Friends of Congaree Swamp

www.friendsofcongaree.org
Fall 2007

Advocates for Congaree National Park and its unique environment.

Beautiful Setting for Annual Meeting

Members of Friends gathered at Old Woodlands Farm near Camden Oct. 28 for our Annual Meeting. Many thanks to our hostess, Mardie Faucette, and her staff for her hospitality and the special arrangements made on our behalf. We also thank the Friends' organizing committee of Andy Fiffick, Sharon Kelly, and Bob Render.

Casual conversation, informal tours of the barns and property, and close inspection of some particularly productive lantana for late butterflies provided a relaxing afternoon. John Galbary and Al Graves led members on a naturalists' hike around the pond, while members had the opportunity to make friends and share a few carrots with Rio Rosita (Little Baby), Emerald Bay (Emmy), and their stablemates.

In a brief address during the meeting, park superintendent Tracy Swartout said she felt development pressures threatening the park would pose the greatest challenge in upcoming years. We then discussed upcoming events and re-elected board members Barry Beasley, John Cely, Harriott Faucette and John Grego, and elected Kate Hartley and Tom Mancke to three-year terms on the board.

Retiring board members Jim Welch and Bob Render received special recognition for their long service to Friends. The meeting concluded with the presentation of the Order of the Cypress to Prof. Rebecca Sharitz, an internationally known wetlands ecologist at Savannah River Ecology Laboratory and the University of Georgia. She co-wrote the grant that created the park's Center for Old-growth Bottomland Research and Education. Her long-term study of Congaree's response to natural disturbance (that would be Hurricane Hugo) shepherded in a new era of research at Congaree National Park. In her remarks, Becky shared her enthusiasm for the park and thanked the many volunteers and colleagues who have participated in her research over the years.

By dinnertime, the changeable weather had settled into a calm and beautiful fall evening. Many of us headed straight for Ben Moise and John Laroche's oyster tables, though we also indulged ourselves in "a bowl of red," Andy Fiffick's barbeque chicken, butternut squash soup, roasted vegetables and desserts prepared by board members.

Thanks again to Mardie Faucette for sharing this very special place with us.

Counter-clockwise starting above, John Grego, president, addresses Friends at the annual business meeting. Friends say "Thanks" to retiring board members Jim Welch and Bob Render. Prof. Rebecca Sharitz recieves the Order of the Cypress.

President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

As you can see from the current newsletter, Friends has devoted much recent effort to advocacy efforts. I would take special note of the floodplain fill ordinance discussed below. On a related issue, Richland County will soon be revisiting its Flood Insurance Study (FIS) and Flood Insurance Rate Map (FIRM), the same topics that ignited the Green Diamond controversy in 1999. The preliminary FIRM could be just as contentious now as it was then, and we will try to keep members of Friends informed about this important issue.

Cellular Tower

Some advocacy efforts last for years, others less so. A couple months ago, Dr. Cynthia Garman, a resident of Blackberry Road in Gadsden, contacted Park staff when Alltel requested a zoning change so that a 285-foot lighted cellular tower could be built south of Bluff Road, less than a mile from Congaree National Park. Resource Manager Bill Hulslander appeared before the Richland County Board of Zoning Adjustments and Appeals with Dr. Garman to delay a vote. Prior to the board's next meeting, Friends of Congaree Swamp drafted a letter to the board objecting to the permit and critiquing the project's Environmental Assessment. In response to an action alert, Friends members contacted the Board requesting a denial of the appeal. Friends was concerned that the environmental assessment ignored the nearby presence of the Park, and its importance as a migratory bird corridor. The assessment also had numerous factual errors (Gadsden was placed in Florence County!), and alternatives, including co-location at either of two nearby towers north of Bluff Road, were not carefully explored. In addition, the site plans indicated that additional towers could be built on site.

