



Friends of Congaree Swamp News

www.friendsofcongarree.org

Spring 2020

An open letter from the superintendent

Friends,

Park Servicewide, we have been operating under an “Incident Command Structure” for about two months, with commanders, section chiefs and other members of the incident management team rotating on and off in 21-day cycles, just as we would for a large wildfire or huge public event requiring months of planning.

At Congaree, we deliberated, and documented decisions about areas and operations to modify, and then temporarily close, using risk-assessment tools and issuing administrative orders. We, along with thousands of other organizations, struggled, at times, to wrestle some structured decision-making—indeed, any semblance of structure at all—around a roiling and overwhelming set of circumstances.

And now, as I reflect on what the last two months have meant for the park and the Service, I understand that this requires a change in focus—less “incident” management and more “long-haul” adaptations.

COVID-19 did not just *happen*, like the fire or event with a conclusive end, but rather continues, with degrees of uncertainty that make all but the steeliest among us uncomfortable, and with clarity about what will be required of us in the future sorely lacking. We will need to figure out new ways of operating, and puzzle through the how to restore access to recreational opportunities, interpretive programs and other services in a safe manner for our staff, volunteers and visitors. And all of this, for an indefinite, but probably lengthy, time period.

The park continues to monitor scientific data about the pandemic and turns to public health officials for guidance.

We have begun an adaptive recovery planning process which uses a phased approach to increase access and services, and which incorporates a number of risk mitigation strategies and

solutions for new operational challenges.

We are considering engineering solutions, such as temporary structures to increase physical distances between a visitor and front desk staff. We’ll develop programmatic solutions, such as limiting the number of people permitted on a tour. We’ll think through administrative options, like continuing a liberal telework policy, or staggering arrival times. And we’ll substitute, when required, in-person events with amazing virtual ones.



Planning to keep people safe while keeping it light.

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President's Corner

Dr. John Grego

Shutdown

With the onset of COVID-19 cases in South Carolina, a small party of Friends of Congaree Swamp members proceeded with our physically distanced Sugarberry Hike in mid-March, but John Cely and I engaged in careful discussion about whether his April 4 Running Creek paddle could proceed with a smallish group of 12 paddlers. The discussion was rendered moot when South Carolina closed all public boat landings, and all our remaining spring activities—Robin Carter Dawn Chorus Walk, Earth Day activities, North American Migration Count—were canceled after the park announced its closure.

We have not scheduled early summer activities, and assume that fall activities may be able to move forward in some altered form—for now.

The park's closure started with the closing of the Harry Hampton Visitor Center on March 17, followed by the campgrounds, then restrooms. Closure of the front country was then hastened by the usual large spring crowds concentrated on the boardwalk loop, even with the visitor center and restrooms closed. The park attempted to leave the backcountry open as a recreational outlet for visitors, but this had the potential to over-extend park staff, and the entire park has been shut down since April 2.

Feedback I have received has been supportive

of the park's approach, though it's been painful to forego visits to the park at its peak in April and May. Reopening of the park will include difficult visitor management issues, particularly for the popular—and narrow—Boardwalk Loop.

In order to provide a nature fix for park fans, I have been re-posting seasonal Facebook albums on a daily basis, working from our 10-year weekly catalog, and picking the top 7 for each week. It's been a good opportunity to share some recent park and Friends' history, acknowledge park supporters, and correct some errors in the albums along the way.

Smithsonian Water/Ways

With Water/Ways set to start in November, we continue to plan as though the exhibit can go forward with its accompanying special events, though some other park and Friends' events we intended to link to the exhibit have already fallen by the wayside.

Participating organizations in the exhibit are fortunate to apply for outreach events actively promoted by S.C. Humanities, Smithsonian's traveling exhibit program (SITES), and Smithsonian's Museum on Main Street program.

