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SC's ambitious Black River park project will provide public access to waterway



Dale Threatt-Taylor of The Nature Conservancy on a boat Tour of the Black River on March 16, 2021, near Andrews.

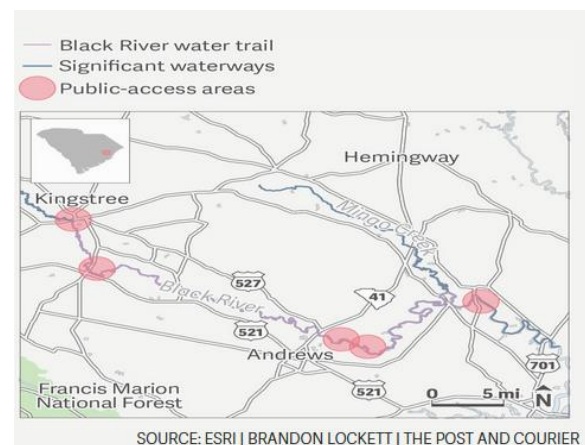
By Adam Parker

Some rivers are unique. They start and end within a single region. They meander through cypress swamps. Their waters turn a deep copper-brown because of the tannins drawn from old-growth wetland forests.

The Black River of South Carolina is one such river. It roves through rural tracts of loblolly pines used by the timber industry. It crowns at Kingstree then widens as it approaches Andrews.

It is a place full of life, color and beauty, of sights and sounds most of us know little about. We have turned our backs to it. It runs behind the objects of our civilization — the farms and towns and warehouses and highways. It runs within the forbidding woods. It runs quietly, mostly out of reach.

But that could change soon.



Conservation groups and government officials are working together to create a series of public access points along the Black River.

An ambitious collaboration between conservation groups, municipal governments, private landowners, local residents and the state eventually will result in South Carolina’s first state park in more than 20 years. The project is one of the most sweeping and inclusive efforts yet undertaken in South Carolina to conserve land for public use.

It won’t be a typical park. This will be a series trails, boat launches, picnic areas and other features along the Black River — an effort to turn us around and face what nature has to offer.

The waterway itself links them all, of course, and 75 miles of it have been deemed a “State Scenic River” under the South Carolina Scenic Rivers Act. This act enables the Department of Natural Resources to help landowners, conservation groups, state agencies and adventurers manage the resource responsibly and promote good stewardship. Conservationists welcome DNR’s oversight, for the river is a fragile ecosystem impacted by urban runoff, agricultural waste and industrial contamination.



The Black River Cypress Preserve is owned by the Butler Conservation Fund, which has collaborated with several private and public organizations to create a recreational network of public spaces along the Black River. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

It is also subject to flooding and fast flows that can wreak havoc. In October 2015, a “1,000-year flood” sent river water nearly 23 feet above normal levels, causing significant destruction throughout the Black River’s floodplain.

That fearsome event demonstrated the need to manage development, promote public awareness, encourage landowners to create natural buffers, reduce pollution and develop an effective water-use plan, DNR reported.

Advocates hope the new park can benefit people in a rural part of the state with few other amenities. They want to spur economic activity not only in Kingstree and Andrews, but also along the country roads near the river.

The team of river advocates are planning to engage with local communities and entrepreneurs to foster economic development. River users will want kayaks and canoes to rent, sandwiches to eat, fishing gear and sunscreen to buy, and binoculars with which they can watch birds and, perhaps, a slithering snake or two.



Maria Whitehead of Open Space Institute on March 16, 2021, discusses the new Black River park project, which will consist of several public-access areas along the waterway. In Kingstree, officials plan to create Mill Street Park, to feature a kayak launch, marketplace, education opportunities and more. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

The Black River is part of the Winyah Bay watershed, among the largest on the East

Coast. It captured the attention of conservationists in the early 1990s, in the wake of the successful ACE Basin initiative, said Dana Beach, a board member of the Butler Conservation Fund.

“It is not as well-known as the ACE, which has a national profile, but it has been a stunning, quiet success,” Beach said.

Around 250,000 acres of the ACE Basin were secured starting in 1988, thanks to public-private partnerships. The effort to protect this habitat set an example for nearly every conservation project undertaken in the Southeast since the 1990s.

And now the model is being applied to the Black River. If the history of human civilization includes environmental manipulation, this is where there’s an effort to limit despoilment, to assist nature in its recovery, to unburden the flora and fauna. This is where the unhindered current ensures that the wildlife can thrive. The rise and fall of this dark water is evidence of Earth’s enduring vitality.

‘This brings hope’

Kingstree Mayor Darron Tisdale celebrated the new collaboration that likely will draw welcomed attention to his neck of the woods.

“Local people, even me as mayor, took (the river) for granted,” he remarked.

