



Our History

20 Years of Watching Your Forest



GEORGIA
FORESTWATCH

Our History

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Georgia ForestWatch celebrates two decades of working hard to protect one of Georgia's great treasures, the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Words cannot express our gratitude for the many generous supporters, volunteers and staff for their part in accomplishing our work. Special thanks to the authors for the difficult task of pulling our history from many minds. Knowledge of our history keeps us true to our task as we plan the future.



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History, Part One

The defense of public lands: The birth of Georgia ForestWatch

by Bob Kibler and Charles Seabrook
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In the 1970s, a fervor for environmental stewardship was sweeping the nation. Congress created the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 and a few years later adopted landmark legislation to protect our air, water and land.

Just as strong was the sentiment for protecting our natural heritage. In 1973, the momentous federal Endangered Species Act was adopted.

But of all the bedrock environmental laws passed during that decade, the one that would be of paramount importance to the future of then-unborn Georgia ForestWatch was the National Forest Management Act of 1976. A decade after its passage, the law and its aftermath helped birth the organization.

In essence, Georgia ForestWatch was spawned as part of a legal settlement between the U.S. Forest Service and seven conservation organizations that challenged the agency's first-ever comprehensive management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. The Forest Service had devised the plan as part of the 1976 act's mandates.

In the settlement, the conservation groups' lawyers inserted language into the agreement, requiring the Forest Service to publicly disclose on an annual basis its logging, clear-cutting and road-building plans for the coming year.

To engage the Forest Service and dog its activities on the ground – and to ensure that the agency was sticking to its promises – the conservationists formed a new organization, Georgia ForestWatch.

It was a historic step because it was a move away from a timber-first policy and a nudge towards a forum for public forestry, said Walter Cook, a retired University of Georgia forestry professor. "It's one of the best things to happen to forestry in this state," he told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution in 1987.

This is the story of how Georgia ForestWatch came to be. It's a story of dogged persistence on the part of the conservation organizations to stop destructive logging, road-building and other practices that seriously threatened the ecology and natural splendor of the forests.

The conservationists persevered in the face of frazzled nerves, sleepless nights and sometimes flaring tempers. There were some dramatic moments, as when they had only minutes to make a midnight deadline.

But luck, determination – and the 1976 law – were on their side.

In the law, Congress directed the U.S. Forest Service to curtail clear-cutting, provide for biological diversity, protect streams and water quality, limit uneconomic timbering and provide for public input.

Responding to those mandates, the Forest Service in 1980 began drawing up its first-ever comprehensive management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee national forests, outlining in detail how it would abide by Congress's intentions for the forests. The final plan would integrate management of timber, wildlife, road-building, wilderness and other facets of the forests and would guide the agency in Georgia over the next 10-15 years.

The conservation organizations eagerly awaited the so-called Land and Resource Management Plan. The Forest Service had developed it with absolutely no public input. In October 1984, the groups got their first peek when the Forest Service released the draft plan -- a ponderous, 750-page document -- for public perusal. The public would have 60 days to comment.

The conservation groups quickly went to work. Recognizing the plan's great importance for the forests for decades to come, they joined together in a coalition to dissect the bulky document, understand its implications and write up their comments. In the coalition were representatives from The Georgia Conservancy, the Wilderness Society, the Sierra Club, Friends of the Mountains, Georgia Botanical Society, Atlanta Audubon Society, and the Georgia Council of Trout Unlimited.

The members agreed to meet in either Atlanta or Gainesville once every week or two. Often, the group, sitting around a big table, was in session late into the night. Almost immediately the coalition came to a stark realization -- scrutinizing the plan and producing comments would be a daunting task. For one thing, many of them had little experience in analyzing Forest Service documents. They would have to quickly familiarize themselves with nearly incomprehensible Forest Service jargon.

"We really felt overwhelmed," said James Sullivan, who represented Friends of the Mountains.

Hanging over the group was the deadline. They well knew that if they were to have standing for possible legal challenges to the final plan, they must submit their comments before the cut-off date.



Larry Winslett photo

Georgia ForestWatch was birthed amidst growing citizen momentum to bring an end to clear cutting and the realization that an organized group was needed to watchdog the U.S. Forest Service.

Given the laborious task ahead of them, the coalition requested and obtained from the Forest Service an extension of the comment period to 90 days. To help them wade through the massive plan and absorb its many nuances, they hired consultants familiar with Forest Service lingo and technical data. One of them was Randall O'Toole, an Oregon activist who already had been involved in legal challenges against the Forest Service in that state.

The coalition, though, was not entirely devoid of its own expertise and savvy leaders. Far from it. Some of the members had butted heads with the Forest Service in the past. For instance, Friends of the Mountains, a grassroots organization also represented by Andrea Timpone, had battled the agency in the early 1980s over herbicide use, clear-cutting and a misbeguiled Reagan administration notion to sell national forest land.

Another coalition member and veteran of environmental battles was Bob Kerr, then director of the Georgia Conservancy, who brought his considerable political and negotiating clout to bear. "Bob was sort of a father figure to us," said Peter Kirby, then a staff lawyer for The Wilderness Society's national office in Washington.

But the coalition's acknowledged leader was Chuck McGrady, an Atlanta-based lawyer and conservation chair for the Sierra Club's Georgia chapter. He is credited with keeping the group focused and united in the face of headache-causing tension and seemingly insurmountable disagreements among members. "He had a good sense of humor, which helped ease tensions," said Sullivan. "He was good at keeping things flowing. That was especially important for this group, which was a bit unruly. Everybody liked him and respected him."

Working alongside McGrady was Jean Sokol, a staff member of the Wilderness Society's Atlanta office. The coalition's only non-volunteer member – though she contributed many uncompensated hours – Sokol was a tireless worker who did much of the group's grunt work. Later, Sokol and McGrady were married.

For the most part, the differences in the coalition arose over what the members deemed to be of primary concern with the new Forest Service plan. The Wilderness Society, led by Ron Tipton, focused on roadless areas, which could become future wilderness areas. The Georgia Conservancy was most concerned over rampant logging. Friends of the Mountains zeroed in on the use of herbicides on public forest land. Other members concentrated on wildlife and botanical issues.

There also was fear that the coalition's "big three" – the Georgia Conservancy, Sierra Club and The Wilderness Society – would dictate the final response to the Forest Service.

But, McGrady, as facilitator, mustered his considerable leadership and organizing skills to keep things on track. He urged coalition members to sponsor workshops and public meetings and other programs to educate the public and motivate it to voice its own concerns over the Forest Service's plan.

As the January 31, 1985, deadline for comments approached, discord arose anew as coalition members debated whether to submit comments jointly or separately. Most of the members chose the latter route, although The Wilderness Society and the Georgia Conservancy decided to file theirs together. They barely made the deadline -- they dropped their comments into the post office box at the Atlanta Hartsfield International Airport only a few minutes before midnight of the final day.

"In fact, nearly all of us sent in our comments on the last day of the comment period," Sullivan said. "We were working right up until the end because there was so much we had to look at."

In their comments, coalition members stated that not enough forest land was being set aside for roadless and wilderness areas. Also, they said, the plan leaned heavily towards excessive logging and lacked sufficient safeguards against clearcutting, road-building, and herbicide use. For one thing, the plan proposed removing 81 million board feet of timber per year and even increasing logging levels over the next several years.

“It just didn’t make a whole lot of sense to us,” Sullivan said.

Now, with the coalition’s comments in the Forest Service’s hands, it became a waiting game to see if the agency would absorb the comments and re-work its management plan to address the groups’ concerns.

One bright spot appeared during this time – the public had come through. The Forest Service had received more than 2,000 written public comments on the management plan. The agency, it was revealed later, was taken aback by the public outpouring.

“The Forest Service, too, was treading on unfamiliar ground,” said Kirby.

Finally, in September 1985, the Forest Service released the eagerly awaited “final draft” of its first-ever management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee national forests. Those who didn’t like the plan would have 45 days to file an appeal.

The coalition members, in fact, were appalled over what they saw. Disappointment was profound. “We considered it a very bad plan,” Kirby said. In most respects, it was almost identical to the draft plan released nearly nine months before. It was as if the coalition’s comments had mattered little in the final writing.

