

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

In-stream flows

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

For years the water in western North Carolina's Cheoah River was collected and piped overland to a power station on the neighboring Little Tennessee River, leaving behind a river bed fed by a trickle of water coming through the dam and water flowing in from downstream tributaries. One of the great conservation success stories of recent years has been the return of flow to that dewatered stretch of river, a commitment made by Alcoa as part of the deal struck to allow them to continue using the river to generate electricity.

But one question was how much water should flow? What level of flow makes for a healthy, vibrant stream that also meets the needs of our farms, towns, and cities.

At a recent meeting of fish biologists, Virginia Tech professor Donald Orth discussed this question of flow and what it means to the future of fish in our southeastern rivers. He pointed out that the southeast has the greatest biodiversity of fish species in the temperate world, and that of the 675 fish species found in the southeast, more than 25% are imperiled.

While the south has long dealt with questions of water quality, we're now having to deal with question of water quantity – how much water can we take out of our rivers and still have healthy, biologically diverse rivers? It's a question we're going to have to answer and include in our conversations about what we want our communities to look like.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.