

STATE OF THE PARK by Superintendent Bill Cox

3rd Annual Park Symposium, Sept 18, 2019

Welcome to the CRNRA and our headquarters here at the Island Ford unit: one of 15 beautiful land units that make up the park along with 48 miles of the Chattahoochee River.

This is an important conversation we're having, and a chance to again see what all's planned or happening along the river. There is a tremendous amount of investment going on along the 48 miles of the Chattahoochee River in the park, and beyond.

I usually close my talks with these economic figures but I'm going to start with them today. This park generated an estimated \$171 million in economic impact in 2018 and supported approximately 2,000 jobs. This is a *significant* recreational economy we have here. It's worth investing in - and it's worth protecting.

CRNRA alone has in the works about \$15-16 million worth of improvements to the park with some of the very partners you will hear from today. Other cities and nonprofit organizations also have millions worth of investments planned. You'll be hearing about some of those investments today.

These investments are being made because this is what our citizenry wants - more and better places to walk, exercise, hike, bike ride, and connect with nature - and they especially like doing it along the Chattahoochee River.

In 2016, the National Recreation Area developed our parkwide strategic plan with a goal of creating greater recognition, locally, regionally and nationally, of the park as a unit of the National Park Service. To do that, we decided to focus on three aspects of the park every five years - to create a truly iconic NPS experience. We have been working to implement that plan since then.

I am pleased to report we are making progress on the first three areas: the Paces Mill Unit, Vickery Creek Unit and our National Water Trail. We have spent the bulk of these first three years in planning, designing and assessing environmental impacts. We'll soon begin the fundraising phase for some of our projects and hopefully be seeing construction start in the next couple of years.

Kyethea Clark from the Cumberland Community Improvement District is here to talk about our efforts to renovate the Paces Mill area of the park and we'll hear from her soon. The Vickery Creek unit improvements are tied to the City of Roswell's efforts to enhance the entrance into the city from Hwy 9. All the trail connections and improvements to the access into the Allenbrook home area are part of this major undertaking by the city of Roswell. When they're through, I believe the Vickery Creek Unit will be one of the premier hiking destinations in the park. You'll be able to hike from the Roswell Mill Park all the way to the river through our Vickery Creek Unit.

With regard to the improvements to the National Water Trail designation: I talked last year about our effort with the Virginia Tech Landscape Architecture Dept to provide us with ideas of how to enhance our water trail. One of the major ideas they developed was to create a paddle and camp experience throughout the full length of the 48 miles of river in the park. To that end, we are in conversation with the Trust for Public Land about potentially funding this effort. I believe this project has some real potential for connecting people to the outstanding water resource we have here in this river.

I also believe people will be willing to invest in the park's projects, and all the projects along the river, including those being done outside the park, **if** they believe the river and surrounding lands are in good condition and inviting for recreation.

So, I want to talk a little bit about the state of the park in terms of its water resources, land resources and then some thoughts about how the park is doing in general.

Water Resources

Let's start with the river and our water resources. This is a bit of a good news/bad news story.

I think many of us know that what's going on in the river is a function of what's going on in our watershed: the watershed being that area of land that drains to this particular river. This portion of the Chattahoochee River watershed is narrow and within it is nested several smaller sub-watersheds like the Big Creek watershed coming out of Forsyth Co and entering the river here at Roswell.

The two biggest factors influencing our water quality in the park are pathogens (or bacteria), and sediment or dirt getting into our river.

A couple of years ago, I mentioned that although the river has seen tremendous improvement over the last 40 years, we were starting to see that improvement plateau with regard to pathogens. It looks like from the data we've collected that we have actually lost ground on pathogens over the past couple of years.

In 2017, pathogen levels exceeded EPA's recommendation for recreational waters in 26% of the samples collected. Last year, the standard was exceeded 31% of the time. This year, to date pathogen levels exceeded EPA's standard in 41% of the samples collected. That's the bad news.

In the main stem of the river, water quality for pathogens declines as you move down river from Buford dam, due primarily to tributaries and other storm water discharges. The biggest declines have been in the middle and southern portions of the park, with the water quality in fairly good condition in the north end with regard to pathogens.

And there is a reason for this. In 2019 to date, there were over 150 sewer spills in the Chattahoochee watershed (over 12.3 M gallons). That number has gone up significantly in the last three years from 62 in 2017, to 79 in 2018. And 2019 isn't over yet!