In short, the conservation groups feared that if the plan were implemented as written, the forests would be as vulnerable as ever to destructive logging, clear-cutting and other practices.

Once again, the coalition rolled up its sleeves and went to work. A momentous decision had to be made – whether to appeal the plan or simply sit down with Forest Service officials and plead for better treatment. Once again, tension arose over what route to take. Kerr of the Georgia Conservancy wanted to negotiate with the Forest Service, to see if an agreement could be reached. Friends of the Mountains, however, was adamant – it would appeal and go it alone if the others bowed out.

The wrangling over what to do came to a head on Oct. 27, 1985. At a coalition meeting in Gainesville, McGrady called for a final vote. It was time to fish or cut bait, he said. Using all of the facilitator skills at his command, he called first on Friends of the Mountains. He already knew, though, what the Friends’ choice would be – to file an appeal, no matter what. But by letting Friends announce first, McGrady hoped other coalition members would follow suit.

It worked. The vote to appeal the Forest Service’s plan was unanimous. “The others fell in line like dominos,” Sullivan said.

Now, the coalition truly would be sailing into uncharted waters. The formal notice of appeal – a procedure required by federal law before filing an appeal itself – that the coalition submitted to the Forest Service was the first of its kind in the nation.



Sullivan family photo

Big Burn: A young Jim Sullivan looks over a forest stand in White County that had been clear cut and burned by the U.S. Forest Service, circa 1987-88, shortly after Georgia ForestWatch is formed.

Despite the bold move, though, McGrady and Kirby, the coalition's lawyers, knew that the group was treading on thin ice. They worried whether the coalition's case was strong enough to convince an administrative law judge that the Forest Service should re-work its management plan.

They fretted, too, that another required follow-up document, the "reasons for appeal," would lay bare the coalition's weaknesses.

Then, Lady Luck smiled. To the utter surprise of everyone, even before the appeal had started winding its way through the Washington bureaucracy, the Forest Service sent word that it wanted to negotiate a settlement.

Coalition members were jubilant. "We knew that we didn't have the expertise to go to court if it came to that, so we were very happy," Sullivan said.

Added Kirby: "We had drawn up a 5-page 'reasons for appeal' document, but we never had to submit it."

It was learned later that the agency's unexpected move came about primarily because it, too, was venturing into unknown terrain. The agency was wary that the appeal might open up a can of worms and set a national precedent that would jeopardize management plans for other national forests.

Now, the coalition was on a playing field tilting more in its favor. During the settlement negotiations, Forest Service officials themselves made a suggestion that later would prove to be the impetus behind launching Georgia ForestWatch. The officials opined that the way to make sure the agency was true to its word was to monitor its forest management, project by project, on the ground.

McGrady and Kirby immediately realized the potential. But if ground-level surveillance were to be effective, the group had to know what the Forest Service was up to. Accordingly, the lawyers added a paragraph to the agreement, requiring the Forest Service to meet annually with coalition members – or the "appellant groups" – to disclose specific plans for logging and other activities in the forests. The appellants, through their on-ground eyeballing, could then determine if the Forest Service were following acceptable courses of action.

"Public participation would be guaranteed," Kirby said.

The "Settlement Agreement" was submitted on April 1, 1986, a date McGrady chose as an in-house joke.

The coalition's triumph, however, was muted: It had achieved only a "modest victory" on other issues, such as persuading the Forest Service to preserve additional acreage and reduce logging and herbicide use.

But at least they were in a better position now to keep the Forest Service in check.

Now, a structure had to be set up by which the groups would carry out their watchdog activities. Sokol, Kirby, Timpone, Brian Hager of the Sierra Club and Nell Jones of the Georgia Wildlife Federation, in large part, helped developed the framework for a new group that would perform the monitoring chores on behalf of the conservation organizations.

During that time, the Wilderness Society was providing most of the support for the working group. Sokol, the society's staff member, was devoting most of her time to launching the monitoring effort. "Without Jean's help, I don't think we would have succeeded." said Dennis Stansell, a Gainesville social worker who was one of the first volunteers in the new organization.

Sokol, in fact, was the first to suggest that the new group be dubbed "Georgia ForestWatch."

On an apple-crisp day in September 1986, ForestWatch's first band of volunteers assembled at the old Tumbling Waters Camp in the serene mountains of Rabun County to kick off their monitoring effort. A pivotal decision they made that day was that at least one or two volunteers would be assigned to each of the Chattahoochee-Oconee forests' eight ranger districts to keep a close eye on Forest Service undertakings. Also on that day, the volunteers underwent the first of several watchdog-training sessions. Some of the instructors were Forest Service employees.

"Actually, the Forest Service was a big help," said Sullivan, who was ForestWatch's first "district leader" for the Chattooga Ranger District.

Over the next several months, the volunteers would learn how to read maps and orient themselves in the woods; write comments; check the health of forest trees and streams; survey for rare species; understand Forest Service regulations and jargon; and make sure that "visual quality" regulations were being followed to protect scenic beauty.

Thus, Georgia ForestWatch was born standing up. It would become a force to be reckoned with as it matured into an independent organization to protect Georgia's national forests from wanton ruin. ■



Peter McIntosh photo



History, Part Two

Growing pains

by Bob Kibler and Charles Seabrook
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Still a little wobbly on its feet in August 1986, the newly birthed Georgia ForestWatch quickly geared up for its first important mission – the deployment of a well-trained volunteer force to monitor management of the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests and rein in destructive logging practices.

Prior to the mid-1980s, the U.S. Forest Service’s stewardship of the Chattahoochee-Oconee leaned heavily in favor of road-building and preparing timber sales for private industry.

Clear cutting, a particularly ruinous practice, was widespread in the Chattahoochee and other Southern Appalachian forests. Private industry clearly called most of the shots. As one candid Forest Service official put it, there was a hell bent zeal “to put logs on trucks.”

But under federal law, the Forest Service is supposed to manage national forests for multiple uses – watershed protection, fish and wildlife habitat, scenic beauty, wilderness protection, recreation and limited logging.

ForestWatch would be instrumental in forcing the federal agency to abide by those mandates and do what it should have done all along – give due consideration to the crucial ecological and environmental values of the forests.

In the beginning, ForestWatch came about as part of a legal settlement in 1986 between the Forest Service and seven conservation organizations – known as the “appellant groups” – that challenged the agency’s first-ever comprehensive management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee forests. The Forest Service had devised the intricate plan as part of the 1976 National Forest Management Act’s mandates.

In the settlement, the Forest Service agreed to disclose publicly on an annual basis its logging, clear cutting and road-building plans for the coming year. To engage the Forest Service and eyeball its activities on the ground – and to ensure that it was sticking to an acceptable course of action – the appellant groups formed Georgia ForestWatch.

In the basic structure developed for the new organization, the Chattahoochee-Oconee came under the hawk-like scrutiny of a dedicated group of volunteers known as district leaders. At least one volunteer was assigned to each of the Chattahoochee’s seven districts and the Oconee’s single district to monitor the government’s activities.

When they came across what they deemed was an unacceptable activity in the forest, they reported it to the appellant groups. In turn, the groups would file, if necessary, an administrative appeal or other legal action to persuade the Forest Service to mend its ways.

ForestWatch's first district leaders and assignments were:

– Ken Kombs, working with a Gainesville textile company, transferred to Chattanooga after a year, and handed off to Mort Meadors. Mort lived near Rabun Gap and ran a trout farm, on the Tallulah Ranger District.

– James Sullivan, a self-taught botanist and canoe builder who lived near Toccoa, on the Chattooga District.

– Dennis Stansell, a Gainesville hospice worker, on the Chestatee District.

– Brent Martin, a graduate history student at Georgia State University in Atlanta, on the Armuchee District.

– Hillrie Quin, an Atlanta conservationist who was prominent in the Appalachian Trail Club, on the Brasstown district.

– Shepard Howell, a Cartersville lawyer and later a judge, on the Cohutta district.

– Jim Leonard, a Superfund lawyer from Alpharetta, on the Toccoa district.

– Nathan Melear of Athens, on the Oconee district.