Museum on Main Street specifically sought our participation in Stories: YES, and we met with Lower Richland High School principal Dr. Ericka Hursey and science faculty in the early spring to discuss students' participation. We hoped work could start in the spring, but reached an agreement with Lower Richland faculty to defer activities until August.

We have also been in contact with Dr. Laura Marcus Green of the S.C. Arts Commission about a Communal Pen workshop to be led by artist Eboni Ramm.

The program encourages participants to consider community connections to Smithsonian's traveling exhibit themes, including Water/Ways. Chief interpretive ranger Gregory Cunningham agreed that the park's Nature Wellness would be a good fit for the workshop.

We are still planning for a special reception prior to the official opening of the exhibit, as well as a grand opening on November 14 and accompanying events in the fall and winter.

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Friends of Congaree Swamp advocates for Congaree National Park and its unique environment.

Dr. John Grego, President

Sharon H. Kelly, Editor

Environmental policy revisions troubling

The Council on Environmental Quality recently proposed profound and troubling revisions to procedural provisions of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

Enacted in 1970, NEPA provides the public the opportunity to share comments on a variety of major construction projects that could have harmful impacts on the environment.

The agency overseeing the project can vary—the S.C. Department of Transportation and the Federal Highway Administration supervised the U.S. 601 bridges project some years ago, while the Nuclear Regulatory Commission oversees Westinghouse Electric Company's current Fuel Fabrication Facility relicensing.

Project impacts are summarized in Environmental Assessments for smaller projects and Environmental Impact Statements for larger projects.

Conflicts often arise on a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI), or whether a more extensive Environmental Impact Statement should be required rather than an Environmental Assessment.

Friends of Congaree Swamp comments on drafts and final versions of such documents, most recently for the Westinghouse Environmental Assessment in November 2019. One of our lawsuits against S.C. Department of Transportation and the Federal

Highway Administration for the U.S. 601 bridges project was also based on a violation of NEPA standards, specifically a deficient Environmental Assessment, a Finding of No Significant Impact, and failure to prepare an Environmental Impact Statement.

So we reviewed the draft set of procedural changes with some interest and shared concerns as detailed below on a variety of proposed changes.

The document was obsessed with the length of environmental reviews; we argued this purely mechanical approach to careful environmental review was flawed and should be set aside.

We encounter numerous lengthy reports in any environmental review and do not find them burdensome. In our experience, projects that require a full Environmental Impact Statement are massive in scale with a wide range of potential impacts, and a document hundreds of pages long should be readily anticipated.

Further, these documents are prepared by environmental consulting firms that are well equipped to study and summarize the wide array of environmental issues that need to be addressed.

The document proposed “to clarify that agencies should consider economic and technical analyses along with environmental effects.” We requested a citation in NEPA

that supports this amendment, and otherwise recommended that the amendment be deleted.

The document suggests that “an agency does not need to include a detailed discussion of each alternative in an environmental assessment, nor does it need to include any detailed discussion of alternatives that it eliminated from study.”

In our experience, this critique is off-base. Most alternatives analyses we see are often quite weak and do not explore a rich or interesting array of alternatives.

Typically, only a couple are presented in addition to the preferred alternative and the no-action alternative. We always find ourselves wanting to see a wider and more creative range of alternatives receive careful consideration, rather than a handful that are modest tweaks of the preferred alternative that are typically dismissed out of hand.

We argued that the Council on Environmental Quality should encourage a wider range of environmental alternatives than typically appear in NEPA documents.

The document noted that “consistent with the current CEQ regulations, the proposed rule would not specifically require publication of a draft EA (Environmental Assessment) for public review and comment.” We argued that if that was consistent with the

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A look back at Congaree's beginning

By Neal Pohemus

October 18, 1976, the date President Ford signed Public Law No. 94-545, is generally considered the birthday of Congaree National Park. But the campaign to save the rapidly disappearing old-growth forests across North America, specifically those in the Congaree River floodplain, began much earlier.