At the hearing, Superintendent Tracy Swartout and Bill Hulslander presented a compelling case against the zoning variance. Dr. Garman and members of Friends also spoke against the towers. On a split vote by the Board, the permit was not approved. Alltel has the option to appeal and we will continue to watch this case. A special thanks to Dick Watkins and Carol Kososki for speaking before the Board.

Floodplain Fill

Friends of Congaree Swamp has recently been working with Park staff to fight a new Richland County ordinance on the use of fill in the floodplain fringe. The floodplain fringe is the portion of the 100-year floodplain that lies outside the floodway, the portion of the floodplain set aside to ensure the safe passage of floodwaters through the floodplain. Generally, the floodplain fringe is simply referred to as the floodplain, in contrast to the floodway. The current ordinance allows fill to elevate structures in the floodplain when other alternatives (including elevating structures and constructing curtain walls) are not viable. In reaction to recent complaints from developers that the current language is too restrictive, County Council requested new language from the Richland County Planning Commission (a panel of county citizens) that would more clearly define circumstances when fill would be permissible. The draft version of the ordinance, rather than limiting the use of fill, instead focused on standards when using fill (slopes, compaction, etc).

Superintendent Tracy Swartout was in communication throughout the summer with Richland County staff to suggest wording for the draft ordinance. At the Council's second reading of the proposed new ordinance, park staff and Friends of Congaree Swamp spoke against the ordinance, and Council voted to send the ordinance back to the Planning Commission for revision.

Some members of the Planning Commission provided a hostile audience to a progressive floodplain ordinance. Richland County staff drafted their own version of the ordinance based on language developed by FEMA and their contractor Dewberry & Davis. The Planning Commission presented an alternative draft written by a third party that would allow floodplain fill under almost any circumstance. In spite of spirited opposition to the Planning Commission's version, the Planning Commission voted 4-3 to send its version to County Council for a third and final reading. Because of the great disparity in the two ordinances, the staff's version will also be forwarded to Council. We will be encouraging Council members to support the staff version of the floodplain fill ordinance.

We would like to acknowledge LaBruce Alexander and Carol Kososki for speaking before the Planning Commission on behalf of Friends.

Riverstone Tract

The U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives are finalizing funding levels for the Land & Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) as part of the Fiscal Year 2008 Appropriations Bill for Interior, Environment and Related Agencies. Though Congressman Clyburn and Senator Graham support $5.6 million for the purchase of the 1,840-acre Riverstone Tract, ear-marked funding for the tract's purchase was not included as part of either the House or Senate versions of the appropriations bill. However, the greater amount of Land & Water Conservation Funds available in general, the greater the chance that Riverstone will receive a portion of that funding. As part of this effort, Friends of Congaree Swamp is currently supporting efforts to ensure that the Land & Water Conservation Fund receives as much funding as possible for FY 2008; the Riverstone Tract would then compete with other projects from this common source.

The House has approved funding levels of $206 million for the federal and stateside programs of LWCF. The Trust for Public Land and numerous signatories have asked the House and Senate to support at least $206 million for the Land & Water Conservation Fund. The final version of this appropriations bill is still pending.

On a parallel track, The Trust for Public Land had pledged $2.8 million toward purchase of the Riverstone Tract as part of the Department of Interior's Centennial Challenge. The Centennial Challenge was announced this past year in recognition of the National Park Service's upcoming 100-year anniversary in 2016. President Bush pledged to seek $3 billion over 10 years for Park Service projects, with the Federal Government providing one-to-one match ($150 million per year) with private partners. South Carolina proposed several projects, with the Riverstone Tract project being by far the largest. Other projects at Congaree National Park included improved restroom facilities at the campground, wilderness workshops, an interpretive/research pontoon boat for use on the Congaree River, and Congaree Academy, a summer program for local school groups. When approved projects were announced, the Riverstone Tract funding was not on the list—in fact, no land acquisition projects nationwide were funded at all. Though a couple of the Congaree projects were funded, in essence, South Carolina received only $75,000 of the $150 million pledged by the Federal Government—that's only 1/2000 of the total available funding! We are hopeful that the decision to exclude all land acquisition projects from Centennial Challenge funding will be revisited by the Department of Interior.

