

Chattooga boat issue gets personal

By Joseph Gatins: District Leader

A poet, an avid swimmer, a concerned citizen and a long-time river guide and whitewater photographer (and teacher and father), all added their voices to the most recent round of public comments elicited in response to U.S. Forest Service efforts to open the last stretch of the Wild and Scenic River's headwaters to boating.

- "I can't be the only one who truly needs the pristine, untrammled beauty of this upper section -- this is what truly belongs to all of us," said Laurence Holden a resident of Rabun County, noted poet and visitor to these parts for the past 40 years. "This is not the resource for the Forest Service to manage our use of like it was merely an entertainment park or a recreational highway."
- "I have been hiking and swimming this river since 1975," said Ellie Hogan, of Highlands, N.C. "From Grimshawes Bridge to the Iron Bridge. Up and down, in the river and out. It is a place that feeds my soul. Please do not allow boating in this section of river."
- "I am a concerned citizen and environmentalist [who] feels very strongly that there are areas for a wide assortment of recreational activities in all the national forests. I do not feel that it is necessary, nor should it be allowed, for boating to take place in the upper Chattooga River regions," said Guynelle Robbins of Clayton. "There are various other areas of rivers and whitewater for this type of activity to take place. It is a shame that individuals and corporations always seem to want more of something that is not necessary or needed."
- "What has become clear by now with the continued agonizing, litigious agenda of the kayak lobby," said Butch Clay of Mountain Rest, S.C., the former river guide, "is that there is a certain subset of paddlers represented by powerful, well-funded promoters at the national level who are not interested in compromise but who are apparently insistent upon opening up all of the river all of the time, to inaugurate the wholesale appropriation of the last remaining wild stretches Chattooga as a paddling playground."

Chief among equals in that kayak lobby is the group American Whitewater, which again weighed in with comments in the latest round of public comments sought by the U.S. Forest Service. That verbiage again was aimed at trying to get the 21 miles of the Upper Chattooga, closed to all boating since 1976, open to unlimited padding year-round. The group also is pushing that argument in a companion federal court suit in Greenville, South Carolina, which aims to short-circuit the Forest Service's administrative studies (that American Whitewater initiated) and have a federal jury and judge approve opening the upper river. (American Whitewater is joined in that suit by the American and Georgia Canoe Associations, Atlanta Whitewater Club, Western Carolina Paddlers, Foothills Paddling Club and three individual boaters.)

Counterbalancing that view: Georgia ForestWatch, the only conservation and recreation group to have consistently and unwaveringly supported current prohibitions on boating this stretch of river, as well as the Jackson-Macon Conservation Alliance, and several other individuals and groups making similar argument or raising new questions about the bureaucratic Forest Service process. (Of the more than 40 comments filed in the latest go-around, at least seven supported boating, 23 were opposed and six involved form letters aimed at protecting private property rights.)

See more comments:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r8/fms/sumter/resources/ChattoogaReinitiatedNEPA2010.php>

For the first time, the list of boating opponents also included a local volunteer fire department in the unincorporated community of Satolah, Georgia, whose Chief voiced concern over potential costs of riverine search and rescue (or recovery) efforts involving boaters.

“Our concern is that opening the 21 miles of the Upper Chattooga to boating will eventually result in accidents or fatalities that we would have to handle, without compensation from local, state or federal government agencies,” said Chief James L. Reed. (His firefighters have mutual aid agreements with fire stations in adjacent North and South Carolina, which also have responsibility for river rescues.) “This amounts to an ‘unfunded mandate’ of no small proportion.”

“Our members and their families since time immemorial have used the Upper Chattooga to hunt, fish, and generally enjoy its wild backcountry and solitude,” Reed continued. “We believe that it is best to keep the kayakers on ... the West Fork and along the 36 miles of the ‘lower Chattooga,’ to which they have unfettered access today. Is that not enough for these boaters?”

Interestingly, American Whitewater used its experience on Overflow Creek, where boating is permitted, to assert that “usage data” on Overflow “reveal very low expected use of the Upper Chattooga, even with very liberal estimates.”

Both the Chattooga headwaters and Overflow Creek were technically difficult streams to boat, and had a “logistically challenging, flashy nature” that would limit “paddling visitation” to “brief intervals during and after storm events,” according to Kevin Colburn, the national stewardship director for American Whitewater.

So, what comes next?

The Forest Service aims to return with a more final proposal on the boating issue in June, with implementation hoped for in September. That is, if there are no further delays in the often-delayed boating study --

begun more than five years ago – and if the agency effort is not trumped in federal court.

The Forest Service's original proposal to open seven of the Upper Chattooga's 21 miles above Route 28 was withdrawn last year after five groups appealed that plan as unworkable and unwise (for varying reasons). The most recent effort was termed a "re-initiation" of the environmental review process required under federal law.

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