



Friends of Congaree Swamp News

www.friendsofcongarree.org

Spring 2025

Save the date

Litter pickup

Our next litter pickup will be held **Saturday, June 14** from 9:30 to 11 a.m.

As a belated National Trails Day activity, Friends of Congaree Swamp members will meet at Bates Bridge landing on U.S. 601 to collect litter at the Congaree River boat ramp, parking lot and access road.

Depending on attendance and time, some of us may drive to other sites along U.S. 601 to clean those as well.

This is one of three regularly scheduled clean-ups as part of the Adopt-a-Waterway program sponsored by Keep the Midlands Beautiful.

Keep the Midlands Beautiful will provide trash pickers, trash bags, gloves, etc. to assist with the clean-up and we will use the dumpster onsite to dispose of non-recyclables. Light

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Recap on administration actions affecting Congaree

Editor's Note: This article replaces President's Corner for this issue.

By John Grego

As shared at the Annual Meeting, we have found ourselves preoccupied with the Trump administration's actions affecting the Department of Interior, National Park Service, and Congaree National Park. Developments in several areas happen quickly, and any additional information I distribute could just as quickly be out-of-date. We have posted extensively on social media, both Facebook and Instagram, but I still thought it useful to share an update of actions across several different areas.

Probationary employees and early deferral policies

On February 14, 1,000 probationary employees working for the National Park Service were dismissed. Park staff could not share information on whether the park had any probationary employees dismissed, so we prepared a Freedom of Information Act request.

The process took a little longer than we would have liked, but we eventually obtained copies of the park's organizational chart and emergency contact list that confirmed a single probationary employee had been dismissed.

A district judge later ruled that probationary employees at the park service should be reinstated, and Congaree's probationary employee is back at work, though the Trump administration appealed the judge's decision. Though recent reports suggest that 16,000 probationary employees across the federal government have again been dismissed, to our knowledge, the park's probationary employee is still at work.

At the same time we prepared the FOIA, we also phoned the Midlands offices of U.S. House members Jim Clyburn and Joe Wilson to discuss the dismissals. We emphasized growing visitation at the park, and noted the poor timing of the dismissals, occurring as the park was approaching its busiest three-month stretch of the year.

Federal employees have twice been offered deferred resignation, with full benefits for some months after agreeing to participate.

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Recap

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The first so-called “fork in the road” in February resulted in approximately 700 park personnel resigning—none from Congaree National Park.

A second offer in early April resulted in 1,100 personnel tendering resignations, but those resignations may not be accepted since the administration would prefer cutbacks to upper-level park service administration rather than front-line personnel at parks.

Keep in mind that the total number of National Park Service staff (including seasonal employees) is around 20,000, so these cuts would have devastating impacts. Even larger cuts are on the way, though impacts on individual parks are not yet known.

Social media

At the annual meeting, we noted that promised weekly postings in honor of African-American History Month stopped abruptly after the first two postings, and postings in general became less frequent.

Our FOIA included a request for documents related to social media policy, but we received only outdated information; apparently, policy is not being transmitted via memoranda or emails. A letter by Jon Jarvis, former NPS Director, shared on social media, confirmed that “Edicts from on-high have directed the NPS to not talk about ‘national policy,’ but permission is granted to use social media for visitor (information).”

Too many national parks’ missions are inextricably linked to “national policy” to avoid such topics in social media posts and Congaree is no exception, embedded as it is in an African-American community with long and deep cultural ties to the park’s lands.

We have seen encouraging signs in some of

the park’s recent posts. Nonetheless, a single post about women working at Congaree National Park on the last day of Women’s History Month suggests a tortuous process to win approval for posts.

Research

A few months ago, we began planning for the biennial research symposium in 2026, which would feature 50 years of research at the park. Recently, park staff on our planning committee shared the jaw-dropping news that they would no longer be able to participate in either planning or the symposium itself.