Based on the spill records provided by the State's Env Protection Division from Jan 2014 to present, 76% of the volume spilled within the watershed was from the Azalea/Riverside Road area. **That's the bad news.**

The good news:

Fulton County has a major sewer expansion project underway that will hopefully address these many of these sewage spills, especially along Azalea & Riverside Roads. They are currently working with us and other partners through the environmental assessment part of this project that provide for increased capacity.

The other good news:

Pathogen contamination levels are highest in the off-season when fewer visitors are expected to be on or in the river recreating. So, during the summer months when people are most likely to be on the river, the water quality is pretty good. **And that's good news.**

It may be interesting to note that based on our efforts to track the source of pathogens, humans and dogs appear to be primary contributors of contamination in the CRNRA and throughout the watershed. Yes, those nice little bags people leave in the park are not biodegradable and are not fertilizer. They are trash that ends up in the river and tributaries or worse. The park will be working with our Friends Group, the Chattahoochee Parks Conservancy to begin an effort to better educate people on the proper collection and disposal of their dog waste.

Development continues to be another stressor to the water quality of the river. The amount of impervious surface within the CRNRA watershed is steadily increasing. By impervious surfaces, we mean surfaces that rain water can't percolate through and ends up running across the surface picking up velocity and anything else it can pick up from parking lots and roads, ultimately ending up in our creeks and tributaries.

Both stream habitat and water quality are impacted when the impervious surface in a watershed exceeds around 10-12%. There is only one sub watershed within this part of the Chattahoochee River watershed that has less than 12% impervious surface and that's Haw Creek in Forsyth Co. And even that sub-watershed is developing rapidly.

In 1991, the watershed was about 12% impervious surfaces. In 2016, the impervious surfaces have increased to just over 23%. So, it's not surprising we're seeing impacts to water quality since almost a quarter of our watershed has a hardened surface. There are currently two developments of over 900 housing units planned adjacent to the river. I'm not necessarily anti-development, but I do hope there is some level of consideration given to reducing the impacts to the river through appropriate conservation planning techniques.

The first step would be to adhere to the recommendations from the Atlanta Regional Commission as part of their Metropolitan River Protection Act review. And there are ways to reduce storm water impacts and keep the water and dirt on site.

These developments, really any development in the watershed, if not properly planned, can result in increased sediment in our river through ineffective efforts to control erosion at the construction site, and increase the amount of impervious surfaces such as roads, driveways and roof tops resulting in storm water runoff that has increased velocities and the ability to scour stream banks. I'm suggesting that any development within the 2000-foot MRPA corridor, or the authorized boundary of the park, be closely evaluated for opportunities to reduce impacts on water quality in the river.

When you think about the river and all the changes that have gone on in our watershed, both good and bad, in many ways, it's surprising our water quality is as good as it is. That's pretty much been the result of some vigilant partners like the Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and the local jurisdictions who have made protecting water quality a priority.

Another contributor to sediment loading in the river is through dam operations that increase stream bank erosion. Between 2005 and 2013, we experienced over half a mile of bank erosion from Buford Dam to Settles Creek, with an additional mile of potential bank erosion identified. During that same time period, we lost over 40 feet of bank from the head of Bowman's Island. I believe a significant amount of sediment is being added to the river through bank erosion.

As some of you know, we have completed what we call a High Definition Stream Survey of our river banks for the entire 48 miles of the park. That data is currently being analyzed and will give us a better understanding of what our current bank conditions are, allow us to monitor changes through time, and identify opportunities for bank stabilization efforts.

One example of addressing stream bank erosion is through our Embrace a Stream Partnership with Trout Unlimited, University of Georgia, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and GA-DNR where we're working on a stream restoration project on Crayfish Creek in the Orrs Ferry Unit.

Water Quantity or Flows

Water quantity or flow is another critical driver for water quality and is a major component in the health of the river and the recreation economy. Research has suggested that the optimum flows needed to support the type of recreation we have here on the Chattahoochee River should be between 1000 and 1500 cubic feet per second.

Over the past five years, our flows in the park have been between 1,000 and 1,500 cfs only **18%** of the time period at Medlock Bridge (ranges from 15% to 21%) and **35%** of the time at Paces Mill (ranges from 21% to 48%).

We have struggled with both times of too much flow (like this past spring) and too little flow like during periods of drought. Much of that, of course is a function of weather.

But know that the success of the park's commercial operations is very much flow dependent. Flow and water quality are keys to our current and future success. I have appreciated the

efforts of the Corps of Engineers to work with our commercial operators on coordinating their releases to minimize impacts to commercial activities in the park.

