattooga drainage to collect aquatic insects, often an even more sensitive indicator of a river's general health. The coalition partnered with Clemson University to conduct sampling.

Rankin described the early sampling as "kind of a scattergun approach," and said that methods have improved over the years to include three long-term monitoring sites. Such sites allow the coalition to compare data on species such as brown trout with past samples from the same site.

The partnership aspect of the coalition has been the key to its great success.

"Much of the work that has been done couldn't have been accomplished with one agency or its limited resources--it was all about pooling expertise and resources, and that's what made the whole thing work," said Rankin. "It's fostered more communication: the annual sampling, the annual meeting to talk about issues among the partners. It's really grown into a dynamic and interesting project with those lines of communication open."

"There's been a social aspect to this as well as a professional one that is very important," insists Rankin. "You have new folks coming in every year, but they'll return year after year and get to know each other. You see a lot of friendships develop over this project. I think that's really important to morale, to people wanting to work in the interest of the river. People just develop a real affection for the project. It's fostered communication professionally and personally well outside of the Chattooga management."

Three members of the original Chattooga Coalition remain involved to this day. Monte Seehorn, a retired Forest Service biologist and member of the Rabun Chapter of Trout Unlimited, has chaired the coalition from its inception. Jeff Durniak of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources and Doug Adams, also of TU's Rabun Chapter and a Chattooga angler since 1955, have been active from the start.

Nearly 25 years of coalition efforts have provided invaluable information about the effects of habitat, temperature, water quality and even erosion and sedimentation on the Chattooga watershed, all factors that ultimately figure into the long-term health of this wild and scenic river.

That's not bad for a project hatched originally by a handful of dedicated anglers who noticed that the fish weren't biting and pushed to find out why.