Again, a paper trail does not exist, but park staff participation in research-related activities is largely limited to visitor-centered presentations *by* park staff on-site. Travel or participation in a research symposium is apparently not permissible. We contacted the park service’s national Partnership Office for insights, and were simply referred down the administrative chain from the Southeast Region’s Partnership Office back to Park Superintendent Greg Hauburger.

Congaree National Park is one of only 17 park units (or collection of parks) with a research learning center and the new national policy represents a significant turn away from one of the park’s most important missions. The organizing committee, after internal discussion and conversations with park leadership, have chosen to go ahead with the conference. Hopefully, some arrangement can be made for park staff to attend, if not in a professional capacity. We again communicated with South Carolina’s Congressional delegation to share our concerns about the new policy on research engagement.

Purchases

The use of payment cards for park purchases has been greatly restricted, and any payment over \$1 must be reviewed. The Friends Board agreed to assist the park with purchases on a case-by-case basis should any emergencies arise. So far, there have been some close calls, but we have not yet been asked to assist the park with funding.

At one of the Friends Alliance meetings, there was an extended discussion of park assistance;

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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

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Annual meeting topics wide ranging

Friends of Congaree Swamp held our Annual Meeting and Oyster Roast on March 13 at Congaree National Park. We dodged an uncertain forecast and met in appropriate oyster-shucking weather.

We continue our observance of 50th-anniversary events related to the establishment of the park. On

a suggestion from Neal Polhemus, arrangements were made to re-create photos taken of both Bill Marshall and John Cely at the Wise Lake bald cypress in 1975. The photo of Bill and the bald cypress was prominently featured in campaign literature to protect the swamp,

including the Congaree Action Now conference program.

We shared a poster of side-by-side photos of Bill Marshall in 1975 (photographed by George Taylor, our Order of the Cypress honoree) and in 2025 (photographed by Bill's daughter, Katie Marshall). In addition, Will Prioleau brought a 1975 AC Flora High School yearbook, with a

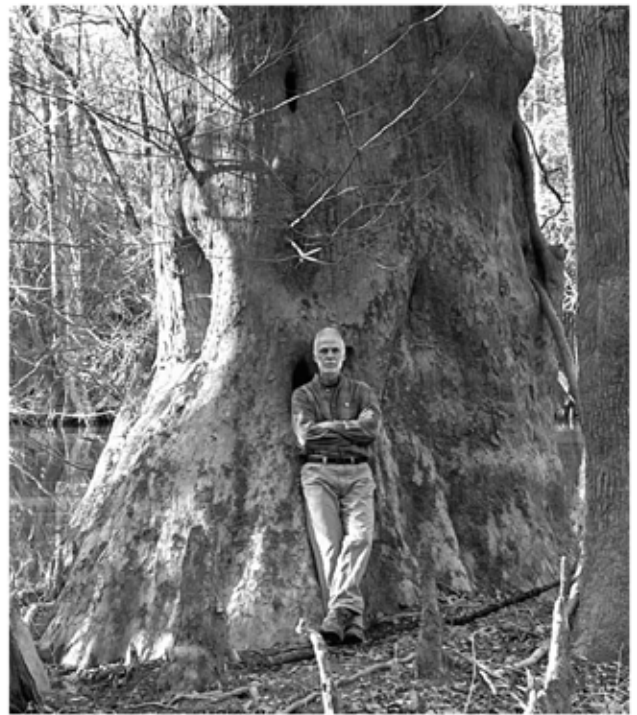
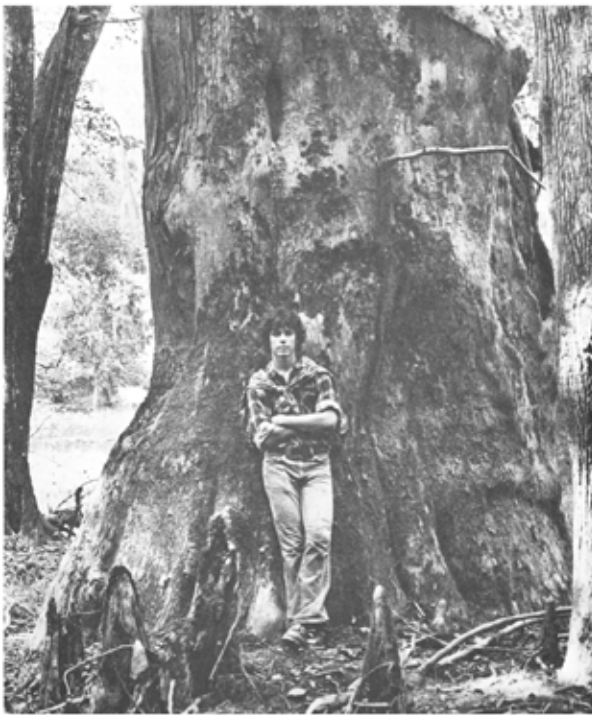
two-page spread on the "Mini-Sierra Club", whose members included George and Bill.