Here, at the crown of the river, begins the navigable portion of the waterway. Here, 18th century Colonial loggers provided the lumber used to build ships for the British navy. The area once was full of the king’s trees. A new 18-acre park just steps from the center of town likely will feature a boat launch, swimming access and commercial activity such as food trucks and kayak rentals.

Mill Street Park will be one of four main sites, separated by miles, that comprise the new Black River state park. The others are:

- The private Hinds Canada tract in rural Williamsburg County.
- The Black River Cypress Preserve secured by the Butler Conservation Fund, and an adjacent preserve secured by The Nature Conservancy.
- Rocky Point Community Forest, a riverside public space in Georgetown County.



Williamsburg County Supervisor Tiffany Wright said many residents of this mostly rural part of the state, which is 65 percent African American, don’t have easy access to the river (or other natural amenities).

“This brings hope to our citizens,” she said, adding that the county wants to create economic incentives that encourage investment in the project.



The Black River near Andrews features cypress and tupelo, and several other species of flora. It provides habitat for birds, reptiles, fish and even some large mammals. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

Williamsburg County native and trial lawyer Billy Jenkinson recalled how, as a teenager, he motored a small wooden boat down the river to Brown's Ferry, stopping along the way to catch fish.

Jenkinson said he knows every stretch of what he considers to be "the most scenic river in South Carolina" and the county's greatest natural asset. But much of the Black River runs through swampland and is difficult to reach, he said.

"People who don't know somebody, or have some kind of right of privilege of going there, it just limits (access) too much," he said, adding that most African Americans do not own land along the river.

That's why the project is so important, he said.

Down S.C. Highway 377 is the 310-acre Hinds Canada tract, which sits adjacent to another property secured with an easement by the Pee Dee Land Trust.

Hinds Canada is a low-lying, flood-prone, semi-forested stretch that has the potential to be developed into a multi-use public park, with river access, walking trails and picnic areas.



"It needs to be resilient," Bishop said, "a park that can absorb floodwaters but remain intact."

Much of the highway was underwater in the October 2015 storm. Anyone standing nearby would have been fully submerged.

Holley Owings, a landscape architect with Greenville-based Earth Design, said the team is reaching out to communities along the river to ensure local interests are represented. Already, 236 churches are in the loop, she said. Access, though, is just one of the priorities. The ecosystem needs to be restored and protected, rural economies revitalized and history — both the good and the bad — confronted with honesty, she said.

The Open Space Institute purchased the property in May thanks to funding from the S.C. Conservation Bank and The Nature Conservancy. In February, the deed was transferred to the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism.



A view of the Black River near Andrews. The river features tannin-rich waters and an abundance of wildlife that conservation groups seek to protect with easements, preserves and a new public park. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

State Park Service Director Paul McCormack credits Maria Whitehead of the Open Space Institute with forging this coalition and pushing the Black River park initiative.

Whitehead, senior projects director, said the grand scope of the project is only possible because of the many groups that are involved.

It began with an idea, became a conservation effort, then inspired others to get involved, she said. DNR, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service played critical roles in securing the ACE Basin. Now, local and county governments, along with the Parks department, are helping to transform our relationship with the Black River.

McCormack said all the details are yet to be worked out and it could be several years before the sites are ready for managed use, but the grand vision is to provide day access as well as multi-day excursions.

The linear park, though managed by multiple entities, will feature uniform branding, a single website and other centralized features so users can easily

collect information, plan their trips and secure any necessary materials.

‘A reason to stop’

The Black River features “clear water stained by the giant teabag of a swamp that’s all around us,” said Gates Roll of the Butler Conservation Fund.

Roll oversees the Black River Cypress Preserve, which is undeveloped and home to all kinds of species of bird, reptile, insect and plant. It’s the epicenter of the spotted turtle habitat, he said. The warblers and kites fly great distances northward to nest here. They join little yellow swamp canaries, dam-building beavers, barred owls, wood ducks, white tailed deer, river otters, bears and a lot of aquatic wildlife.

“The rare is commonplace,” Roll said.



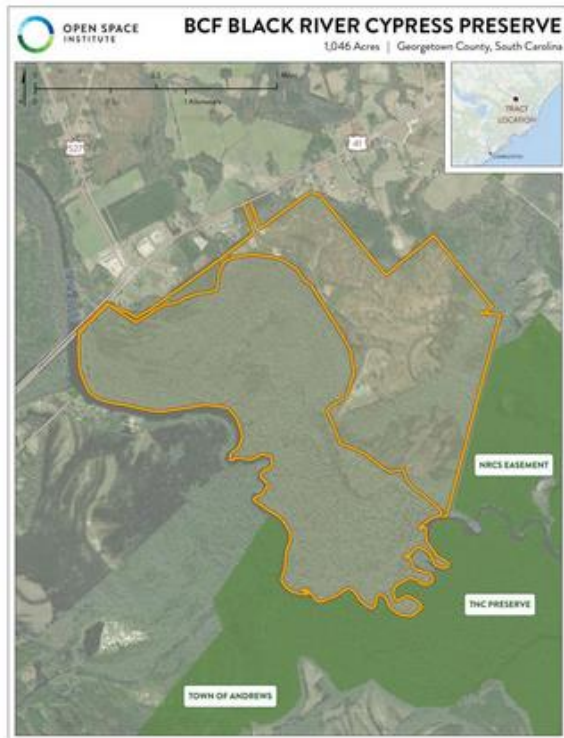
A patch of southern wild rice grows along the Black River near Andrews on March 16, 2021. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

His job is to show people around, whether along the riverside trails and through the managed pine savannah, or upon the water, meandering between the cypress and tupelo.

