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1. WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS: Whitewater enthusiasts test the waters of the Upper Chattooga

Arthur O'Donnell, *Land Letter* editor

For the first time in 30 years, a group of kayakers was allowed to experience a run down the upper reaches of the Chattooga River this week. They were taking part in a unique Forest Service study on whether to remove a long-standing ban on boaters along the portion of the river, imposed when a 57-mile stretch of the Chattooga flowing through parts of North Carolina, South Carolina and Georgia was granted "wild and scenic river" status in 1976.



Kayakers slide through thrilling features of the Upper Chattooga River. Photo by Brian Jacobson. Copyright 2007 Jacobson/Trout Lips Video, LLC; used with permission.

For two days, Jan. 5-6, a group of eight boaters and two monitors, using kayaks and a canoe, tested multiple sections of the river that included multiple Class IV and Class V rapids with names such as "Maytag," and "Harvey Wallbanger." The group had to portage at Big Bend Falls because of a log wedged at the base of the falls, but otherwise were able to paddle through the course marked by tall trees, gorge walls and a half-mile section of bedrock and boulder rapids called "Rock Gorge" -- among other highlights described by participants.

The test, part of a "visitor use capacity analysis" ordered by Gloria Manning, reviewing officer for Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth in April 2005, represented a victory for members of American Whitewater and others who have been fighting the agency for more than a decade to lift the floating prohibition from a 21-mile run of the river above Highway 28 in the Francis Marion and Sumter National Forests.

"We've spent 10 years trying to get the river open," said Kevin Colburn, national stewardship director for American Whitewater. The effort culminated in a successful appeal of the 2004 Sumter National Forest Plan that would have continued the long-standing prohibition. "There was never any justification for it," Colburn said.

That is essentially what the [appeal decision](#) of the forest plan found. The regional forester's revised plan had decided to continue the prohibition "on likely impacts that would result from lifting the ban." These were described in the ruling as including "decreased opportunities for solitude" by other area users, the potential for creation of unofficial user trails and an increased need for search and rescue efforts.

However, the reviewing officer declared the forest plan "deficient in substantiating the need to continue the ban on boating" to protect recreation or preserve the wilderness resource, and it found no legal basis to exclude whitewater activities based on safety concerns.

The order reversed the revised forest plan's continuation of the prohibition but maintained the ban until a series of user capacity studies could be completed. Although the group sued the Forest Service last year to end the ban, the court dismissed the case as "unripe" until the required studies are completed.

Doug Whittaker, an Alaska-based consultant with the firm Confluence Research and Consulting, was hired by the Forest Service to design the user studies and analyze the results. He said this week's test run along the Upper Chattooga is just part of a broader series of carrying-capacity studies into how opening the river may affect use by hikers, anglers and others. In fact, he said, another component of the study was to have a group of anglers on the river at the same time as the boaters.

Other users, including hikers and birdwatchers were not included in this particular study, which Whittaker said was to test the interaction of "high-flow dependent activities" fly-fishing and whitewater rafting. "It probably takes 800 to 1,000 cubic feet per second of flows" measured at a certain point to offer sufficient water for running this stretch of the river, he said. "That happens only 20 to 50 days out of the year, and only for a day or two at a time."

Because the Upper Chattooga flows are seasonal, the two-day test had to wait for the right conditions of higher flows, which occurred following a New Year's weekend rainstorm.



Scoping out rapids at Big Bend. Photo by Brian Jacobson. Copyright 2007 Jacobson/Trout Lips Video, LLC; used with permission.

"We hit exactly good flows," Whittaker said. "At the low end for boating, and not too high for angling."

'Spectacular'

The experience from the boaters' perspective was reportedly quite positive, while other users appear to remain skeptical of increased activity.

"Once we got on the river, it was unbelievably spectacular," said Don Kinser, a board member of American Whitewater who lives near the Chattooga River. "I've had some great adventures in my life, and this was on par with the best of them. It was probably one of the most emotionally meaningful days of the river of my life," he told *Land Letter*.

On the other hand, Whittaker, who monitored the group of eight recreational fishers said, "anglers are very upset at the possibility of more boaters. Our report will talk about that."

Separately, the Forest Service has been accepting public comments on the potential for opening the Upper Chattooga, some of them quite negative. James Whitehurst, chairman of the Over the Hills Hiking Club of Highlands, N.C., urged the Forest Service to maintain the ban.



Whitewater enthusiasts have waited and worked for decades to open the Upper Chattooga. Photo by Brian Jacobson. Copyright 2007 Jacobson/Trout Lips Video, LLC; used with permission.

"Boaters destroy the stream banks where they enter and depart the river. Boaters leave debris like food wrappers, drink containers, boating gear, paddles, broken watercraft, etc., wherever they choose. Boaters are daredevils who take chances for the thrills they seek, and it will only be a short period of time before some of them will be seriously injured or killed which will require rescue or recover efforts that will cause serious destruction of pristine environment," Whitehurst wrote. "Hikers enjoy the tranquility of this wonderful river. Boaters will destroy the tranquility and will certainly spook the fish and wildlife normally seen here," he concluded.

Consultant Whittaker said the letter illustrates the level of concerns by other users. "Almost certainly, the group at greatest risk is the summertime hiking community," he said. However, whitewater activities would be largely confined to winter and early spring.

In addition, Whittaker said the area is already subject to pressures of increased use, because of new resorts and a booming real-estate market. "The number of hikers will certainly increase," he said. "Anglers, probably not. It's unclear whether kayakers will have a significant increase."

Whitewater enthusiast Kinser rejected the harsh criticisms of boaters as untrue. "There's no data to support these assertions," he said. "If you're hiking in there, you don't even see the river." In addition, he said, rafters and kayakers do not want to see a lot of new development. "We don't want any more access points or improved sections."

Though the local foresters were given two years to come up with a new decision on possibly opening the Upper Chattooga, it will take longer, said Terry Seyden, spokesman for Region 8 in North Carolina. "We're shooting for one year from now to have a decision," he said.