The first kick-off training session for district leaders was held at the old Tumbling Waters camp in Rabun County in August, 1986. Subsequent sessions were held annually at the Camp Wahsega 4-H Center nestled in the scenic mountains just north of Dahlonega.

At those gatherings, the district leaders honed such skills as getting around in the woods and assessing the impact of Forest Service activities on the forest. They also learned how to recruit other volunteers to assist them.



Georgia ForestWatch photo

Prior to the birth of Georgia ForestWatch, clear cutting was a common U.S. Forest Service practice.

Instructors included the district leaders themselves and outside experts, some of whom were Forest Service personnel. “The Forest Service really helped us out during the first four or five sessions, explaining the laws under which they operated,” James Sullivan said.

Sullivan himself taught map reading, orienting oneself in the forest and understanding Forest Service codes and jargon. “It was very important that we learned how to walk the woods with a compass and a map to keep from getting lost,” Sullivan noted.

Hillrie Quin taught visual quality. “He learned everything there was to know about how the Forest Service dealt with visual qualities (scenic values) in various parts of the forest,” Sullivan said.

The participants usually arrived on Friday night and stayed through Sunday afternoon, with a hike in the forest usually part of the weekend agenda. The participants were charged \$25 for food and lodging. Another important volunteer group – the district leaders’ spouses – did much of the cooking. Sue Murphy, wife of James, is still fondly remembered for her “mountains” of tasty spaghetti.

But with no funding or staff of its own, ForestWatch in its early years had to depend on the appellant groups, primarily the Wilderness Society, for administrative support.

The Wilderness Society stepped in at the behest of Peter Kirby. As a lawyer with the society’s national office in Washington, Kirby was one of the lawyers who led the appeal in 1986 that resulted in the birth of ForestWatch. Afterwards, he became the director of the Wilderness Society’s southeastern office in Atlanta.

“It was Peter’s decision to support Georgia ForestWatch,” Sullivan said. Kirby arranged for Wilderness Society staff members – who came to be known fondly as “den mothers” – to devote part of their time to handling administrative chores for ForestWatch. The first such staffer was Jean McGrady, who handled the duties until 1988, when she left the Wilderness Society to nurture a family. After that, it was Shirl Darrow, now Shirl Parsons.

McGrady and Parsons made the arrangements for Camp Wahsega, set up district leaders’ quarterly meetings and served as liaisons between ForestWatch and the appellant groups. Parsons typed up ForestWatch’s first newsletters. A file cabinet at the Wilderness Society’s Atlanta office was devoted to storing ForestWatch records and other paperwork.

“I did just about everything, including arranging for speakers at Camp Wahsega, sending out notices of meetings and registering attendees,” Parsons said.

She remembers that the fledgling ForestWatch’s finances were strictly a “shoebox” operation. “We had only about 50 members at the time, and there were no dues,” she recalled.

Later, the financial burdens were relieved somewhat by donations from Recreational Equipment, Inc. (REI). When the company opened its store in 1990 along the I-85 access road near Clairmont Road in Atlanta, it chose Georgia ForestWatch as the recipient of funds generated by its grand opening festivities.

Parsons remembers ForestWatch receiving “several thousand” dollars from REI, which became a major contributor to the organization in later years.

The trained district leaders began fanning out in their respective areas, paying particular attention to areas proposed for logging.

“I walked through the Chattooga district three or four times a month or stopped in the afternoon on the way home from work for a short hike,” Sullivan said. “Some areas were easy to get into, others much more difficult. If there weren’t any logging roads, you had to walk cross country. That’s why it was important to know how to get around in the woods.”

The district leaders were looking for possible impacts on soil, wildlife, scenery, water and other forest resources from proposed logging and road-building activities. They tried to determine whether the section should be logged at all or protected for wildlife habitat, visual quality and other purposes.

They learned about proposed logging projects from several sources, including occasional meetings with the forests’ district rangers. During the meetings, the district leaders and rangers were able to resolve many of their differences and avoid legal snarls.

In April 1988, for instance, foresters postponed a timber operation to allow ForestWatch members to review a potentially controversial site near Dahlenega.

In working with the agency, ForestWatch’s well-trained and knowledgeable volunteers earned respect from several district rangers.

Former Chattooga District ranger Tom Hawks once said of James Sullivan: “He doesn’t just preach a party line like some paid person. He gets out there and studies the situation to learn what is going on and is very knowledgeable.”

Also, in keeping with the original settlement, at least initially, top-level Forest Service officials began meeting annually with the district leaders and the appellant groups, laying out the agency’s plans for the Chattahoochee-Oconee in the coming year.

“The annual meetings gave us a heads up on the Forest Service’s plans so that we knew where to focus our forest monitoring,” Sullivan said. “The meetings also helped us keep a line of communication open all the way up to the forest supervisor’s office.”

Logging plans also were revealed in official scoping notices, the first formal steps the Forest Service must take to involve the public in its decision-making, as required under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).

The scoping process is still used today to determine the “scope,” or range, and significance of the issues associated with a timber sale or road-building project. The issues and other areas of concern identified by scoping are analyzed in detail in another document – the draft environmental assessment, which is also put forth for public scrutiny and comment.

After that, the Forest Service draws up its final environmental assessment to guide logging or road-building in a particular forest tract. If the public doesn’t like what it sees in an assessment, an administrative appeal can be filed to persuade the agency to change its plans. An appeal wends its way up the chain of command to as high as the Forest Service chief for a final decision.

In ForestWatch’s early days, district leaders certainly did not like much of what they saw in the environmental assessments, and they were forced to crank up the appeals process.

At first, the appellant groups agreed that ForestWatch itself wouldn’t file appeals. Rather, district leaders would hand over their recommendations to the appellant groups, which would file the necessary action.

One of the first appeals was made in 1988. Sullivan wrote it and turned it over to Friends of the Mountains, one of the appellant groups, for official filing with the Forest Service.

The appeal challenged a timber sale and a logging road that would have passed through the Chattahoochee River watershed and through what would later become the Mark Trail Wilderness Area.

“A main consideration in making the appeal was that the long road would involve steep, rocky terrain to reach a timber stand of the lowest quality in the entire watershed,” Sullivan recalled. “There just wasn’t any decent timber there.”

The challenge was successful and the Forest Service changed its plans for the sale.

With the first victory under their belts, the district leaders gained considerable confidence that they were on the right track. They would go on to win many more appeals during the early years of ForestWatch.

In 1991, a legendary coup occurred when Dennis Stansell and his wife Jan in the Chestatee District found a showy wild orchid known as the small whorled pogonia (*Isotria medeoloides*) in a proposed logging stand in the Blackwell Creek watershed. The plant, Georgia’s rarest orchid, was listed as threatened on the federal endangered species list. The timber sale was cancelled.

Of equal importance, however, the discovery was stark evidence that the Forest Service was not surveying diligently for protected species in proposed logging areas. The agency even questioned whether it had to conduct such surveys or simply rely on prior records.

The question was convincingly settled in early 1992 when ForestWatch volunteers learned that a Forest Service manual indeed required a biological survey as part of an environmental assessment. The agency had not been doing that.

The revelation was made with the help of Jim Loesel of Virginia, a citizen watchdog for national forests in his state. He had made interpretation of Forest Service regulations his life’s work. “We drove up to Virginia to meet with him, and he educated us on how to interpret the manual,” Sullivan said.

Loesel’s information came in handy a short time later, in February 1992, when ForestWatch filed its first direct appeal. Written by Stansell, the appeal protested implementation of the Flat Creek timber sale on the Chestatee district. The logging, the appeal stated, would increase browsing by white-tailed deer and jeopardize protected plant species.

The action was a momentous move because several members of ForestWatch had been pushing for the organization to begin filing its own appeals instead of routing them through the appellant groups. Direct filing, it was thought, would be more effective since ForestWatch volunteers were more knowledgeable than the other groups about a proposed forest project and could follow the process more closely.

The first direct appeal was also significant for another reason – it encouraged the then loose-knit volunteer group to incorporate in 1993 and become a full-fledged, independent organization.

Prior to incorporation, however, ForestWatch played a major role in another important mission in the early 1990s – forest preservation.

