Saving parks along the Chattahoochee

Standing up for critical greenspace outside Atlanta

More than 3 million people come to the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, a string of parks along the Chattahoochee River north of downtown Atlanta. This is almost as many as Yellowstone National Park and roughly a million more visitors than Mt. Rushmore. The state’s largest brown trout on record was caught along the park, and archaeologists have found evidence of people in and around the park dating back to 6,000 B.C.

Many reasons for preservation

These facts and many others were explored in the report, “Top 10 Reasons to Protect and Preserve the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area,” released by Environment Georgia.

“Three million visitors know that this park is a big part of what makes Atlanta special,” explained Jennette Gayer, Environment Georgia state advocate. “For the past several months, we have been working to share the importance of this place and the need to protect it with Georgians throughout the state.”

Nearly half of the 10,000 acres that Congress meant to be included in the park are unprotected and at risk for development. Perhaps one of the most important reasons for keeping this land out of the hands of developers is because it helps to keep the Chattahoochee River clean, which supplies 70 percent of metro Atlanta with drinking water.

Three proposals for funding

Funding that could be used to protect the parks and expand the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area is one of the hot items in the Congressional budgeting debate. The Senate has proposed a budget that fully funds the Land and Water Conservation Fund at $900 million. The House of Representatives has proposed cutting the important conservation fund to around $60 million; and the president has proposed funding at $600 million.

As the three branches negotiate, Environment Georgia will be launching a statewide push to educate Georgians about threats facing our parks and opportunities to save them.

“Protecting open space is one of our most critical missions,” said Gayer. “We’ve stood up for special places before. Now is no different.”

more online

For more information on our efforts to protect greenspace throughout Georgia, visit our website at www.EnvironmentGeorgia.org or follow us on Facebook at Facebook.com/EnvironmentGeorgia.

Sprawl in Metro Atlanta
To our members

Every summer Environment Georgia undertakes a huge citizen outreach effort. This year, we’ll focus much of our time and energy on an effort to protect and expand parks along the Chattahoochee River.

We’ll talk to thousands of people about the challenges facing Georgia’s environment and leave thousands more information about how we are creating change and solving these problems through grassroots action.

It’s clear from these conversations that Georgians are concerned about the future we are leaving the next generation and realize that without a healthy environment, we don’t have much.

Thanks for making all this work possible.

Sincerely,

Jennette Gayer
Advocate

Recent action

A recap of this year’s legislative session

Every year, Environment Georgia publishes a “Legislative Agenda” that gives our members a run down on both our offensive and defensive priorities for the legislative session. This year’s legislative session ended in April, and as expected, there were both wins and losses. Here are a few updates:

Unfortunately, HB 199 by Rep. Ed Lindsey didn’t pass. The legislation would have added high-tech water conservation investments by water utilities to the list of projects that may be funded by the governor’s Water Supply Program of the Georgia Environmental Finance Authority.

Environment Georgia opposed bill SB 213 by Sen. Ross Tolleson that sought to revise the Flint River Drought Protection Act. We wanted to make sure this legislation considered the entire Flint River in any planning efforts and ensured a certain level of flow in this river, which has been known to run nearly dry in certain segments. Unfortunately, the bill focused on only one part of the Flint River and included “augmentation” schemes that threatened groundwater and challenged existing laws managing water rights. Thankfully the legislation did not pass this session, but it will likely return the next session.

Legislation ensures fund goes to waste cleanup

For years, Georgians have contributed to the Hazardous Waste Trust Fund as part of the money they pay for trash collection. The fund is supposed to be used to clean up hazardous waste sites and helping to stop landfills that may be leaking toxins into drinking water and the environment. Unfortunately, more than half of the fees are consistently used by state legislators for purposes that have nothing to do with cleaning up toxic sites or protecting the environment.

Recently, legislation supported by Environment Georgia passed that will stop money collected for the trust fund from being used for anything except hazardous waste cleanup. This is an important motivator for future legislators to make sure money is spent to clean up some of our state’s most toxic sites.

Toward a greener future

Environment Georgia and Environment Georgia Research & Policy Center gratefully accept bequests, beneficiary designations of IRAs and life insurance, and gifts of securities to support our work to build a cleaner, greener, healthier future.

For more information, call 1-800-841-7299 or send an email to:
PlannedGiving@EnvironmentGeorgia.org.