Students Write Congress Requesting Funding

Juli Jones loves nature and she works hard to instill that same love in her students at Kelly Mill Middle School in Blythewood.

Every spring she takes her class to Congaree National Park, where ranger Fran Rametta and long-time volunteer Chuck Schaeffer "work their magic by showing and describing the Congaree at its finest," she said.

This year, when she heard there was a possibility of adding more than 1,800 acres of land to the park with the $5.6 million purchase of the Riverstone tract, she put the youngsters to work.

"We decided it would be a worthwhile effort for us to write letters that The Trust for Public Land could take to our senators and congressmen to convince them to vote for the bill that would allocate those funds," Jones said.

> "It is a very nice place to fish and a fun father son experience".
>
> Josh Farris

The Riverstone tract is a strategic link connecting the western 22,000 acres of the park with the 2,395-acre Bates Fork section purchased in 2005 under a boundary expansion authorized in 2003 when the Congaree Swamp National Monument became South Carolina's only national park.

"The students have studied soil and water conservation and understand the importance of the Congaree area as a natural flood plain, filtering the water and adding nutrients to the soil," Jones said. "It is a fragile ecosystem rare to the United States. [The students] also understand the importance of the area as a sanctuary and recreation area for the human species and a home for many, many species of plants and animals."

She said some student comments on every field trip to the park that it is "like being in a beautiful church."

"It never fails," she said. "Someone always says it!

> "I would like some day to maybe take my grandkids there. I would love to see their faces when they see that beautiful forest."
>
> Mitchell King

"I think what they are trying to verbalize is that they rarely get to go to a very natural, serene place and just sit and experience peacefulness," Jones said. "Their lives are so scheduled and hectic, and they really love the experience of nature at its best."

In addition to general concerns, students shared their personal experiences at the park with Senator Graham and Congressman Clyburn through their letters. Josh Farris wrote "It is a very nice place to fish and a fun father son experience". No one summed it up better than Mitchell King, who expressed the following wish: "I would like some day to maybe take my grandkids there. I would love to see their faces when they see that beautiful forest."

Jones was named 2007 Conservation Teacher of the Year by the Richland Soil and Water Conservation District and is a 2007 Champions of the Environment Award Recipient..

COWASEE Basin Focus Area Update

The Congaree-Wateree-Santee River (COWASEE) Basin Initiative is one of several focus areas in South Carolina. Focus areas are land-protection projects that focus on outstanding conservation features within large areas, typically thousands of acres. As most lands within focus areas are privately owned, and public land acquisition funds are scarce, conservationists use conservation easements (CE) as one of the primary tools for land protection. Under a CE, in exchange for potentially significant tax benefits, a landowner gives up his or her development and subdivision rights. The landowner continues to own and manage the land as before, for example forestry, farming, hunting and fishing and other traditional uses.

The ACE Basin is the oldest, and one of the most successful, focus areas in South Carolina and subsequent focus areas have been modeled after it. Because of the scale and size of most focus areas, no one organization or agency can do it all, so partnerships are a critical feature of focus area implementation. Naturally, private landowners are the most important partners in these efforts – but numerous private organizations such as The Nature Conservancy, Ducks Unlimited, and various land trusts as well as governmental agencies at the local, state and federal levels are represented.

The COWASEE Basin Focus Area Initiative was started in 2005. Containing some of the finest bottomland hardwood forests in the Southeast, and the critical uplands and bluffs that buffer them, the COWASEE Basin covers about 215,000 acres of which 68% is in private ownership. The area boasts some of the premier public lands in South Carolina including the 26,000 acre Congaree National Park and the 16,000 acre Upper Santee Swamp which includes the famous Sparkleberry Swamp.

