

House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands

H.R. 3785 - To authorize the Secretary of the Interior to study of the suitability and feasibility of expanding the boundary of Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area

Testimony of Alan Merrill

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Honorable Members of Congress, staff and guests. I am Alan Merrill, Chair of the Board of Directors of the Chattahoochee Hill Country Conservancy. The Conservancy is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization charged with the responsibility to preserve the rural and natural land in a 100 square mile area and to promote best conservation practices in an undeveloped region in the southwest corner of the Atlanta metropolitan area. I am honored that you invited me here today to speak in support of H.R. 3785, a bill which would authorize the National Park Service to study extending the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area from Peachtree Creek in the City of Atlanta to County lines 45 river miles to the south.

Coming from Atlanta, I could speak about traffic congestion, the fallout of overbuilt condominiums and office buildings, the social cost of teenage pregnancy or high school dropouts. And I would imagine you would think to yourself, "So what else is new? I have that in my own district." Issues like these have been hashed and rehashed in the news media. Instead, I am here to share with you good news about what's happening in our area that isn't in the spotlight, at least not yet.

First, let's describe the situation, beginning with the Chattahoochee River itself. Chattahoochee is a Native American word meaning flowering or colored rocks. The Appalachian Mountains, or more specifically the Blue Ridge Mountains end in North Georgia, where Brasstown Bald at 4784 feet above sea level is the highest point in the state. You could describe Georgia, the largest state east of the Mississippi River, as a slope from Brasstown Bald to the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico.

The Appalachian Mountains were formed hundreds of millions of years ago when a piece of the African continent collided with North America. The result were mountains taller than the Himalayas are today. 250 Million years of erosion reduced the Appalachian chain to its present size. That collision of tectonic plates also created a plateau as well as an ocean floor that covered the southeastern third of Georgia.

This geography creates the terrain of the 542 mile long Chattahoochee River. From headwaters 3500 feet above sea level in the mountains, the river runs south and southwest. Rainfall and springs in the mountains plunge down the Brevard Fault to begin the flow of water which is then joined by about 80 streams as it runs across that plateau, known as the Piedmont, and then flows over the fall line to the old ocean bed, now known as the Coastal Plain. The Chattahoochee River eventually unites with the Flint River and forms the Apalachicola River. The 112 mile long Apalachicola River is a watershed with rich biodiversity and is a popular river for canoeing.

The River is shared by three states, Georgia, Alabama and Florida, which all view it as a critical natural resource. If you stood in the middle of the Chattahoochee River with trout at your feet,

you would not describe it as massive (like the Mississippi) or powerful (like the Niagara River). Rather, you would be inclined to describe it as a pastoral stream with shoals and rocks contained between two forested banks. It is tranquil and relaxing, nature's opposite of, say, the infamous Beltline.

It is a River that was important to the Native Americans such as the Creek Nation that farmed the land before the white colonists drove them west to cut trees for settlements, farmhouses, bridges, ships and fuel and then planted cotton on the cleared land. The Creeks left behind a history we are just learning to preserve and treasure. The Chattahoochee was an obstacle to General Sherman in the Civil War. Thus, the banks of the River are also home to relics from that period of national tragedy.

Let's leave the geography and history lessons, and take an on-the-ground look today. The present day Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area borders the River from the northwest side of the City Atlanta upstream 49 river miles north to Lake Sidney Lanier. Within the boundaries, the National Park Service has established 6500 acres in 14 parks for public access to the River and the adjoining forests. Last year, the Chattahoochee River NRA hosted well over three million visitors. Wow.

I used to live near one area of the NRA between the cities of Marietta and Sandy Springs. There are paid parking on lots at the north and south ends of the park. In the park, the major feature is a three mile long, wide dirt trail used by walkers, joggers, bicyclists, people pushing strollers or walking their dogs. There are picnic tables and physical fitness equipment, restrooms and a drinking fountain. You can see the Chattahoochee River through the trees on parts of the trail and have open access to the River at small clearing. This humble park works hard. There is often a line of cars waiting for a parking space. This is not a complaint about the parking, but a testimony of people's hunger for green space with trees, streams and trails

The CRNRA was established in 1978. How old were you 32 years ago? Yes, it has been a while. And while you have been growing, so has metro Atlanta with a population of 5.7 million people. To the south of the Chattahoochee River NRA, public access to the Chattahoochee River is scarce indeed. Starting at Peachtree Creek in the City of Atlanta, nearly all the land is held by private land owners. In a band within ten miles on either side of the River in the 45 miles in H.R. 3785, live an estimated 600,000 people who immediately would be served by the proposed extension of the Chattahoochee River NRA. This southwest segment of the metro area is poised for dramatic growth in the next 25 years.