After registration, members had the option of attending a Sims Trail hike led by John Cely, a cultural history hike to still sites and the bald cypress log display led by Neal Polhemus, or a birding hike led

Symposium and our two most recent research symposia.

Though the Trump administration had been in place for only 7 weeks, there were several administration actions to discuss. The dismissal of 1,000 probationary employees in the National Park Service potentially affected

Wise Lake Cypress Tree - Congaree Swamp 1975 & 2025



Photos taken by George Taylor in 1975 and Katie Marshall in 2025 with Bill Marshall standing at the tree

by Ron Ahle.

At our business meeting, we re-elected board members Kevin Fisher, Kate Hartley, Sharon Kelly, Dennis Poole, Dick Watkins, and elected John Kupfer, a University of South Carolina geography professor. John has led numerous research collaborations at the park and served on the organizing committee of the Water/Ways

Congaree. We prepared a Freedom of Information Act request to obtain copies of the park's organizational chart and emergency contact list and were awaiting a response.

It was also noted that the park had suspended a weekly series of social media posts honoring African-American history; the FOIA included a

Research shows Congaree River evolution

Marcin Slowik, a geophysicist from Adam Mickiewicz University in Posnan, Poland, came to the University of South Carolina as a Fulbright Scholar from October 2022 to June 2023. After USC geologist Ray Torres, his host, made introductions to the Friends community, Friends members including John Cely and David Schuetrum assisted Marcin with his research.

Marcin and his colleague George Starega recently published the results in the journal *Catena* (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.catena.2024.108467>).

The article, entitled “Controls on channel planform changes in rivers of the Atlantic Coastal Plain: Findings from the Congaree river valley (South Carolina, USA),” provides an opportunity to share his work.

Using a helpful summary figure from his publication, we will share some of his findings about the evolution of the Congaree River channel, which integrates earlier work by researchers David Shelley (USC and formerly NPS), Brad Suther (University of Georgia and Kennesaw State), David Leigh (UGA) and others.

Marcin conducted most of his research using both a cart-mounted Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) system, which recorded soil profiles up to six meters deep, and a direct push coring system, which collected samples just over two meters deep.

The GPR profiles were used to identify features as varied as river channels and beds, migrating river meanders, manmade disturbances, buried logs suggestive of log jams, and at least one likely buried cultural feature comprised of logs. The soil cores helped to validate and detail the top-most portions of the profile.

He focused his research on the Bluff Trail, the Muck Swamp near the boardwalk, Weston Lake, Big Slough, Butterfly Pond, Running Slough, Running Lake Slough and Big Buckhead.

The first figure on the opposite page references earlier scholarship, which detected the presence of a river channel over four meters below the surface, eventually isolated as an oxbow lake then marsh. Previous radiocarbon dates from Scott Werts at Winthrop University have pushed the date of the river channel feature to 34,000 years before present, with the isolated ox bow at least 20,000 years old.

The presence of a single channel is a bit of an anomaly. In general, cooler and drier conditions prevailing 34,000 to 16,000 years ago (during the late ice age) favored the formation of braided river systems throughout the Southeastern United States at this time.