In addition to extensive hardwood forests covering thousands of acres that support some of the most diverse fish and wildlife populations anywhere, the COWASEE Basin is steeped in historical and cultural resources. Hernando DeSoto crossed the Basin in 1540, searching for the legendary Indian village of Cofitachequi, which most archaeologists now believe was located on the east side of the Wateree River below Camden. In 1701 the English explorer John Lawson explored the back country of the Carolinas and provided perhaps the first written description of Cooks Mountain, the highest point in Richland County, which he described as “one alp that extended above all others and shaped like a giant sugarloaf.”

The high bluffs that border the floodplain forests, such as the famous “High Hills of the Santee” in Sumter County, provide stunning views of the surrounding countryside and were used extensively by both sides during the Revolution. General Nathanael Greene sheltered his Continental Army in them, and the historic battle of Fort Motte took place at a bluff overlooking the Congaree River in Calhoun County, not far from the present Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve.

The COWASEE Basin Task Force currently meets once a month and consists of representatives from the SC Department of Natural Resources, Ducks Unlimited, Congaree Land Trust, Natural Resources Conservation Service, Richland County Conservation Commission, The Conservation Fund, and several landowners from within the Basin. Friends of Congaree has played a key role in this effort by providing critical financial support for the printing of a brochure (www.friendsofcongaree.org/Cowasee_Brochure.pdf) and paying for some of the costs associated with meals provided at landowners meetings. Two such supper meetings have recently been held, one at Millaree Hunt Club for landowers in the Congaree River area and the other at Goodwill Plantation for Wateree River owners. Both were well attended and contacts for potential easements have been established.

Focus areas are long-term conservation projects. Some properties may take years before being protected with easements. COWASEE is the new focus area on the block and although there is much work to be done, good progress has been made. Currently there are 14 easement holders protecting more than 15,000 acres within the Basin.

Upcoming Field Trips & Events

Congaree Swamp Christmas Bird Count

Sunday, December 16, 2006
7:00 AM — After-hours parking lot

Each year since 1900, bird enthusiasts have been conducting Christmas Bird Counts in North America. A Christmas Bird Count (or CBC) is an all-day effort to find and identify as many wild birds as possible within a 15-mile diameter circle. This effort, which now includes over 2,000 circles and 50,000 participants annually, is sponsored by the National Audubon Society; results may be reviewed at http://www.Audubon.org/bird/cbc. We have a CBC for the Congaree Swamp (founded by Robin Carter) that includes most of the national park and adjacent areas, from just north of Gadsden to just north of St. Matthews.

Last year was fantastic! With 4 teams from the Ivory-billed Woodpecker research group helping out, we observed the largest number of Barred Owls in the country, were second in the country for three different woodpecker species, and saw more Winter Wrens than any other count circle east of the Rockies.

Join us to help out. You do not have to be a birder, just someone who wants to help and is willing to walk a few hours on the park trails. You may help out as long as you like--many participants stay for a few hours, but some will stick it out all day. Meet at the after-hours parking lot at 7:00 AM on Sunday, December 16, 2007. There is a $5.00 participation fee that goes to the National Audubon Society to help cover the costs of processing the data. If you have any questions please contact:

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U.S. Highway 601 on Congaree Floodplain

S.C. Administrative Law Court in Columbia was the setting Oct. 16-18, 2007 as the S.C. Dept. of Transportation (SCDOT), S.C. Dept. of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC), and conservationists presented testimony about U.S. Highway 601 on the Congaree floodplain.

SCDOT triggered this proceeding a year ago – in Oct. 2006 – by filing an appeal to the Administrative Law Court. Specifically, SCDOT appealed DHEC's decisions on Water Quality Certification for SCDOT's future replacement of structurally-deficient bridges where U.S. Highway 601 crosses the Congaree floodplain through the authorized boundary of Congaree National Park.

Conservationists (Friends of Congaree Swamp, S.C. Wildlife Federation, and Audubon South Carolina – all represented by the S.C. Environmental Law Project) advocate that existing earthen causeways should be replaced with bridging when SCDOT replaces the structurally-deficient bridges.

