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Countdown under way on Jocassee effort

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"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 Bearcamp 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

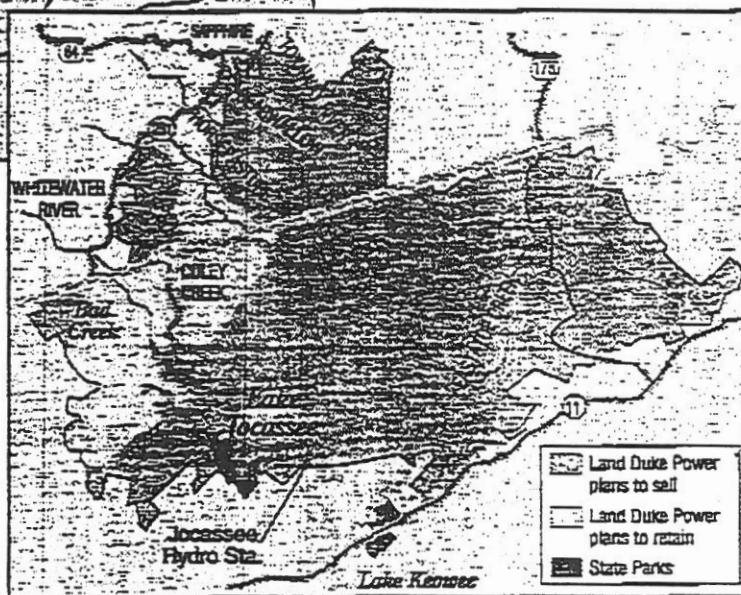
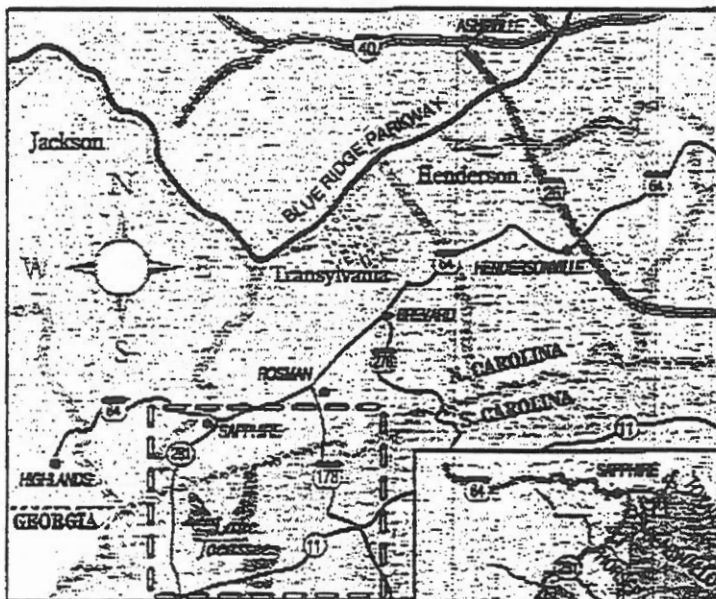
The steep topography of the gorges, combined with a hard granite bedrock and some of the most abundant rainfall in North America, prompted Duke Power to begin buying land here in 1913.

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.

Save

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water from Lake Jocassee to generate 1065 megawatts of electricity during times of peak power demand.

Duke had planned to build another large pumped storage facility on nearby Coley Creek, but a coalition of environmental groups protested that it would damage the area. The utility put plans for Coley Creek on long-term hold after studies indicated it could produce and save electricity more economically through other sources and through conservation.

A few years ago the utility completed studies that showed the best potential sites for future hydro development are concentrated on the west edge of the property near Bad Creek and Coley Creek.

It was then that Duke decided to sell off the lion's share of the Jocassee watershed.

"We found we can hold a smaller part of this land and really cover our future," said Garton, Duke's senior biologist who has worked 23 years in the Jocassee area.