A more fitting birthday would be October 25-26, 1969, the date of the first official outing of The Carolinas Group of the Sierra Club to the swamp. The 50th anniversary of the outing seems a fitting occasion to consider that momentous weekend and the subsequent grassroots campaign that fueled the movement. On that late autumn weekend, Harry Hampton, a conservationist and former editor of *The State* who had been advocating since the 1950s to preserve the forest located only a few miles from his family's ancestral homestead, symbolically passed the torch to save the forest to a group of about 75 environmentally conscious citizens.

Rural spaces like Congaree National Park exist in stark contrast to South Carolina's state capital Columbia, the nearest urban space and political epicenter, some twenty miles north. It is somewhat ironic that the grassroots campaign to save the forest from the sawdust piles of Sumter County was organized in urban spaces.



From left, Dick Watkins, Jim Elder and Mike McAnelly. Watkins attended the October 1969 outing, Elder joined the club in 1971. They provided crucial leadership in the campaign to save the Congaree Swamp.

Members of the Sierra Club met together in members' suburban apartments, converged in high-rise board rooms, and advocated at the desks of public officials in Columbia, Chicago, and Washington D.C. Organizing took place in the rapidly expanding concrete jungles that pockmarked America's landscape like an out-of-control virus, infecting and consuming nearly every natural resource it encountered.

To protect the Congaree Swamp, the Sierra Club had to convince public officials that federal legislation was required; legislation that was printed, passed, and signed in the thickly lacquered walls of the U.S. Capitol building. In order to establish a pristine natural space where all citizens were welcome, Sierra Club advocates had to successfully navigate and traverse urban spaces.

In 1967, only two chapters existed east of the Rocky Mountains: the Atlantic Chapter, founded in 1950 and concentrated largely in the New York area, and the recently organized Southeast Chapter, formed in Washington D.C., that extended from Delaware to Mississippi. A nucleus of North Carolina members was concentrated in Winston-Salem, Greensboro, and Raleigh-Durham.

In November 1968, members from across both states gathered at Morrow Mountain State Park to formally organize the Carolinas Group. Greenville attorney Theodore A. Snyder Jr. was elected the group's first chairman. In April 1969, there were 174 dues-paying members in the Carolinas Group; by the following year membership

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had doubled. There was momentum in the Carolinas for shifting environmental policy. In October 1970, the Board of Directors approved the group's application for chapter status, and the first official meeting of the new Joseph LeConte Chapter was held on Halloween of that year. Time and time again, home-grown citizens from across the Carolinas would answer the call to volunteer their time and pledge their resources to advocate for the organization's goals.

The LeConte Chapter's conservation work focused on endangered natural spaces in coastal North Carolina, the Piedmont and the Great Smoky Mountains. While vulnerable to developers, especially the U.S. Army Corp of Engineers, and anti-wilderness legislation, Congaree was the most threatened.

In 1969, the Beidler family, which owned the heart of the old-growth forest, began negotiating timber contracts to harvest the highly prized lumber. Preservation would be pointless if the ancient hardwoods were harvested. In May of that year, the LeConte Chapter's Conservation Committee commenced a study to investigate how the Beidler Tract could come under management of the National Park System.

The raw natural beauty and the rare flora and fauna of the Congaree Swamp was known to only a few people

in South Carolina and to even fewer outside the state. But that number had been growing since the early 1950s. At Harry Hampton's request, Richard H. Pough contacted the National Park Service.

In 1959, and again in 1961, a Park Service team spent several weeks exploring and surveying the Beidler Tract with Hampton as their guide.

Despite the Park Service's 1963 report stating that the Beidler Tract was a "biological community of rare quality and considerable scientific value," no further action was taken by the agency.

With Pough's assistance, and others, Hampton had succeeded in convincing the agency to visit the swamp and witness first-hand its rich botanical bounty. Yet the Park Service was reluctant to press forward because the Beidler family was not interested in selling their bottomland property and, consequently, momentum to save the forest was lost.