Photo: U.S.D.A.

Flint River
On Mar. 13, Environment Georgia Research and Policy Center released a new report outlining Atlanta's huge potential to become the South's solar leader.

The report, “A Bright Future: Building a Solar Atlanta,” provides a roadmap to help Atlanta get 10 percent of its energy from the sun by 2030.

We already have what we need

“Atlanta has the sun, the public leadership, the engaged citizens, and the budding solar business sector to transform into the South’s solar leader,” said Environment Georgia State Advocate Jennette Gayer. “Solar energy is a proven, pollution-free resource. Making bold goals now, Atlanta can build a homegrown, solar economy.”

The report found that Atlanta can reduce its global warming pollution by more than 712,000 metric tons every year by generating 10 percent of its energy using solar and ramping up its use of solar water heaters at the same time.

Atlanta nonprofit uses solar, saves money

Environment Georgia Research and Policy Center released the report at an event in front of the headquarters of CHRIS Kids, a nonprofit in Atlanta that saves $248 per month by using solar to create energy and heat water.

“For us, solar is a win-win,” explained Kathy Colbenson, CHRIS Kids Chief Executive Officer. “We save money on our electric bills, contribute to the power grid, and teach the kids in our programs about sustainability and responsibility for our planet and the air we breathe.”

Kenny Hughes with the Georgia Solar Energy Association and Dakin Spain with Radiance Solar joined Gayer in releasing the report and discussed just how widespread the benefits of Atlanta going solar could be.

“Solar projects in Atlanta mean jobs for Atlantans,” said Spain.

2 MW of capacity so far

Atlanta currently has around two MW of installed solar capacity. To boost its solar capacity to 10 percent of Atlanta's total energy consumption by 2030, the city will need to increase solar installations roughly 38 percent every year. Georgia Power is currently enacting a plan that proposes a growth rate of around 40 percent, but for just the next three years.

“Georgia historically has been ranked in the lower two-thirds for total solar installations in the country, yet is ranked as one of the top states for solar potential,” said Kenny Hughes, director of sales for Suniva and a board member of the Georgia Solar Energy Association. “The Georgia Solar Energy Association is happy to see Georgia Power’s Advance Solar Initiative poised to increase solar installations by more than 10 times over the next three years and look forward to new opportunities in Atlanta and beyond to increase our solar investment.”

Environment Georgia is working to further publicize Atlanta’s huge solar potential, in efforts to start seeing our solar potential translated into real results on homes and businesses throughout the capital city.

Keeping fracking out of Georgia

A recent Atlanta Journal Constitution article reports that gas and oil speculators are already at work here in Georgia, hoping to strike it big in the Conasauga gas field, which runs under the Northwest corner of the state and likely includes parts of the Chattahoochee National Forest. We’re working hard to make sure that this never becomes a possibility in Georgia.

Fracking would mean serious damage for the pristine headwaters of many of our rivers—which are huge sources of drinking water. It would also threaten critical wildlife and amazing trails.

Right now, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and the Department of the Interior oversee drilling leases in our national forests. We’ve been gathering petition signatures to the new Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewell to make sure we can protect our drinking water and our national forest.

Consider the legacy fracking has left in other parts of the country:

- 320 leaks or spills where fracking fluid reached groundwater in Colorado.
- 421 drilling-waste pits have leaked into groundwater in New Mexico.
- 3,355 state environment law violations by drilling companies in Pennsylvania from 2008-2011.
- Approximately 1.3 billion gallons of fracking wastewater was created in Pennsylvania in about three years.
Ensuring Jekyll Island is protected by law

As a member of a task force that was established to help rewrite the Jekyll Island Master Plan, Environment Georgia’s Advocate Jennette Gayer has been working for efforts to clarify and strengthen what part of the state park should be protected from development. Currently, state law requires 65 percent of the island remain in its natural state.

Task force members and facilitators have completed research that shows developers have developed nearly 200 acres more than should have been allowed under state law.

Now, the challenge will be to make sure the Master Plan clearly discourages any further overdevelopment and truly provides protections for the areas that are undeveloped.

“Jekyll Island is one of the most amazing places in Georgia,” said Gayer. “I’ve been honored to be a part of this task force and will continue to be a voice for its preservation.”