Garton quickly added that the utility has no plans to develop any of the sites, but wants to reserve the right to do so in the future. In addition to Coley Creek, potential hydro sites include several smaller creeks in the area, such as Corbin Creek, Wright Creek and Limberpole Creek.

Neither the Whitewater River, Thompson River nor Bearcamp Creek are considered potential sites, even though they lie within the 10,000 or so acres Duke would retain, he said.

S.C. moves forward

Of the approximately 60,000 acres Crescent holds in the area, about 50,000 will be sold at fair market value, Garton said. About 35,000 acres of that lie in South Carolina around Lake Jocassee and stretching eastward to Table Rock; another 15,000 or so acres lie across the state line in Transylvania County.

News that the land would be sold has prompted action in both states, although South Carolina has made more strides towards purchasing its part of the tract so far.

The South Carolina Heritage Trust Program in November announced plans to pay \$1 million to buy the first 1,000 acres in the Laurel Fork watershed, which includes part of the Foothills Trail.

About 43 miles of the 80-mile trail are on land owned by Duke and Crescent. The state, in cooperation with national conservation groups, hopes to eventually purchase all the South Carolina land to protect water quality, wildlife habitat and rare species.

The area is larger than 25 percent of the country's national park

units, said Dr. James A. Timmerman Jr., director of the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. Once purchased by South Carolina, it will remain open to traditional recreation uses such as hunting, fishing, hiking and camping.

"This is an unprecedented opportunity," he said. "For years the Duke and Crescent lands around Lake Jocassee have been the number one large area protection project for our Heritage Trust program."

South Carolina Gov. David Beasley held a press conference Jan. 31 at Lake Jocassee where he stated his support and pledged to secure state funding, Duke spokeswoman Guynn Savage said.

South Carolina is seeking to raise between \$30 million and \$40 million for its part of the purchase. South Carolina Congressman Lindsey Graham has also pledged to seek federal funding for the project, Garton said.

Duke has promised to hold the South Carolina tract until the year 2000 but could offer it for sale for development after that. But representatives of state and federal agencies and leaders in the conservation community have expressed optimism the deal will go through.

"Everyone I've been associated with both internally and externally all share a very high level of optimism," Savage said.

North Carolina interested

The utility has not yet worked out a purchase deadline with the state of North Carolina for its part of the land, she said. Talks about protecting these upland sections are in the preliminary stages.

"I would say that North Carolina is every bit as enthused (as South Carolina)," she said. "It's just a matter of where we went first. There's more land in South Carolina and we started out there first."

The Transylvania County section, long treasured by hunters, anglers and other outdoors lovers, includes many famous waterfalls. The Toxaway River, Bearwallow Creek, upper reaches of Thompson River and a large part of the Horsepasture National Wild and Scenic River all plummet off the Blue Wall there.

The state has conducted biological inventories along the Horsepasture River, which is a state designated Natural and Scenic River as well as a National Wild and Scenic River. State biologists have conducted similar studies along other rivers there such as the Toxaway and Thompson.

"We are very familiar with the property," said Carol Tingley, chief of planning and natural resources for the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. "When we heard that Duke Power was interested in selling it naturally we were very interested."

Tingley said she feels the area would make a "wonderful state park." The General Assembly

would have to authorize funding for such a purchase.

"It's not a decision we can make ourselves - we are looking to the General Assembly for authorization before we can acquire that property," she said. "I feel like we could put together the funding from a variety of sources."

The U.S. Forest Service is also interested in part of the property along the Thompson River which is located near current federal holdings. The state is interested in areas along the Toxaway and Horsepasture Rivers.

Tingley also expressed optimism that the North Carolina part of the property will end up in public hands.

"I have been in contact with most of the folks that are helping out," she said. "It's a project of great interest to a lot of people. We have received a lot of indications of support and kind of expect it will be a very popular project."

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.

