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Countdown under way on Jocassee effort

BY HARRISON METZGER

Times-News Staff Writer

"Because of the size and natural resource values of the Lake Keowee-Toxaway river systems, this project will be considered the most significant conservation project in the Southern Appalachian Mountains in the latter half of the 20th century," John Garton, senior biologist, Duke Power Co.

Three years to save a natural paradise. That's how long Duke Power Co. has given the state of South Carolina to raise

millions of dollars to purchase 35,000 acres of wilderness along the north shore of Lake Jocassee.

Just across the state line in southern Transylvania County lie another 15,000 acres the utility plans to sell — the possible heart of a new state park and important additions to adjacent Nantahala National Forest.

In size, beauty and ecological bounty, the mountain gorges of the Jocassee region have often been compared to America's national parks. Take a walk here and

you can understand why government and conservation leaders agree that protecting this land for posterity is a top priority.

You can feel it in the thunder of Upper Whitewater Falls as it pitches more than 400 feet off the side of "The Blue

Wall," the mountain escarpment that runs along the North Carolina/South Carolina state line.

You can smell it when you walk a few miles out the Foothills Trail and deeply breathe the crisp, oxygen-rich air where the Thompson River rumbles through big rounded boulders and thick green rhododendron.

You can hear it a few miles down the trail where the pure waters of Bezcamp Creek whisper through a Hobbit-like landscape of ferns, small trees and rare plants sprouting from the rich black soil.

At day's end, you can see it in the pale moonlight reflected in the Horsepasture River, now quiet after dropping 2,000 feet through waterfalls with names like Rainbow, Windy and Staircase.

A land where water falls

The steep topography of the gorges, combined with a hard granite bedrock and some of the most abundant rainfall in North America, prompted Duke Power to begin buying land here in 1913.

Over the years, the utility purchased most of the land from Table Rock State Park all the way to the edge of the Chattooga River watershed near the

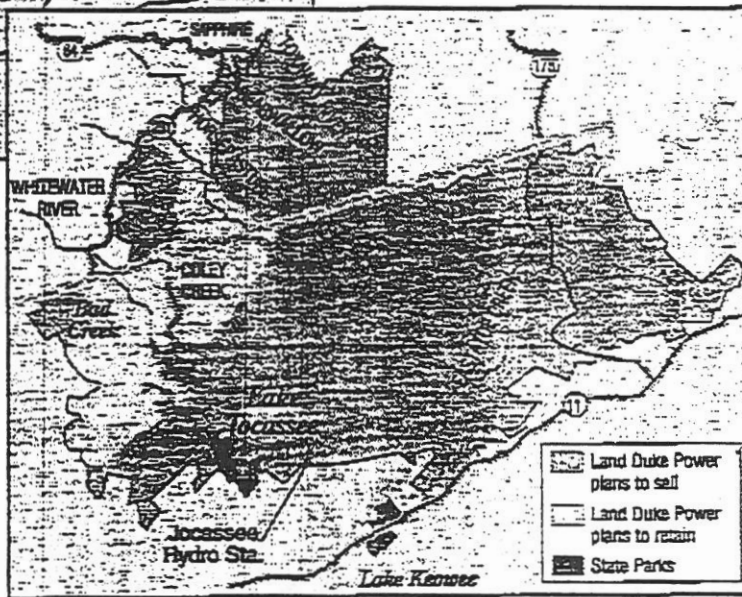
Georgia state line.

Duke subsidiary Crescent Resources Inc. has managed the land in partnership with state agencies to maintain and improve forests, watersheds, habitat for wildlife and rare species, recreation and the area's splendid scenery.

In 1991, Duke completed work on its \$900 million Bad Creek pumped storage station. The massive hydro-electric facility recycles



The aerial photo at top was taken near Whitewater Falls, looking east over the north shore of Lake Jocassee and shows some of the approximately 50,000 acres Duke Power has offered to sell North and South Carolina. The area is shown in location and detail in the two maps above and at right.



CHRISTINA STRAYER/TIMES-NEWS

SAVE continues on 15A

The Blue Wall

For those who have never visited the Jocassee area, its special magic can be found in the pages of a new photography book, *The Blue Wall* by South Carolina author and photographer Tommy Wyche. The book, commissioned by Duke Power Co., features lush photos of not only the Jocassee lands but also the adjacent Chattooga National Wild and Scenic River.

Wyche has camped, hiked and floated through some of the world's greatest wild places including the Himalayan Mountains, Alaska and the Grand Canyon. He calls the Jocassee region "one of the world's great wilderness areas."

Few people know the Jocassee area better than Transylvania County resident Bill Thomas, a leader in the N.C. Sierra Club who was instrumental getting the federal designation for the Horsepasture River.

Thomas says the area offers "one of the more fantastic land purchase opportunities east of the Rockies."

"To have four rivers like the Horsepasture flowing together in a relatively small area over the Blue Ridge Escarpment — it's just an incredible place..." he said. "There just isn't any place like it."

Thomas said public response will determine if the area is protected in the future, whether as a western state park, state gamelands or wildlife refuge.

"The key here is public support — the politicians in this case need to be convinced this is a wonderful idea," he said. "The lands need to be protected — they are just too special to be allowed to go into second homes and condos."

Thomas will present a slide show on the area at the next meeting of the Sierra Club's Pisgah Group, which is set for 7 p.m. Feb. 20 at Brevard-Davidson River Presbyterian Church in Brevard.