Most of the preservation effort at that time centered around then-U.S. Rep. Ed Jenkins, who represented Georgia’s 9th Congressional District that encompassed most of the Chattahoochee National Forest. Jenkins

said he was concerned that too much timber cutting, especially clear-cutting, was taking place in the Chattahoochee. He had shepherded legislation through Congress in 1986 that bestowed wilderness designation on Tray Mountain, Rich Mountain and Raven Cliffs – more than 45,000 acres.

But he wanted to take more forest land out of timber production, especially areas that were omitted from his 1986 wilderness act. A fortuitous meeting in early 1991 between him and Peter Kirby helped spur legislation to accomplish that goal. As Kirby recalled: “I met Ed at an event on the forest and then asked for an appointment for Shirl and me to visit him at his district office. At that visit he asked us to prepare a proposal for him on special areas, particularly Blood Mountain.”

For help in drawing up the proposal, Kirby turned to Georgia ForestWatch’s district leaders because of their intimate knowledge of the forest. They dubbed themselves the Chattahoochee Design Team. Within two months, they had a plan, which called for the creation of a national recreation area across the crest of the entire Blue Ridge above 3,000 feet, from Springer Mountain to the North Carolina border.

The plan was presented to Jenkins at a dinner in Norcross, a northern Atlanta suburb. One of the attendees was Sullivan. “I remember it being at a fancy restaurant,” he recalled, “and I remember two things about that night – the superb swordfish we had for dinner, and Jenkins’ saying that if he proposed this plan, he would be ‘dead politically.’”

A more modest plan, therefore, was quickly prepared. The final proposal included four major sites: Blood Mountain Wilderness Area; Mark Trail Wilderness Area; Coosa Bald Scenic Area; and Springer Mountain National Recreation Area.

Dennis Stansell remembers his part in establishing the boundaries of Blood Mountain Wilderness and the national recreation area as one of the most exciting and rewarding times of his life – one of his “greatest contributions.”

But it was hard work. There were few trails, and much of the work required bushwhacking, or making one’s way through the forest with a compass. “A GPS instrument would have made it a piece of cake,” Stansell said.

The Forest Service wasn’t of much help, either: “They kept trying to narrow down the proposed areas as much as possible,” said Stansell.

Quin and Sullivan met with similar frustrations in the proposed Mark Trail Wilderness Area.

After the new plan was presented to Jenkins, he sent out questionnaires in May 1991 to thousands of his constituents, asking for their views on the proposal. Kirby also intended to publish and distribute a brochure across North Georgia to explain the need for forest protection and help garner public support for it.

While trying to come up with funds for the brochure, Kirby had another fortuitous meeting – with Dr. Bob Kibler, a recently retired professor of neurology at Emory University and a long-time hiker.

“When I retired, I wanted to do something with the environment,” Kibler remembered. “I first approached the Georgia Conservancy, but I really wanted to get involved with an activist group. So, I called Peter Kirby and told him about my interests.”

Meeting with Kirby, Kibler asked what he might do as a volunteer for the Wilderness Society. “Peter, always direct, said the first thing I could do was contribute \$700 towards the publication of the brochure, and so I wrote a check,” said Kibler, who later became a leading ForestWatch advocate.

The public response to Jenkins' questionnaire was huge. Of more than 4,000 persons replying, nearly 70 percent were in favor. Armed with the high approval rating, Jenkins introduced the Chattahoochee National Forest Protection Act of 1991. Quin, Sullivan, Kirby and Nell Jones of the Georgia Wildlife Federation testified before Congress on behalf of the measure.

The Forest Service, which had planned to proceed with four timber sales in the areas that Jenkins wanted to preserve, opposed the legislation. But when asked during the hearings why it had harvested only 60,000 board feet out of an allowed 80,000 in the forest, agency officials admitted that it was due, in part, to insufficient demand.

In the Senate, U.S. Sen. Sam Nunn of Georgia pledged his help and declared that he and his fellow supporters "would stay until the legislation was approved." The bill was passed, protecting some additional 50,000 acres of the Chattahoochee National Forest. It was an amazingly speedy journey for a piece of legislation through Congress.

"A lot of people really worked hard to make it happen," Stansell said. "We wanted to do it right. I really can't say enough about Ed Jenkins. This was his legacy."

Later, in honor of the former lawmaker, Congress changed the name of the Springer Mountain National Recreation Area to the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area.

But about the time Jenkins' bill was moving through Congress, Georgia ForestWatch and the Forest Service were becoming more wary of one another. Their relationship was taking a decided turn. For the first several years after the organization's birth, its relationship with the federal agency was relatively smooth, probably because of the good will generated by the 1986 settlement. But by the end of the 1980s, dealings between ForestWatch and the Forest Service were becoming more strained.

Sullivan remembers that the annual meetings with the agency's bigwigs were becoming more loud, tension-filled and confrontational. At one meeting, some attendees, frustrated, pounded hard on the table to make a point.

Undoubtedly, the dozens of appeals filed by ForestWatch and other groups, and the threats of lawsuits by environmental allies, contributed to the touchy relationships with the Forest Service. The passage of Jenkins' forest preservation legislation also generated some hard feelings within the agency.

Eventually, the annual meetings between ForestWatch and the Forest Service, as originally set forth in the 1986 agreement, ended. The Forest Service informed the district leaders that henceforth the agency would reveal its proposed logging projects and other activities through the scoping notices, as required by law.

Then, in 1989, a harried Forest Service came out with tougher rules in an effort to curtail appeals. One of the rules, for instance, placed a strict 45-day deadline for filing appeals. Formerly, extensions from 45 to 90 days were commonly granted to allow challengers like ForestWatch to gather technical information.

In an interview at the time, Kirby said that the new regulations would make groups like ForestWatch "less effective because the appeals process will become more difficult."

Still, ForestWatch was hugely successful in helping to stymie destructive logging in the Chattahoochee-Oconee. A measure of the organization's initial success became apparent in 1995 – the Government Accounting Office reported that meeting the timber quota in the Chattahoochee-Oconee had become difficult because of the Forest Service's reduced use of clear cutting and legal challenges from environmental groups.

Meanwhile, in a separate situation, ForestWatch's relationship with the seven appellant groups was heading for a change. In the early 1990s, interest in ForestWatch among the appellant groups, with the exception of the Wilderness Society, was waning. The groups had other important environmental battles to wage.

It was time, ForestWatch's leadership decided, for the organization to incorporate, become independent and take charge of its own destiny. Adding to the impetus for incorporation was an unfortunate accident in September 1992, when a young lawyer fell into a creek at Camp Wahsega and broke her arm. The episode ended without conflict, but the lawyer advised ForestWatch about the potential for law suits against individual members from such occurrences.

In the spring of 1993, the ForestWatch leadership informed fellow members by newsletter that the "loosely knit organization of national forest activist volunteers" would incorporate and gain non-profit status. The group would retain its structure, activities and purpose. Incorporation, though, would enable ForestWatch to apply for grants from foundations and other sources and charge membership dues – initially \$5 per person – for operating funds.

With the incorporation would come a board of directors made up of the district leaders and two members-at-large, and an advisory board composed of representatives of the seven appellant groups from the 1986 appeal of the Chattahoochee-Oconee forest management plan.

Incorporation was officially approved by the state of Georgia on April 20, 1993. By the end of that year, Georgia ForestWatch was fully on its own, anxious to carry out its mission to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee-Oconee national forests and educate the public about their splendor and necessity. ■



Lori Martell photo



History, Part Three

Developing a unique identity

by Bob Kibler and Charles Seabrook
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In 1994, after over-logging the national forests of the Pacific Northwest, ruining once-splendid landscapes and endangering animals such as the spotted owl, the timber industry set its sights on a new bonanza: the forests of the South. In the industry's eyes, Southern forests, after nearly a century of re-growth, were ripe for the chainsaw.

“Within 10 years, the South will account for about half of all lumber produced in the United States,” University of Georgia economics forecaster Jeffrey Humphreys predicted in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* in October 1994.

That outlook sent shivers down conservationists' spines. They knew that there would be renewed pressure to log the South's national forests, including the Chattahoochee-Oconee in Georgia.

They girded for battle. By the time timber companies and the U.S. Forest Service began laying new plans for logging the region's public lands, a small army of savvy, dedicated tree-huggers had dug in to defend the forests from whining saws and snorting bulldozers.