When three days of testimony ended, Judge Anderson directed the parties to file briefs within 30 days after receiving the court reporter's transcript.

Meanwhile, more than one year has passed since Friends of Congaree Swamp, S.C. Wildlife Federation, and Audubon South Carolina – represented by the S.C. Environmental Law Project – filed a federal lawsuit in Sept. 2006 against the Federal Highway Administration

Hwy 601 continued page 7

E. Coli Study Ongoing At Park

As of late October 2007, over 300 water quality samples testing for both *Enterococc*i and *Escherichia coli (E. coli)* have been collected and analyzed by Stacy Dugan Montebello at sites throughout Congaree National Park. Sites tested so far have included several sites within Congaree National Park along Cedar Creek, Tom's Creek, Wise Lake, and Weston Lake. Additional samples have been collected on Tom's Creek within the Kingville Hunt Club north of the Park boundary, and along Cedar Creek in the same area where park staff lead weekly canoe trips. Several samples are undergoing DNA analysis to try to identify possible bacteria sources.

The comparison of the bacteriological sampling data from both *Enterococci* and *E. coli* will provide an objective assessment of the existing conditions with the twofold purpose of identifying any sources of pollution that may be entering Congaree National Park, and documenting existing conditions in order to protect and preserve the natural environment.

So far, these data show surprising variability within the different bodies of water. The two bacteriological tests, while generally maintaining similar levels

Photo by Susan Dugan

Stacey Dugan Montebello conducts her study of *Enterococc*i and *Escherichia coli (E. coli)* concentrations in Congaree National Park. A portion of Stacey's work has been supported by Friends of Congaree Swamp.

under normal conditions, tend to differ (sometimes extremely so) when the environment undergoes a significant change (e.g. a rise or fall in temperature, rainfall, or in our current extreme drought). So far, samples collected from Weston and Wise lakes almost always have a lower concentration of indicator bacteria than the equivalent samples from stream sites.

Hwy 601 continued

(FHWA), challenging the Environmental Assessment which SCDOT and FHWA prepared for the U.S. 601 Congaree Bridge Replacements project.

On Sept. 7, 2007, the S.C. Environmental Law Project filed a Plaintiffs' Memorandum in Support of Motion for Summary Judgment – asking the U.S. District Court to order the Federal Highway Administration to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

FHWA will submit its brief by Nov. 15, after which we plaintiffs will submit another brief by Dec. 7.

Friends of Congaree Swamp

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Advocates for Congaree National Park and its unique environment.

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Yes, I would like to support conservation of Congaree Swamp for future generations. Enclosed is my tax deductible contribution of $ _____ . Please make your check payable to Friends of Congaree Swamp.

_____ $ 15.00 Individual _____ $ 50.00 Advocate _____ $ 500.00 Benefactor _____ $ 50.00 Nonprofit Org.
_____ $ 35.00 Family _____ $ 100.00 Partner _____ $ 1000.00 Patron _____ $ 1000.00 Corporate

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Mailing Address: _____
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I would like to work on the following committee(s):
_____ Field Trips _____ Fundraising
_____ Public Relations _____ Membership
_____ Education _____ Advocacy
_____ Events _____ Newsletter
_____ Research _____ Other: _____

In addition to my membership, I would like to give $ _____ as a donation to Friends of Congaree Swamp:
In Memory of: _____
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Please provide contact information so we can inform the person or family:
Name: _____
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I would like to order the following items (proceeds benefit FCS projects): $_____ enclosed.
_____ copies of the beautifully detailed ***"Map of Congaree National Park and Vicinity"*** @ $12.95 each/plus $3.50 s/h
_____ copies of ***"Images of Congaree Swamp,"*** a 64-page, full color, photographic book of the park @ $10 each/plus $2.50 s/h

Thank You For Supporting Friends of Congaree Swamp!
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