

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Toe River Trail

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature. Today we'll examine an effort to increase accessibility to one of the most beautiful corners of the Southern Appalachians.

In Okefenokee Swamp National Wildlife refuge, there is little hiking, simply because there is little dry earth, however, visitors routinely traverse the refuge, camping in it's backcountry and enjoying the alligators, turtles, and birds this southeast Georgia wilderness offers. Instead of being laced with hiking trails, the area is laced with paddling trails, with backcountry visitors paddling through the swamp from wooden camping platform to wooden camping platform.

In Eastern North Carolina, Alligator River National Wildlife refuge similarly offers paddling trails, as does Merchant Mills Pond State Park, and the tiny town of Columbia has a paddling trail that heads directly out from its waterfront.

While the Southern Appalachian area is crisscrossed with hiking trails, and we're a national center for paddling, we're a little short on paddle trails. Sure, folks can paddle any number of rivers, but few rivers have an organized system of put-ins and take-outs that allowing people to quickly and easily pick out a section of river, long or short, challenging or easy, and paddle it on a Saturday afternoon.

However, efforts are afoot in North Carolina's Yancey and Mitchell Counties to open up access to the Toe River and make it an outdoor recreation destination in this undeveloped part of the mountains.

Toe River Valley Watch, the local watershed group, is working to piece together a series of boating access points to create a river trail that would start at River Park in downtown Spruce Pine, and extend across two counties, ending just before the Tennessee State Line, after the Toe and Cane Rivers have joined to become the Nolichucky River.

The rivers of the Toe River Valley, which include the Cane, and North and South Toe Rivers, have historically been heavily impacted by mining, though in recent years water quality has improved in the area. Today the area is home to the endangered Appalachian elktoe mussel. Relatively undeveloped, the area hasn't suffered greatly from stormwater runoff that degrades streams and rivers near urban areas. Sadly, the Cane River has recently suffered from a malfunctioning waste water treatment plant, but the overall tract of water quality in the valley has been good. The river trail presents an opportunity to open up access to these rivers so more people can enjoy them, and realize what a precious resource they are.

These are rural counties that have seen a lot of industry leave in recent years, the river trail presents an opportunity for this area to attract paddlers who might otherwise paddle the French Broad, Watagua, or other area rivers. The trail would be a big step toward integrating the area into the extensive outdoor recreation industry that covers the Southern Appalachians.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.