The single-thread channel detected along the bluff may date to a warmer and wetter interim during that period. The

presence of braided channels has been found beneath the terraces that form the bluff and uplands bordering the current floodplain.

Conditions in the uppermost figure persisted till at least 16,000 years ago. From 14,000 to 12,000 years ago however, warmer and more humid conditions prevailed as the ice age waned. The increased water flow and sediment transport resulted in an abandonment of the previous system of braided channels, resulting in large-scale, fast-growing, “mega-meanders,” that carried significantly more flow than we see today.

As shown in the second figure from the top, traces of the large-scale channels from this time can be found in Running Slough and Running Lake Slough. Brad Suther’s work on Running Lake Slough and other mega-meanders across North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia suggests that they were formed by flows of up to 70,000 cubic feet per second.

This is far more than the modern flows, which tend to range from 5,000-10,000 cubic feet per second. It is worth noting that these high flows were likely regular, seasonal pulses and not necessarily year-round flows. They could have been driven by storms as well as spring snowmelt, but definitely not by direct glacial runoff, as the glaciers were much farther north over the Great Lakes

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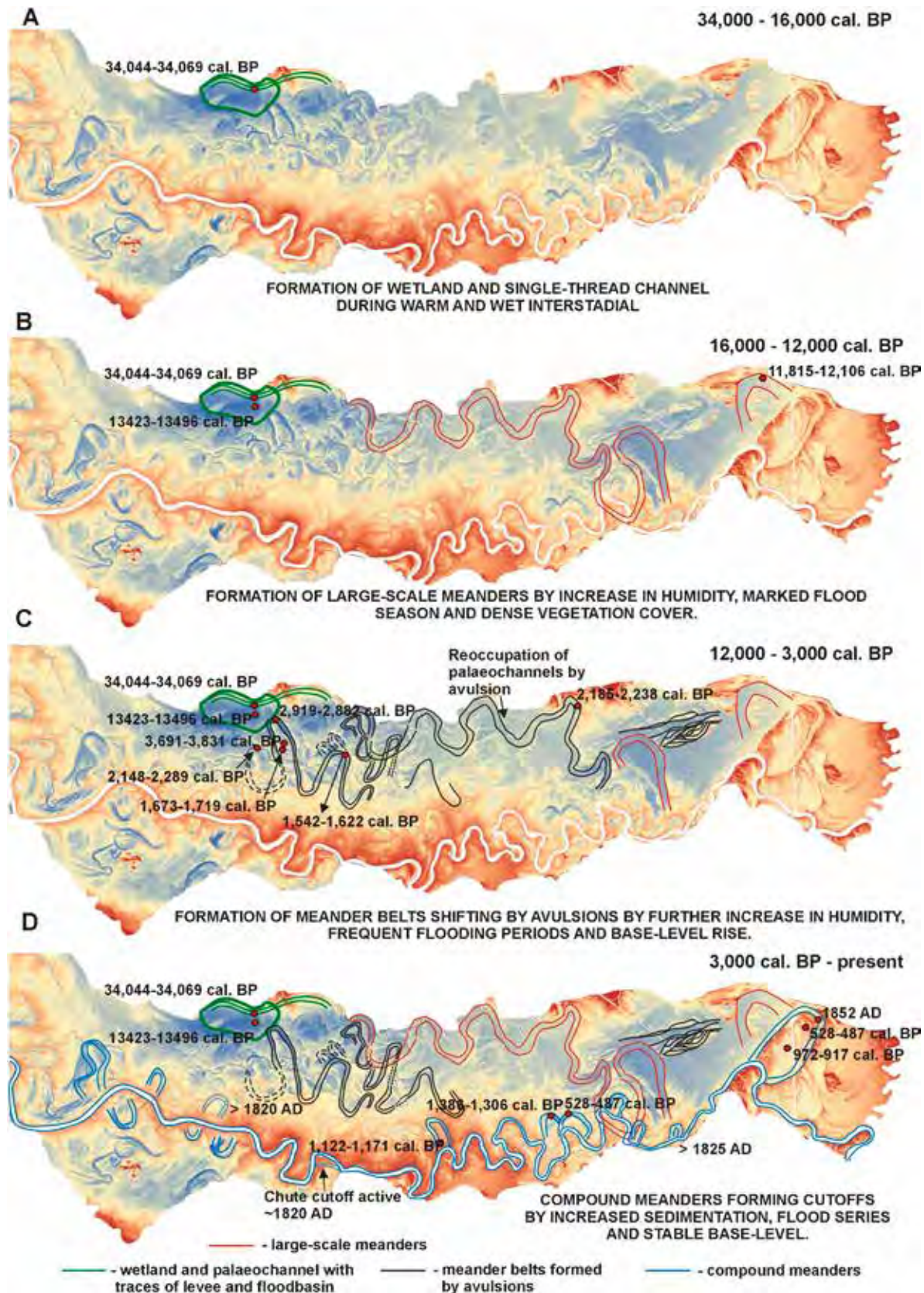