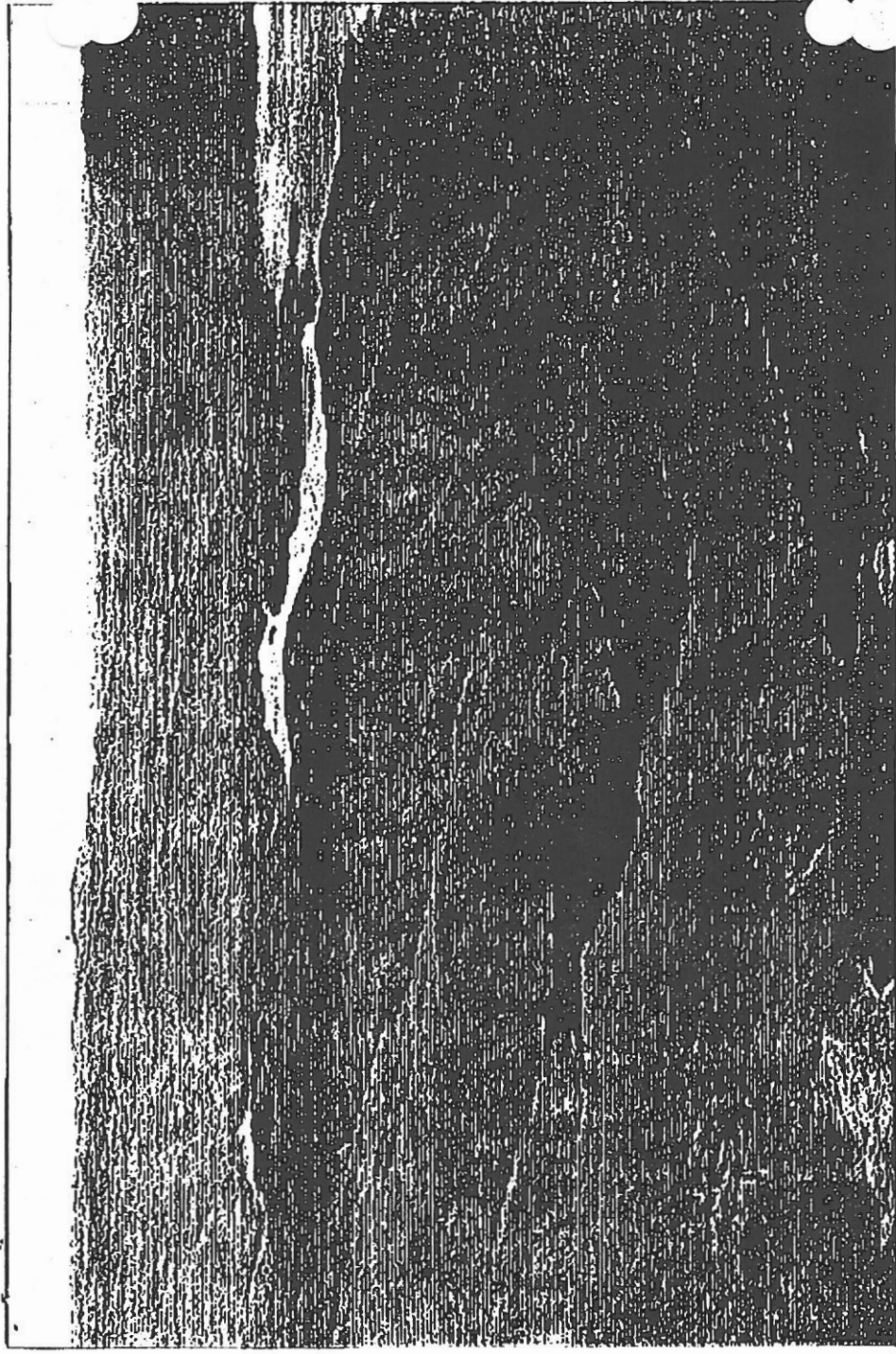
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SAVING PARADISE



HARRISON METZGER/TIMES-NEWS

The Thompson River courses through icy boulders in this photo taken a few days before Christmas. The river is one of four major streams and numerous creeks with pristine water quality and spectacular waterfalls in the Jocassee area.