

## Editorial

# *Black River initiative can create a great state park, aid conservation*

**S**outh Carolina's recently unveiled Black River initiative, which includes a new state park that eventually will be created in parts of Williamsburg and Georgetown counties, promises to be a unique and significant addition to our state for many reasons, including:

- Its natural setting along 70 miles of a scenic, largely unspoiled coastal river that got its name after its dark, tea-like hue created by tannins from leaves and swamps. This is the Black River's most navigable stretch, meandering through large, open lake-like areas to narrow stretches bordered by cypress, swamp tupelo and loblolly pine.

- Its linear footprint. The emerging park won't be one single site like most other state parks but rather a series of smaller public parks connected by the river itself. It also happens to be in a part of the state farthest away from our 47 existing state parks.

- Its collaborative formation. The initiative is supported by more than a dozen distinct nonprofits, governments and agencies, and four private funds are helping pay for it while five private companies are serving as consultants. Yes, the state's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism will own and operate the park, but there's much more to what's going on here.

That's because the Black River initiative is only partly about creating this new park, tentatively known as the Black River Water Trail & Park Network. Its other, equally important aspect is the conservation effort already launched along the Black River, an effort that supporters hope will continue to grow significantly in the coming years.

Both can be mutually reinforcing: The conservation effort will protect the river's habitat and scenery; the park will expose the river's beauty to more people, raising awareness and appreciation for what has been conserved.

"State Parks and other public partners that are willing to own and steward land along with the river increase the capacity for conservation," said Maria Whitehead of the Open Space Institute, which is part of the effort. "To create local stewards and river advocates, we have to give people a way to experience the river. Parks and trails will do this. I'm quoting here, but at the end of the day, we love that we know, we know what we experience, and we protect what we love."

Charleston conservationist Dana Beach noted that parks are expensive to run and have less acreage than what can be protected through conservation easements. "A park and its public access component is always best embedded in a larger protected landscape," he said. "I don't need to be able to walk on every acre in the ACE Basin of the 250,000 that are protected, but I do need to walk on some of it, some of the best of it. ... The goals here are not fundamentally different than they were in the ACE, but the constituency and public involvement are vastly expanded."

While the initiative has many influential, impassioned backers, it still needs more public support and feedback, particularly from those who live near the river but also those who would want to play there. An ongoing master planning effort will determine what specific park activities people want, such as kayaking, picnicking, fishing, camping, hiking and biking. It also will map out strategies to

protect, preserve and interpret the river's natural and cultural significance as well as more mundane needs, such as restrooms and parking.

Those who want to know more should visit the master planning website or even explore the river themselves; existing access points include the Rocky Point Community Forest (open daily) and the Butler Conservation Fund's Black River Cypress Preserve (go to [cypresspreserve.org](http://cypresspreserve.org) to arrange a visit).

Done right, the park will not only showcase the river but also breathe new life and economic opportunity into nearby communities, particularly Kingstree and Andrews. Williamsburg County Supervisor Tiffany Wright said residents' greater access to the river will be welcome, adding, "I think this project is going to restore hope."

The project's ultimate success will hinge on not only public access but also future conservation work. Ms. Whitehead said a reasonable goal would be to protect about half of the river frontage through private conservation easements and public ownership (about 20% is protected now). We encourage conservation groups, landowners and the S.C. Conservation Bank to remain diligent about seizing conservation opportunities as they arise, particularly as parts of the river remain vulnerable to hardwood logging and possibly even mining for limestone.

Many in South Carolina have never seen the Black River, but its beauty soon will be much more accessible. This new chapter is only beginning, and all those who care about the river should remain engaged — or become engaged — and help write it.