Fig. 10. Main stages of the Congaree channel planform evolution during the last 34,000 years.

Annual meeting

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request for information about changes in social media policy.

At the same time, the Department of Government Efficiency had threatened to terminate the lease of the Southeast Archeological Institute, which houses eight million artifacts from almost 70 Southeastern parks, and has conducted research at Congaree National Park. Grant programs that support parks were also being scrutinized, as well as philanthropic partnership agreements.

There was and remains a real fear among Friends groups that agreements could be terminated and assets claimed by the federal government.

John Cely then introduced our Order of the Cypress recipient, George Taylor. George became interested in the swamp as a teenager, and had permission to explore current parklands through his grandfather, a member of Cedar Creek Hunt Club.

Initially interested in photodocumenting the Ivory-billed Woodpecker, he continued his photography during frequent visits, initially as a high school student. After noticing logging near Bannister Bridge, he had the idea of developing a slide show to share with conservation

groups—both to document logging and educate the public about the natural resource at their doorstep. George found a sympathetic audience with Jim Elder and Dick Watkins and collaborated on a slide show, which was widely shared as part of the campaign to protect the swamp.

George's continued access

to the hunt club was invaluable as other activists were banned from the Beidler Tract, though his guerilla photography eventually resulted

in his arrest. His photos comprised most of the photo documentation used in the campaign, and he served as photographer at the Congaree Action Now conference.

In his remarks, George shared stories about his adventures and misadventures in the park, both as explorer and activist, including a harrowing night on a flooded sandbar, discovery of an immense bald cypress on a multi-day trip and his arrest and the several hours he spent in jail while his father and uncle discussed how much character-building should take place.

Afterwards, we raffled a copy of John Cely's Arcadia Press book, *Congaree*, a signed and numbered limited edition copy of Will Barnes' Congaree photography book,

and three bottles of wine from Morganelli's, donated for the event.

John Sparrow from Oyster Bar provided oysters from the Virginia tidelands, supplemented by chili, roast vegetables and other side dishes provided by Friends members.

Thanks to the many Friends members who provided food and beverages, assisted with registration, set-up and clean-up.

Recap

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keep in mind that Friends groups at large parks often run bookstores and other concessions, oversee interpretive programs, and regularly support staff positions. The consensus was that providing too much assistance led to fundamental conflicts with the parks' public mission. Efforts to keep parks open, for instance, were resented by park staff, and could lead down the road to increasing privatization and corporate sponsorship.

Allies and resources

Friends of Congaree Swamp belongs to the National Parks Friends Alliance, which has provided an opportunity to compare notes and share resources. The recent half-day Virtual Spring Meeting included a chilling reminder of the current climate when a National Park Service representative speaking at the meeting did so from a script, and would only answer questions from a script.

Biweekly meetings among

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George Taylor

Research

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region.