Prime among the defenders was the relatively young Georgia ForestWatch, which had incorporated in 1993 as an independent, non-profit organization. Since its founding in August 1986, it had been on a roll, defeating several government plans to allow logging and road-building in environmentally sensitive areas of the Chattahoochee forest.

It also had played a pivotal role in 1991 in helping then-U.S. Rep. Ed Jenkins persuade Congress to permanently protect an additional 50,000 acres of the forest.

Now, in 1994, the lessons learned from those struggles would be of immense benefit for the skirmishes ahead. For the remainder of the 1990s, ForestWatch, in addition to waging other bitter battles to keep commercial lumberjacks out of the national forests, also would bird-dog the government's development of the second “Forest Land and Resource Management Plan” for the Chattahoochee-Oconee.

From those efforts, the organization would emerge at the end of the decade as the premier organization – with a professional staff and a cadre of well-trained volunteers – guarding the natural splendor and ecological integrity of Georgia's national forests and advocating their preservation.

“I think 1994 really was when Georgia ForestWatch gained its own identity,” said Rene Voss, who was the organization's first staff member.

That year, with the timber industry exerting big pressure on the government to log some of the last wild places in the Chattahoochee, ForestWatch and other conservation groups saw the drawing up of a new detailed management plan as a chance to protect tens of thousands more acres of the forest from logging and road-building.

Like the first comprehensive management scheme implemented in the mid-1980s, the second plan was required by federal law. It would guide Forest Service management of the Chattahoochee-Oconee forests for another 10-15 years, probably through 2015 and perhaps beyond. Georgia ForestWatch was well familiar with the planning process – the organization was spawned in 1986 as part of a legal settlement between the Forest Service and seven conservation groups that challenged the first plan.

When that first plan was publicly unveiled by the Forest Service in October 1984, it caught the conservation groups flat-footed. When they scrutinized it, they frantically realized that they would be hard-pressed to understand the confusing jargon and interpret what the 750-page document meant for the future of the forests. They had to scramble and burn much midnight oil to absorb the information, comment on it and urge the Forest Service to devise a more acceptable management blueprint.

The conservationists claimed that the first plan favored the timber industry because it left more than 70 percent of the Chattahoochee and 90 percent of the Oconee open to logging.

In 1994, the now independent Georgia ForestWatch and other groups vowed they would not be caught off guard again. This time they would be well prepared when the Forest Service launched its second planning process. The process was supposed to get underway in earnest in 1996, although the agency would be doing preliminary work prior to that.

The conservation groups decided early on that their main objective in the forthcoming plan would be the protection of tens of thousands of additional acres of the Chattahoochee-Oconee forests from logging and road-building – beyond the areas that already were protected to some degree. At that time, 124,000 acres of the Chattahoochee were permanently protected by Congress, either as wilderness areas or wild and scenic river areas. Another 83,500 acres received limited “administrative protection” as scenic areas, botanical areas and trail corridors.

A key strategy towards achieving the conservationists’ new goals would be to draw public attention to the natural beauty of the north Georgia highlands and emphasize the need to preserve still-intact wild places threatened by eventual logging.

The result was an 80-page booklet, “Georgia’s Mountain Treasures: The Unprotected Wildlands of the Chattahoochee Oconee National Forests,” published by the Wilderness Society in January 1995. It was the third in a series of reports as part of the Wilderness Society’s Southern Appalachian Project. The two previous reports--one on the Nantahala and Pisgah national forests in North Carolina in 1992, and the other on the Andrew Pickens district of the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina – had proved successful in educating the public, politicians and even some government personnel about the need to sustain and restore the Southern Appalachian ecosystem.

The new report described and mapped forty-four wild areas – a total of 235,700 acres – of the 750,000-acre Chattahoochee forest that the conservationists wanted protected from further logging and road building. In essence, the report would serve as the basis for the conservationists’ recommendations to the Forest Service. “In order to protect water quality, retain native plant and animal species and provide recreational opportunities, we are recommending that the wild areas detailed in this book be protected,” the conservationists stated in the introduction. “We also are asking that these areas not be logged and roaded between now and when the new plan goes into effect so that options will not be lost.”

Interim protection was important. Continued logging and road building until the plan was completed could disqualify potential roadless areas and take them out of the running for wilderness areas.

The 44 areas constituted some of the wildest and least disturbed tracts remaining in Georgia, the booklet noted. They ranged in size from 14,000 acres at Rabun Bald, the second-highest peak in Georgia, to 1,000 acres along Cooper Creek, a popular trout fishing spot. The tracts were crossed by few roads. They harbored century-old hardwoods, tumbling streams, stunning vistas, prime wildlife habitat and other natural assets. Most of them had been spared intensive logging since the early 1900s and harbored some of Georgia's last pockets of old-growth forest. Now, the conservation groups were asking the Forest Service to place the tracts in management categories that would protect them from future logging operations. Nearly half of the acreage, the conservationists believed, also qualified as roadless areas, an especially strong level of protection.



Sullivan family photo

Peter Kirby with blooming rhododendron in Cooper Creek Scenic Area.

endangered plants and old growth trees to determine places most at risk. More than 15 conservationists, about half ForestWatch volunteers, also were singled out by name for special acknowledgement.

The Forest Service's initial reaction to the report was subdued. When George Martin, the Chattahoochee's supervisor at the time, was asked if the agency would honor the groups' request that the 44 areas not be logged until the new plan went into effect, his answer was a flat "no." Five of the 44 areas, in fact, were scheduled for logging at that time. "We are not going to make any decisions on the allocation of lands [to various uses] until we hear from other members of the public," Martin said in an interview in January 1995. "We have to satisfy a lot of customers."

One of those "customers" was the Southern Timber Purchasers Council, which wanted to crank up the chainsaws and bulldozers in those areas as soon as possible. The council's spokeswoman, Deborah Baker, summed up the industry's attitude at the time: "All of these areas have been considered for wilderness designation in the past," she said. "If they are so great, why weren't they included then?"

Fourteen environmental organizations had a hand in assembling and writing the report. In addition, former President Jimmy Carter and the Carter Center's Global 2000 program endorsed it. Peter Kirby, then director of the Wilderness Society's southeast regional office in Atlanta, led the ambitious effort to prepare the report. ForestWatch, through its district leaders, was singled out for its major role in mapping and describing the areas, much as it had done in 1991 for Ed Jenkins' wilderness bill. "A network of knowledgeable leaders from ForestWatch," as they were described in the preface, had scoured the woods for rare and

To counter pressure from the timber industry to log the Chattahoochee, ForestWatch made another strategic move – bringing Rene Voss on board in early 1996 as a paid consultant with the title of “Campaign Director for the Planning Process.”

“Rene really was Georgia ForestWatch’s first employee,” said Brent Martin, then the organization’s president.

Voss at the time also was co-chairman of National Forest Issues for the Sierra Club’s Georgia Chapter. He previously had been working, however, as an unpaid advisor to ForestWatch on appeals of Forest Service logging proposals. The decision to hire a staffer was clearly a departure from ForestWatch’s status as a strictly volunteer organization, and at first there was some reluctance on the board to hire Voss. But after discussion, it agreed that Voss could be effective in trying to further the ForestWatch goal of limiting logging in the national forest.

Voss and ForestWatch board member James Sullivan subsequently wrote a grant to the Turner Foundation Inc., which awarded the organization a matching grant of \$25,000. The funds were matched by a grant in kind from the Wilderness Society – Kirby arranged for Voss to have space and access to equipment in the Wilderness Society’s Atlanta office. Voss was paid a salary of \$22,000 and remaining funds went into operating expenses.

For the next two years, Voss, with the help of numerous other individuals, worked to try to achieve two major objectives – engage the public in the planning process and seek and advocate interim protection for the 44 areas described in Georgia Mountain Treasures.

One of the opportunities for public participation came in the fall of 1996, when the Forest Service, as an initial step in the planning process, conducted public meetings and hearings for the public to express what it valued in the forest and the special places they wanted protected in the second management plan. To help rally public support for more forest protection, ForestWatch hired Dana Smith, formerly with Greenpeace, for a three month-stint. Smith collected more than 1,000 individual favorable comments from schools, churches and elsewhere. In addition, more than a dozen organizations were enlisted as advocates for wilderness and other forms of protection.