In May 1969, botanist and accomplished ornithologist John V. Dennis took Snyder on a tour of the Beidler Tract. Dennis knew the swamp well. Two years earlier, Dennis composed one of the first scientific surveys of

the swamp's flora and fauna. Snyder returned to Greenville and began organizing the club's first outing to Congaree.

Club outings were critical opportunities to bring public

attention to endangered spaces. Sierra Club founder John Muir believed that citizens' first-hand experiences and encounters with nature were paramount to preserving the nation's diminishing wilderness expanses.

Snyder

envisioned an outing in late autumn when conditions would be optimal for the group. By then the swamp's dense green curtain that envelops the canopy would be fading into various shades of auburn and brown.

First, the club needed permission from Marion Burnside, a Columbia businessman and avid hunter, who leased the tract from the Beidler family. In years past Hampton had facilitated such endeavors, but in 1969 his wife's illness kept him on the sidelines.

In early September, Burnside granted Snyder's request and planning continued in earnest. Publicizing the swamp was Snyder's primary goal. "One of the major ways our chapter can publicize its conservation activities is through outings to endangered areas," Snyder



Since the late 1930s, the Beidler Tract had been leased to a group of Columbia professionals who fished and hunted in the vast floodplain. In the late 1960s, local businessman Marion Burnside had the lease and operated the Cedar Creek Hunt Club.

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stated, allowing them to “spread the word about its beauties and the dangers they face.”

In addition, Snyder invited Eliot Porter, renowned nature photographer and member of the club’s Board of Directors, to join the outing. It was hoped that Porter’s photographs of the swamp’s towering pines, known as ‘Redwoods East,’ would galvanize public support. At the same time, the chapter’s bi-monthly newsletter was distributed to members across the Carolinas announcing that Dennis would lead tours of the swamp.

With the outing weekend approaching, club members Jim Park, a high-school physics teacher, and Ann Timberlake coordinated logistics and wrapped up last-minute details. The significance of the outing is illustrated in a letter Hampton wrote to Snyder in June 1969 as the idea for an outing was becoming more tangible.

Although Hampton’s fifteen-year crusade had resulted in some public awareness and official visits by park representatives, Washington D.C. officials were unwilling to take additional measures to protect the forest. Hampton needed help. Although no longer the lone spokesman for preserving the Beidler Tract, Hampton’s support was unwavering. He told Snyder that “acquisition should be taken by an organization such as the Sierra Club which has national strength. Hitherto there was no

such organization in the state, and no one with any definite and concrete ideas of how to proceed.”

As the sun set and the swamp grew dark, rising from below the horizon was an iridescent Hunter’s Moon—a celestial signal to the people who formerly inhabited Congaree—marking the commencement of the hunting season in preparation for the long winter ahead. Spirits were high as a sense of discovery and wonder blanketed the campsite.

Perhaps the full moon beaming high over the swamp that night was a symbolic passing of the torch to a new generation of preservationists who, seven years later, would realize the dream Hampton had long envisioned.

Sequestered in urban concrete towers and further isolated in its mind-numbing modular cubicles, shining examples of modernity’s upward march, the public was unaware that Congaree, one of the last old-growth bottomland hardwood forests in America, was on the verge of extinction. Having experienced first-hand nature’s healing powers, club members returned home energized and committed to spreading the word about Congaree.

If saved, Congaree would become a readily accessible antidote for Columbia’s weary working class, a refuge from civilization’s corrupting tendencies. No prescription required.

No longer a private hunting club, the swamp belongs to the people.

Letter

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I have zero doubts about the ability of our staff, volunteers and partners to succeed with these modifications, for however long they are required. We have already been doing it, with phenomenal results, over the last several weeks.