Migrating meanders

From 12,000 to 3,000 years ago, the mega-meanders abruptly shifted to a belt of narrower, more sinuous meandering channels. The change was precipitated by continued seasonal flooding, warming and humid climate, rising groundwater tables, increased forest cover in the watershed and floodplain, sediment-heavy flows from upstream, accumulation of woody debris and log jams, and sea level rise downstream.

Some of these meanders include familiar floodplain features such as Weston Lake, Big Slough, Horseshoe Pond,

and Fishhook Slough. Flows from that time were somewhat lower than flows observed in the main channel of the Congaree River valley today, though evidence of significant channel abandonment exists from this time as well. Some of the large paleochannels were re-occupied during this time, though the general trend, of course, was the familiar southwest march of the Congaree River system. The formation of meanders from that time was similar to the process today, with meanders lengthening or rotating downstream at a rate of 1.5 to two meters per year.

The river system over the last 3,000 years includes channels abandoned prior to historic times (e.g., the arms of Butterfly Pond were formed

by meander cutoffs 1,350 years ago and 500 years ago). Rather than wholesale changes in the river channel, the current process cuts off individual migrating meanders, such as at Buckhead in 1852, and Devil's Elbow before the 1930s. The change in the development and abandonment of meanders may be due to slightly drier conditions and increased sediment transported from the upstate, which have increased greatly in historical times. In several cases, too, the geometry and behavior of the river has been intentionally modified by human activities such as artificial canals (e.g., Mazyck's Cut) and whispered rumors of fertilizer explosions used to maintain some choice fishing holes near the river.

Recap

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Alliance members and National Park Foundation staff have been much more constructive. The National Park Foundation and Friends groups include deeply experienced leadership (e.g., National Park Foundation's CEO is the former Superintendent of the National Mall and Memorial Parks) and it is through them that we obtain some of our most useful information about the actions of the current administration and impacts upon the park service, the parks and their employees.

There are a surprising number of support groups to be found on social media, and we encourage you to find ones

compatible with your interests. National Parks Conservation Association has long focused on advocacy, and their posts have been excellent. National Parks Traveler features articles on a variety of park-related issues, but does not shy away from aggressive advocacy of the park service. (Note: USC Prof. Robert Janiskee, who was involved with the 1970's-era advocacy, served as a columnist for National Parks Traveler for years).

As we mentioned at the Annual Meeting, we met some interesting new allies locally after a protest was organized on March 1, as part of the nationwide campaign, March for Our Parks.

The protest was organized by Kayt Myers, owner of the

outdoors company Field Trip in Aiken. Friends was first contacted about the national campaign by Cameron Sabin, a South Carolina native and creator of the National Park Diaries YouTube channel, with over 80,000 subscribers.

We played a small role (I was unable to attend), but did share the information on social media, and were pleased to see some familiar faces among the 75 protesters at the park.

Save the date

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hiking boots, plenty of water, sun protection and a snack are recommended.

Please contact John Grego (friendsofcongarreeswamp@gmail.com or 803-331-3366) if interested.



Friends of Congaree Swamp

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Yes, I want to support conservation of Congaree Swamp for future generations. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of \$ _____. (Please make checks payable to Friends of Congaree Swamp.)

_____ Individual \$25	Name(s) _____
_____ Family \$40*	Mailing address _____
_____ Advocate \$50	City _____ State _____ Zip _____
_____ Nonprofit \$50	Phone _____ Email _____
_____ Partner \$100**	
_____ Benefactor \$500	
_____ Patron \$1000	Please keep your information current to receive special notices about field trips, events, scheduling changes and acknowledgements in addition to a quarterly newsletter.
_____ Corporate \$1000	

*For a contribution of \$40 - \$99, you may choose one of the following gift options:

Baseball cap maroon _____ tan _____ tan visor _____

Bandana imprinted with map of Congaree National Park teal _____ red _____ forest green _____

**For a contribution of \$100 or more you may choose either a copy of *The Natural History of Congaree Swamp* _____
or one of the six gift options listed above. I do **NOT** wish to receive a membership gift _____

I would like to donate an additional \$ _____.

Thank you for supporting Friends of Congaree Swamp!

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