In addition to that effort, Angela Fincher (who later married Brent Martin) and Shirl Parsons, who worked in the Wilderness Society’s Atlanta office at the time, organized planning sessions and other meetings at various locations to keep conservationists and the public abreast of the planning process.

The result: The public input during the early comment period of the process was the largest for any forest in the Southeast.

While all that was going on, another major concern among conservationists at the time was how many tracts of the forest would the Forest Service include in the roadless inventory of the new plan. Roadless areas are undeveloped national forest lands that are the nearest candidate for consideration as potential wilderness. Federal law dictates that each time the Forest Service revises a forest management plan, it must consider and evaluate roadless areas that have potential for recommendation as wilderness to Congress. Even if the agency does not recommend an area in the roadless inventory as wilderness, the forest plan must provide a high level of protection from logging and road building for the area.

Jim Herd was the Forest Service officer in charge of the roadless area inventory in the mid-1990s. To the utter disappointment of the conservation groups, Herd came up with only a total of 11,000 acres deemed eligible for roadless area status. Although other tracts of the Chattahoochee forest satisfied the size and roadless area criteria – a minimum of 5,000 acres and less than one-half mile road per 1,000 acres – he had excluded many

of them on the basis of the “solitude” (or sights and sounds) criterion. The conservation groups thought this rather ironic since several established wilderness areas in other public lands were close to major cities.

“Herd’s attitude was ridiculous,” Voss said. “It was obvious to us that he wanted to keep the roadless area inventory for the Chattahoochee as minimal as possible,”

ForestWatch itself came up with a total of 115,000 acres – all of them described in Georgia Mountain Treasures – that it believed qualified for roadless status. ForestWatch volunteers had verified most of the acreage by eyeballing and surveying it on the ground. The conservationists confronted the Forest Service with their findings. A major bone of contention was the question of what classified as a “road,” Voss said. The forest service seemed willing to accept the loosest definition of a road in the forest, he said.

Slowly and painfully, the Forest Service was persuaded to accept some of ForestWatch’s roadless recommendations. Ultimately, the agency included a total of 65,000 acres in the roadless area inventory of the new plan. “Persuading Herd to do that was a big pain in the butt,” Voss said. “He was very stubborn; he didn’t want to give us anything.”

The larger roadless areas of the Chattahoochee in the new management plan included The Rabun Bald (Sarah’s Creek), Mountaintown (Pink Knob), Rocky Mountain, Kelly Ridge, Patterson Gap (Joe Gap), and Springer Mountain (Lance Creek). Once in the roadless inventory, these areas could not be altered until the plan’s completion. (See web link at the end of this article for a map of roadless areas.)

But tens of thousands of more acres, areas like Rocky Face and Worley Ridge, listed in Georgia Mountain Treasures, would not receive interim protection. ForestWatch and the other conservation groups, then, would have to continue challenging timber sales in the forest to protect these special places.

That set the stage for one of the conservationists’ greatest victories – a favorable ruling in the lawsuit known as Sierra Club vs. George Martin. It ultimately resulted in the temporary discontinuation of commercial logging in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

ForestWatch in 1995 had appealed seven major timber sales that were to take place in tracts of mature hardwoods – some more than a century old. The tracts had been included in the Mountain Treasures report.

The appeal was denied, and, in April 1996, ForestWatch and six other groups filed Sierra Club vs. George Martin in federal court to stop the timber sales. The groups alleged in their lawsuit that the Forest Service, in proposing the sales, had violated three federal laws: the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918; the Clean Water Act and the 1976 National Forest Management Act.

“The clear cutting in this case involves the death of thousands of migratory songbirds and the discharge of hundreds of tons of sediment, rock and sand, choking our mountain streams,” said the conservationists’ lawyer, Eric Huber of Earth Justice Legal Defense Fund in New Orleans.

The lawsuit also alleged that the Forest Service violated the National Forest Management Act by allowing logging without first doing inventories of all of the some 60 species of plants and animals considered “sensitive.” Sensitive species, such as brook trout and yellow ladies-slipper are those plants and animals that are declining in numbers, though they are not currently considered at risk for extinction.

The Forest Service admitted that individual plants and animals would be killed, but argued that the proposed logging would not reduce the forest-wide viability of those species.

The U.S. District Court ultimately ruled against the conservationists. However, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in February 1999 reversed the district court. The appeals court discounted the water quality and migratory bird issues. But on the issue of inadequate compliance with sensitive species requirement, the court held firm and the suit was won.

As a result of that lawsuit, and follow-up litigation involving George Martin's successor as the Chattahoochee Forest Supervisor, all timber sales were then stopped in the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. Since September 1996, there has not been a commercially driven logging program in these national forests. ■



Peter McIntosh photo



History, Part Four

“The Brent Martin Years”

by Bob Kibler and Charles Seabrook
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In our history of Georgia ForestWatch, we rewind a bit to focus on the pivotal era in the 1990s when the organization moved from the wings to center stage – assuming the lead role in protecting the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests from ruinous logging and other destructive practices.

It's a period that long-time ForestWatch members fondly recall as the “Brent Martin years” because of the young man who shepherded the organization and nudged it into the spotlight. Under Martin's vigilance and firm hand, ForestWatch evolved from a loose-knit group of watchdog volunteers into a prominent, cohesive force fighting for forest protection.

As ForestWatch's first executive director, he took fund-raising to a new height, securing an impressive array of grants and donations to replenish the organization's near-empty coffers. He led relentless battles to shut down controversial roads in the Chattahoochee and keep power lines and military training sites out of the forest. He fought to halt illegal ATV traffic that ripped up the forest's fragile soil. He succeeded in finding old-growth stands in the forest even though skeptical veteran foresters declared that none existed.

Martin, 47, had a keen interest in conservation going back to early boyhood; at age 12, he was a member of the National Wildlife Federation. But more than anything else, it was his boyhood experiences in rural Cobb County in the 1960s and 1970s that shaped his conservation ethic and propelled him into a daunting career of protecting forests.

He grew up in the Oakdale section of Cobb, a place of rolling farmland and wooded hills. “It was...a seemingly endless forested and pastoral landscape...that I learned from an early age held great mysteries and wonder,” he recalled in *Southern Hum* web magazine. “From it I learned to appreciate the many gifts that the natural world had to offer. Arrowheads turned up in our freshly plowed garden, beaver and muskrats traveled the worn banks of Nickajack creek, bream and catfish filled its silent eddies, and gnarly grey beech trees held ancient initials from decades past. We ate Chinese Chestnuts from an overgrown and abandoned farmstead, and explored the seemingly vast remains of a wilderness Girl Scout camp, Camp Highlands.”

Then, when he was 17, the bulldozers and chainsaws showed up. Sprawl had arrived; the beautiful landscape would be no more. In little time, the powerful, smoke-belching earth movers scraped away every square inch of the Girl Scout camp. It became the Highlands Industrial Park.

“The vibrant waters of Nickajack Creek were transformed into a mud filled ditch, hideous, devoid of life,” Martin said. “From then on, I turned my attention to getting away from there and to the Southern Appalachians...When I graduated from high school I did not join the rest of my classmates for a Caribbean cruise; instead, I took off for a backpacking trip across the length of the Smokies.”



Georgia ForestWatch photo

Brent Martin with an old American Beech while conducting on-the-ground forest monitoring on the Armuchee Ranger District.

For the next several years, he worked at various jobs, including a sales position with a hardwood lumber company, “which further opened my eyes to what was happening to our forests,” he said. His love of natural areas, though, never wavered. He joined the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society, and then got an itch to climb rocks. He even traveled to Nepal, the Mecca for rock-climbing enthusiasts, to practice his challenging sport.

Back in Georgia, one of his favorite rock-climbing haunts was Pigeon Mountain in the state’s northwest corner, a region of gentle ridges and valleys. The region attracted him for another reason: his maternal ancestors had settled in its Great Valley (the Coosa River Valley) in the 1850s and then scattered to surrounding areas. Later, the U.S. Forest Service included a huge chunk of the region in the Chattahoochee forest’s Armuchee ranger district, which would play a significant role in Martin’s career.