“You can’t love a place until you know a place,” he said.

The Butler Conservation Fund is actively restoring the long-leaf pine groves with controlled burns and strategic plantings. These are the majestic native pine that were

largely replaced by the smaller, fast-growing loblollies because of timber farming and wildfire suppression.



Habitat restoration is one part of the fund's threefold mission here. The Preserve also is meant to pave the way for research and outdoor education, Roll said.

Interestingly, it was the timber companies, such as MeadWestvaco and International Paper, that donated or sold some of their holdings to conservation groups beginning in the 1980s. The Nature Conservancy acquired 1,200 acres of forested wetlands in the late '80s, which has resulted in 64 miles of Black River frontage under easement. Rocky Point down the river in Georgetown County once was part of IP's holdings.

The Preserve, while privately owned, is open to the public by appointment during its startup phase. The Donnelley Foundation, which has provided support to land trusts and helped with project planning and coordination, is reaching out to various

communities in the area, such as the Waccamaw Indian People and South Carolina's Conservationists of Color, to explore ways the park initiative can incorporate them.



Andrews Mayor Frank McClary said he's focused on economic revitalization, and the Preserve is an essential part of his agenda.

"We have to give (people) a reason to stop," McClary said.

The site features a couple of cabins for overnight stays, a meeting space and bathrooms. But if it can draw enough visitors, maybe there will be opportunities to open a hotel in the future, he said. Andrews sits between Charleston and Myrtle Beach. It boasts great barbecue, a skydiving zone, an annual Heritage Festival and an urban center ripe for revitalization.



Samantha Queen with South Carolina Parks, Recreation and Tourism visits a cemetery atop a bluff overlooking the Black River in Georgetown County on March 16, 2021. The cemetery is part the Rocky Point Community Forest. Grace Beahm Alford/Staff

Upon the bluff

Rocky Point has a boat launch and picnic area, plus a historical cemetery hidden among the trees on a bluff overlooking the river. It was purchased in 2015 by the Winyah River Alliance.

Ray Funnye, director of Georgetown County Public Works, remembers growing up in the nearby Choppee community, which often used Rocky Point as a place to gather, fish, swim and have fun after (and sometimes during) school.

Now he wants it to be part of a new ecotourism effort that can highlight a neglected part of the county.

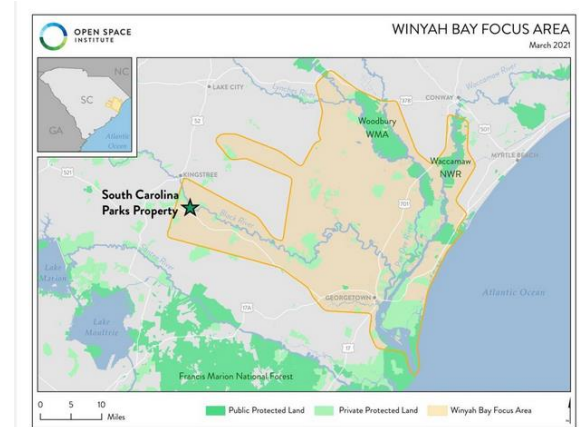
“We’re encouraging developers to look at this side of the river,” he said.

There’s history here. Just up the river, at Brown’s Ferry, White people enjoyed vacation time; Rocky Point mostly was used by African Americans. The old Coachman family cemetery is nestled among the trees. Word has it that a Black burial ground also can be found nearby.

Settlement communities such as Choppee long have been marginalized, in part by design, in part by geographical

circumstances. Emma Boyer of the Winyah Rivers Alliance, Beth Goodale of Georgetown County Parks and Funnye want to change that.

Along Choppee Road is a recreational facility that they want to use in conjunction with the development and marketing of the 680-acre community forest. They plan on establishing camping sites and introducing new amenities to the property.



Here, the Black River is wide, and it wends leisurely toward Georgetown where it joins the Great Pee Dee River and spills into Winyah Bay.

It doesn’t take much for the tannin-rich waters to pull you out of time. The river, though fragile, persists in its run to the Atlantic Ocean, just as it has done for millennia. It is subject to our abuse, to be sure, and it is capable of rebelling with an angry current and high floodwaters.

But it is always ready to make peace.

And now, perhaps, so are we.