As a park, I believe the best thing we can do is keep our communities and key stakeholders informed about river conditions through data and information, and let everyone know when those conditions are trending away from where we need to be. We can do that by establishing parameters that we can measure and evaluate over time.

The actual management of this watershed and the river is ultimately a team effort between us, the other federal agencies, state agencies and the local governments within the 48-mile corridor. **To that end, I am going to suggest we establish a “coalition of the willing” to get together periodically and review what’s going on in the river and the watershed to see what adjustments need to be made.**

I’m recommending participation from our cities and counties along the river, as they control the land use that affects so much of what we do. ARC also should be represented as the keepers of the MRPA (Metro River Protection Act) flame.

We can call this group the Chattahoochee Tailwater Coalition, since we’re downstream of two dams in the park. We can really call it anything we like; I’m just trying to get the idea out there!

And that idea is that as a group, we would better understand the issues related to the Chattahoochee River in the park and the watershed as a whole, in order to take individual actions within our authorities to adaptively manage our river for our collective success.

Now let’s talk a little about the Land Resources

Since this symposium has Trails as its theme this year, I think it’s appropriate to focus on what’s going on with the trail system here. The way we look at it here at the park, our hiking and biking trails are our most significant “facility” in the sense that it’s the most frequently used asset that we have.

As many of you know, we contracted with Applied Trails Research to do an assessment of the entire trail system in the park. That’s 83 miles of official trails. It was a rather sobering assessment in the sense that it basically said what we have here in terms of a trail system is completely unsustainable from several standpoints including a lack of planning for sustainability or quality experiences. Honestly, I couldn’t agree more.

So, we’re doing something about it. In addition to the funding provided by many of our partners, we’ve acquired additional funding to look at each unit individually with an eye toward sustainability and the desired future condition we want for the trails.

We are also in the process of hiring the park’s first Trail Crew Leader to begin systematically managing our 83 miles of trails in a sustainable manner. Our total investment in putting ourselves in position to revamp our trail system has been over \$475,000.

In addition to what we're doing with our own trail efforts, we are partnering with others to make additional trail connections that will provide for expanded opportunities to recreate and connect with the natural world.

And I think that's what makes CRNRA unique in that we can still put people on some fairly long-distance trails, both land and water, in some places with a relatively high degree of quiet and solitude- all next to a metro area of around 5.5 million people. That uniqueness will continue to drive our planning and consideration of other plans that involve the park.

The Park in General

Indicators are that we are in a good position for moving forward in the future. We have invested significantly in planning and organizing with our partners to be in this position.

We still have the 4th highest volunteer involvement out of 70 parks in the Southeast Region of the NPS. That's about 40,000 hours of additional help each year. In addition to the fine trail support we get from many of our volunteers, we've started the Chattahoochee Stream Stewards program and have currently trained 13 volunteers who now monitor 11 tributaries to the Chattahoochee River monthly.

We still score in the 95th percentile in terms of visitor satisfaction with their overall experience in the park. We have a healthy and growing Friends Group, the Chattahoochee Parks Conservancy, which has made significant strides under Sally's leadership to become a significant philanthropic support for the park.

We have steady annual visitation of nearly three million people each year. I do believe we undercount the numbers, especially in terms of missing those who walk into the park as oppose to driving in, and we are working to make improvements to our counting methodology.

We have been able to completely change out our wayfinding signs throughout the park and we will soon be installing our signs at all our river access points to match what many of the other cities along the river have done to designate access.

I should mention that we also have significant trail projects with the city of Sandy Springs connecting their Crooked Creek Trail to our Holcomb Bridge unit, and the trail plans to connect Hyde Farm with our Johnson Ferry unit.

And I would be remiss not to mention we are a stakeholder in planning effort for the Chattahoochee RiverLands effort led by the Trust for Public Land, with support from the ARC and Cobb County. We'll be hearing more about that from Walt Ray today.

CONCLUSION

The bottom line for our park is that we could never be in the position we're in right now - poised for some really great things – without our partners.

That would be the cities and counties that border the park, and the non-governmental organizations that help us do so much from raising funds for the park, to helping with watershed education, to protecting water quality.

It really does take a village to manage a water resource like this in a highly urbanized and urbanizing watershed, with so many variables at play.

My hope is that the one thing you take away from this is that it will take all of us doing our part to protect the investments of time, energy and money that have been made to get us this far and those investments that are still in the future.

And we need to be thinking about how we are going to raise up the next generation of stewards, advocates and park visitors to take over these significant investments in the future.

Again, thanks for your time today and your interest in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area.