“As I drove through the Armuchee area or hiked or rock-climbed there, I would be just appalled over the huge clearcuts and other logging going on,” said Martin. “It was devastating. The Forest Service treated the Armuchee like a red-headed step-child.”

In early 1987, when he was an undergraduate history major at Kennesaw State College, he learned of a new volunteer group dedicated to keeping an eagle-eye on the Chattahoochee and Oconee national forests -- Georgia ForestWatch. The group’s goal: rein in the destructive logging and road-building in the forests.

Martin took an immediate liking to the fledgling group born in September 1986. He became a member and started helping out district leaders and tagging along with them as they reconnoitered their sections of the forest. ForestWatch at that time did not have a district leader on the Armuchee.

“But I was really concerned over what was happening there,” Martin said. “No one seemed to know much about it, perhaps because of its remoteness. It seemed that the Armuchee was being ignored. I started asking about it, and I was told that no one had volunteered as district leader for the Armuchee. It was suggested to me that since I was so concerned, I should sign on as the Armuchee’s district leader.”

He did so – at ForestWatch’s first retreat at Camp Wahsega in September 1987.

He assumed the watchdog role over what was by far the most challenging and logged-over district in the Chattahoochee and Oconee National Forests. More than 95 percent of the 65,000-acre Armuchee district was available for timber sales. The district itself was a patchwork of timberland scattered among the knobby ridges



Georgia ForestWatch photo

Katherine Medlock (foreground) leading a stream ecology outing with then ForestWatch office manager Jennifer Rodriguez’s father (left), Jennifer (center), and Brent Martin.

of northwest Georgia. In some places, it is only a few hundred yards wide. As one writer described it, the Armuchee had been considered for decades as the back yard of the Chattahoochee forest, a place better known by local lumbermen and fox and squirrel hunters than backpackers and campers from the city. As ForestWatch and other groups focused more on protecting the expansive and wilder ranger districts of the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east, the Forest Service was taking steps to eventually cut almost every acre in the Armuchee.

Martin, however, knew that, despite some heavy timbering on the Armuchee, there were still several tracts in the district just as ecologically important – and therefore worthy of protection – as the tracts that conservationists were fighting to save in the Blue Ridge mountains to the east. In particular, three Armuchee tracts – Rocky Face, Johns Mountain and Hidden Creek, each roughly about 6,500 acres in size – were considered potential roadless areas or candidates for higher protection.

As district leader, Martin pored over Forest Service scoping notices and trudged over the Armuchee’s ridges and coves, following old trails, hunter

paths and deer trails or hiking through the forests with just a map and compass. He found fragments of old growth oak and hickory on ridges, impressive beech stands along streams and wildflowers galore in the spring.

He proceeded to build up a volunteer support group of local people for the Armuchee. "I had a good mix of folks," he said. "I got a lot of help, too, from the Wilderness Society."

Meanwhile, he graduated from Kennesaw in 1988 with a degree in history. He also married and became the father of a baby son, Tanner. He entered graduate school at Georgia State University, earning a masters degree in history in 1991. Next, he set his sights on a doctoral degree – in modern British history.

It would be an incredibly demanding time for him. In addition to concentrating on his doctoral thesis and performing his district leader duties in the Armuchee, he was working 20-30 hours a week for the Georgia State Archives and teaching a class at Kennesaw State.

The heavy load began to take its toll. In 1992, his first marriage ended in divorce. He would still be a big part of his son's life, however, essentially becoming a single parent. "I took Tanner with me nearly everywhere," Martin said. "I guess as a little boy he attended more ForestWatch board meetings than a lot of board members."

There was no let-up, though, in his vigilance of the Armuchee. In 1992, he appealed a huge timber sale at Rocky Face that would require several miles of new roads through the heart of the Armuchee district. Rocky Face, however, was the best candidate for a wilderness area in the Armuchee, and Martin vowed to save it from the loggers and road-builders. He and Peter Kirby and Shirl Parsons of the Wilderness Society took their cause to U.S. Rep. George "Buddy" Darden, who represented Georgia's 7th District and shared their appreciation for the Armuchee. Darden and fellow Georgia congressman Nathan Deal, whose district also encompassed a portion of the Armuchee, asked the Forest Service to hold off on logging in Rocky Face – and also on Johns Mountain and Hidden Creek – until they could be studied for possible designation as wilderness areas or scenic preserves. The agency agreed not to plan any additional cutting until the study was completed, but it declined to halt timber sales that already had been scheduled in those areas. It claimed that the sales – including the one that Martin had appealed – would not hurt the areas from being considered for special management protection in the future.

In 1994, Martin and the Wilderness Society tried another tactic – to get portions of the three areas into the roadless area inventory. The Forest Service opposed them at nearly every turn. Typical of the struggle was a controversy over a "road" – known as Swamp Creek Road – in Rocky Face. It had not been maintained in years and there was even a question of whether it was still a road. The Forest Service claimed that it was actually a county-owned road and therefore could not be closed by the agency -- thus eliminating Rocky Face's candidacy as a roadless area. However, the county denied ownership. Later, the Forest Service finally admitted it belonged to the agency, and closed a portion of it.

Martin, though, would no longer have Darden as an ally – Darden in 1994 was defeated by Bob Barr, who was not sympathetic to Martin's cause. In addition, Deal decided to back away from the logging moratorium that he and Darden had requested earlier. Deal said he had worked out an agreement with the Forest Service that would allow selective harvesting on Johns Mountain and Hidden Creek. The moratorium, however, was still maintained on Rocky Face.

In the end, portions of the areas were accorded only limited protection under the second management plan for the Chattahoochee-Oconee, "and today there are still no designated roadless areas in the Armuchee district," Martin said. "It was unbelievable, though, how hard we worked to get protection for those areas."

Towards the end of 1995, Martin became ForestWatch president, succeeding James Sullivan, the first president. “James had done an incredible job getting ForestWatch through its early years,” Martin said. “But by late 1995, ForestWatch’s funds were down to only a few thousand dollars. The board wasn’t meeting regularly. At that time, if you were a district leader, you were by default a board member. A lot of the district leaders, though, wanted to be in the woods looking for problems, not in meetings. The organization was floundering. I knew we had to get the funding back on track, and I had to call the board members and ask them if they still wanted to be board members.”

It seemed an overwhelming task. He was still trying to raise a son, still working a job and still trying to earn a Ph.D. By then, though, another local group calling itself the Armuchee Alliance had sprung up. Its goals essentially were the same as Martin’s -- protecting, preserving and restoring the Armuchee district. For the most part, the Alliance’s prime movers and shakers were Don and Margaret Davis of Dalton. Don was a professor at Dalton State College. Martin and the Davises struck up a close relationship because of their mutual concerns over the Armuchee. Also at this time, Martin’s interest in modern British history was waning, and he decided to abandon his pursuit of a doctorate in that field. Instead, his academic interest was turning to environmental and conservation history and he toyed with the idea of pursuing an advanced degree in that area.

But the Davises made him another offer – they asked him in early 1996 to become head of the Armuchee Alliance. In a difficult decision, Martin accepted, and in 1997, he and his new wife, Angela, moved to Calhoun where the Alliance’s office was located. Martin then stepped down as ForestWatch president and was succeeded by Bob Kibler. Martin, however, stayed on as a member of ForestWatch and as Armuchee district leader.

At first, things went relatively smoothly. A governing board for the Alliance was created from the local community. An impressive array of sizeable grants was obtained from the Lyndhurst Foundation, the Merck Family Fund and the Turner Foundation.

But, then, almost as quickly, things started falling apart. In 1998, the Davises separated and later divorced. The Davises, it turned out, were the glue holding the Alliance together. Without their strong backing, Martin, even with his firm hand, was unable to hold the organization together. The Alliance’s board essentially disintegrated, and the community support dried up.