As the Superintendent, I can tell you that my skills have been tested, but those of the rest of the staff, as well as their resiliency and creativity, have been absolutely inspiring. Among my challenges has been finding a balance between cheering our team in their obvious commitment to the mission, as they innovate, problem-solve and continue to deliver, and encouraging them to recognize that things are *not* business-as-usual, and *it is okay* if we miss a few marks or have to revise our goals and let go of/postpone some of the things we love and believe to be important. I have urged them to take care of—and go easy on—themselves.

I will just have to trust that they are listening to me, because most of the evidence points, instead, to a full-steam ahead approach to their work. I will share just a handful of their successes lately, leaving you, I expect, with as much hope as I have that this park *has what it takes* to rise above the circumstances of the pandemic.

- Phenology model and data observation protocols to help document the onset and

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Revisions

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current rule, then the current rule should be modified to require public input on the draft EA.

In our experience, public input on the draft EA is an excellent opportunity to receive stakeholder input in the early stages of a project and help forestall some of a project's worst impacts.

- The document noted that “some commenters urged that the regulations should not require agencies to account for impacts over which the agency has no control, including those resulting from alternatives outside its jurisdiction.” CEQ agreed that “it is not efficient or reasonable to require agencies

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duration of synchronized behavior of *Photuris frontalis* fireflies

- HR Onboarding processes for our new zone safety manager, Steven Akins, who will report in late June.
- Managing our fleet
- Facebook Live owl program by Ranger Jon
- An astonishingly consistent need to repair the boardwalk after tree and flood damage.
- Developing a new Emergency Action Plan
- Planning to keep people safe, while keeping it light.

K. Lynn Berry
Superintendent

to develop detailed analyses relating to alternatives outside the jurisdiction of the lead agency.” This is an extremely problematic revision that would prohibit agencies from taking into account easy-to-envison consequences from their rule-making, consequences that could have a profound and continuing impact on the environment.

- In a similar vein, the CEQ proposed “to consolidate into one paragraph the requirement to include a discussion of the effects of the proposed action and reasonable alternatives. The combined discussion should focus on those effects that are reasonably foreseeable and have a close causal relationship to the proposed action.” A careful environmental review most certainly needs to include consideration of obvious impacts of any proposed action, and not simply those with a close causal relationship.
- The document noted that “commenters urged CEQ to allow greater flexibility for the project sponsor (including private entities) to participate in the preparation of the NEPA documents under the supervision of the lead agency... Applicants and contractors would be able to assume a greater role in contributing information and material to the preparation of environmental documents, subject to the supervision

of the agency.” As anyone involved in environmental advocacy knows, project sponsors have ample opportunity to prepare project documents, and it is critical to the integrity of the lead agency to conduct an independent investigation without overly close coordination with project sponsors.

- We also argued that CEQ's proposal to change its position so that the analysis of cumulative effects is not required should be summarily rejected. In our experience, projects should always be considered in the context of other projects whose cumulative impacts have the potential to substantially degrade the environment.

In conclusion, we found that concerns listed in the document were almost exclusively confined to the proverbial “some commenters” who want to weaken procedural provisions, with almost no consideration given to strengthening procedural provisions to safeguard the environment and improve opportunities for public input.

Clearly, this will be a battle fought at a national level by powerful environmental advocates, but Friends felt obligated to share our voice, given how strongly we rely upon the National Environmental Policy Act to protect the Congaree and Wateree watersheds.



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Please keep your information current to receive special notices about field trips, events, scheduling changes and acknowledgements in addition to a quarterly newsletter.

*For a contribution of \$35 or more, you may choose one:

- Baseball cap maroon _____ tan _____
- Tan visor _____
- Bandana with map of Congaree National Park gold _____ blue _____ red _____

**For a contribution of \$100 or more you will receive a copy of "The Natural History of Congaree Swamp."

In addition, I would like to donate \$ _____ as a gift.

Thank you for supporting Friends of Congaree Swamp!

Friends of Congaree Swamp, P.O. Box 7746, Columbia, SC 29202-7746
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