In the history of the automobile, our society has separated people from nature. Atlanta is dominated by concrete, granite, silica and asphalt, dotted with trees and few parks. Schools are built on clear cut land surrounded by homes on land that was clear cut and graded to erase nature's footprint. Malls are surrounded by acre after acre of asphalt. We have urban kids who have never been in a forest or on a farm. The kids today are wired to electronics and stay indoors. The popular book **LAST CHILD IN THE WOODS** alerts us to a disease called Nature Deficit Disorder.

In studies around the globe, we are concluding that people living close to natural surroundings and having access to nature are healthier (mentally and physically), less obese, more productive, have a more positive outlook, more resourceful and more curious. People my age are just learning this. Fortunately, the generation called Millennials seem to know this instinctively and gravitate to such places. Want to help reduce health care costs, make our workforce more productive and creative, and help make our children love to learn? Then let's bring nature and people back together.

I am here neither to blame this committee nor to dump the problem in your lap. Not. I am here to invite you to join people who are already on the ground, hard at work behind the scenes. This is the good news I referred to earlier. The Trust for Public Land is setting the direction and encouraging the pace. The City of Atlanta and Cobb County completed a joint study to redevelop a thoroughfare that crosses the Chattahoochee River. The City of Atlanta is in the process of completing a study of the economic benefits of redevelopment adjoining the River corridor. Neighboring Cobb County would like to convert industrial river frontage to areas attractive for the public.

To the south, the City of Chattahoochee Hills is purchasing 243 acres of undeveloped land on the River - with funds donated by citizens. Not taxes. Voluntary donations. Carroll County has been very busy recovering from an unprecedented flood last fall at McIntosh Reserve which closed that popular park for nine months. Thank you to Congress, FEMA, EPA and many other agencies who helped make this recovery effort possible. I wish you could see the beautiful, educational signs at McIntosh Reserve installed by Friends of McIntosh Reserve.

Carroll County, with help from TPL, is also purchasing 454 acres with 1.4 miles of river front and the remains of two historic bridges, one of which is a wooden, covered bridge built in 1850 which we hope to rebuild. Further south, Georgia is developing Chattahoochee Bend State Park, with volunteers pitching in to help build trails.

We - the NGO's, friends of parks and other volunteers and local governments want you to join us. We need you to complement our passion and local savvy with your experience and resources. Together, we have the opportunity to take the Chattahoochee River out of the closet. Let us open it to people who will bask in its beauty, recreate in it, come to love it and work to make it even cleaner.

History is about telling stories, and here are two instructive stories. As you know, President Theodore Roosevelt started the National Parks about a century ago. We picture TR as the husky hero who led his Rough Riders up San Juan Hill. His is the namesake of the Teddy Bear. But do you know that young Teddy Roosevelt was a sickly child raised in New York City? As an adult, he built his strength as an outdoors man, and even during his presidency, rode vast areas of the Great Plains on horseback. This sickly child had had two things on his side. One was determination. The other was Mother Nature.

Another person closely associated with spending time with nature is Thoreau. After the death of his brother, Henry David Thoreau fell into a prolonged depression. He was living in the home of

Ralph Waldo Emerson who thought that a retreat in nature would do him good. Emerson offered his land a couple of miles outside of Concord on Walden Pond. Over the next two years, Thoreau “went to the woods...to live deliberately,” swimming in the lake, watching the moon arc across the night sky; listening to leaves rustle in the breeze.

Thoreau discovered the healing power of nature and left us an account of how we might do the same. “There can be no black melancholy to him who lives in the midst of Nature. ...What is the pill which will keep us well, serene, contented? For my panacea let me have a draught of undiluted morning air.”

Want more modern stories about the positive effects of nature on people? Call Rand Wentworth, the energetic President of the Land Trust Alliance, who wrote that story of Thoreau, and be prepared to be regaled with wonderful and persuasive tales of transformation.

Our challenge is to reunite the people of our nation with its bountiful natural resources. Let us resolve to protect the Chattahoochee River watershed and enable our citizens to enjoy its scenic beauty and be close to nature. Please vote to recommend H.R. 3785 to the House Committee on Natural Resources.