It was major decision-time again for Brent Martin. He had an idea, and approached Bob Kibler at ForestWatch with it – merge the Armuchee Alliance with Georgia ForestWatch. Out of the merger, Martin opined, would come an even stronger ForestWatch. Kibler was taken aback, but then quickly realized the benefits of the two groups becoming one. Martin and Kibler, though, would have to sell the idea to the ForestWatch board, which, in large part, was ambivalent to a merger. Some board members were even dead set against it. “They felt that Georgia ForestWatch would lose its identify if it merged with another group,” Martin said. “But the new organization would still be ForestWatch – it would be the Armuchee Alliance that would lose its identify.”

To help convince the ForestWatch board that the merger was a good thing, Taylor Barnhill of the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition was asked to tout the benefits of the proposal. For one thing, the merger would transfer to ForestWatch some \$70,000 in assets that had been donated or granted to the Armuchee Alliance. Barnhill and Martin had gotten an OK from the grantors for transferring the funds.

Ultimately, with gentle persuasion from Kibler, Martin and Barnhill, the ForestWatch board approved the merger – but not before some members decided to end their relationship with the group. “We kept talking to them, though, and were able to bring them back into the fold within a year when they realized that the merger was indeed a good thing for Georgia ForestWatch,” Martin said.

And, now, Martin had a new job – Georgia ForestWatch’s first salaried chief executive officer. His wife Angela, a musician by profession, would be the assistant director and succeed him as district leader for the Armuchee.

They had to make another move – to Ellijay, where ForestWatch’s rented offices were located on the second floor of a building on River Street, just before the town square. The quarters required considerable face lift and furnishings for transformation into a suitable work space. “Lord, how we worked to make that place habitable,” Martin recalled. It was capped off when a local artist crafted a large wooden sign, emblazoned “Georgia ForestWatch,” and hung it below the front street window.

Then, the Martins rolled up their sleeves and got down to some really hard work. Brent picked up where he had left off as ForestWatch president – securing funding, getting the board on track and molding the organization into a prominent organization for protecting, preserving and restoring the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests. “I knew that a strong organization was critical to our success in North Georgia,” he said. “And we had to get our name out there before the public.” A new board was created from residents of local communities and from the Atlanta area. No longer would it be made up primarily of district leaders, although they would have a representative on the panel. Regular outings were scheduled and led by staff members and volunteers. Richard Ware, a highly knowledgeable self-taught botanist, led several of the early outings.

Martin plunged into fundraising. Lyndhurst, Merck and Turner continued their support, and the Sapelo and Atlanta Community foundations were added.

At the same time, looming on ForestWatch’s agenda was the planning for the new Forest Land and Resources Management plan, then in its third year of development. Like the first plan, the new blueprint would guide Forest Service management of the national forests for the next 10-15 years. Under Martin’s leadership, ForestWatch focused much of its efforts on accumulating and providing the Forest Service with data and information that the organization thought important in formulating the new plan.

As part of that effort, ForestWatch hired Katherine Medlock, an aquatic biologist, in 1999 to work on the aquatic standards in the new plan. Until then, Angela Martin had been handling the aquatic biology work. “If we were going to be a credible organization, we had to have good science backing us,” Brent Martin said.

The Forest Service released the final 1,800-page draft management plan in 2003, but it was a major disappointment to ForestWatch. Kelly Ridge and Mountaintown, which had been recommended for wilderness status in earlier drafts, were no longer slated for such protection. The old growth data also were not incorporated, and the agency’s proposed forest monitoring program was considered inadequate. In addition, some 400,000 acres were deemed suitable for construction of ATV trails.

Medlock (now Groves), working closely with legal partners Southern Environmental Law Center and WildLaw, wrote an extensive and stinging appeal. The Forest Service was required by law to address the appeal in three months which actually took a year and a half for the chief of the forest service to reject. But as heads cooled it was generally agreed that the plan overall had some good points and was better than the current 1986 plan. The new management plan seemed to eschew the old commercial clear-cut timber program for an approach that claimed to address issues of “forest health” with timber harvested as an outcome of forest health improvement. This was certainly an about face from the prior management direction and seen as a reaction to the 1996 legal decision that halted the old clear-cut regime.

In August 2003, Brent and Angela Martin, in a painful decision, felt it was time to move on. The Little Tennessee Land Trust in Franklin, N.C., was asking Brent to come on board, and he accepted. “I was very proud of my accomplishments at Georgia ForestWatch,” Brent said. “I was not getting rich at such work, and

I was barely keeping my head above water. But I believed in what we were doing, and I believed in the capacity of the organization.

“It was a very hard decision to leave ForestWatch, but the Land Trust offered a good opportunity to learn an entirely new realm of land conservation.

“I was ready for a new challenge.”

(Editor’s note: Martin subsequently moved on from the land trust to briefly head the Little Tennessee Watershed Association and has since moved on again to assume a fulltime position, also in Franklin, as The Wilderness Society’s first Southern Appalachian Senior Associate, responsible primarily for seeking permanent protection of wilderness and backcountry wild lands in the Nantahala-Pisgah National Forest.)

The Martin era was characterized by a series of key developments and projects:

- In 1999, Martin hired Katherine Medlock, an aquatic biologist, to help work on development of the new forest management plan. This brought immediate scientific credibility to the organization’s advocacy efforts.
- With Medlock’s help, and that of several foundations, Georgia ForestWatch surveyed goldline darters in the Coosawattee River and salamanders in the Swallow Creek area of the fabled Kelly Ridge area in order to try to secure greater protection for these areas.
- Martin hired Jess Riddle, a young expert woodsman who in three summers documented – after more than 80 hours of bushwhacking through thick territory – more than 11,000 acres of old growth that the Forest Service contended had not existed on the Chattahoochee National Forest. “Documenting those old growth stands was one of my most satisfying times at Georgia ForestWatch,” Martin said.
- Martin also stayed on top of the day-to-day protection of the forest to ward off threats that cropped up almost on a regular basis. He helped lead successful battles to force the Tennessee Valley Authority to move a power line out of the potential Rocky Face roadless area; to combat a proposed military helicopter drop zone near the Ed Jenkins National Recreation Area; and to defeat a resolution by the Gilmer County Commissioners asking Congress to ban further wilderness areas.
- With the help of ForestWatchers David Govus and Wayne Jenkins, Martin documented hundreds of miles of illegal ATV trails, which had gouged deep gullies into the mountain landscapes, wreaking havoc on stately trees, ripping up rare wildflowers and silting up once crystal-clear trout streams. The damage ran into millions of dollars. Martin took reporters on tours of some of the ATV-damaged areas, and several articles and photos appeared in state-wide newspapers documenting the massive problems. Govus also helped defeat measures in the Georgia Legislature that would have legalized ATVs on gravel roads and made it even more difficult to control their use. ■



Cheryl Bird photo



History, Part Five

Like a phoenix: ForestWatch survives a major transition

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Georgia ForestWatch, whose flame burned bright during the Brent Martin years, was facing possible collapse and extinction in early August of 2004.

Martin, one of the forest conservation group's early board members and its first executive director, had resigned a year earlier. The key staffers he had nurtured had also moved on – Katherine Medlock, the organization's first staff ecologist; Jennifer Rodriguez, its tireless officer manager; Jess Riddle, an old-growth expert wise beyond his years; Kate Prodder, a former staffer based in Athens.

Four key members of the board of directors also had stepped down one-by-one over the previous four months. Then, as if to cap it off, Debbie Royston, Martin's successor, turned in her walking papers, taking a fifth board member with her.

"These were very stressful times," said Lynn Cumiskey, the board's secretary who had just assumed the additional position of acting president when Royston announced her move. "That whole year (after Martin's resignation) was a very trying time. Transitioning to a new Executive Director and working to secure new funding sources in a time of economic and political uncertainty was a huge challenge."

The stark question now was: Could ForestWatch keep its flame burning or would it all turn to ash? Would it, like so many other small, non-profit conservation groups, quietly fade away?

The awful possibility had arisen earlier that year. Money to pay the bills and staff was drying up. The board was in disarray. In an effort to conserve dwindling resources, both Royston and a new officer manager went to part-time status. The situation had prompted Royston to warn at the time that, "a lot of things have fallen (and are falling) through the cracks ..."

"It was such chaos," Royston recalled in an interview this month, referring to a variety of "internal conflicts" she felt she inherited – and got blindsided by – upon taking the job. "Clearly the old Georgia ForestWatch we all knew and loved had to be renovated but how, when it was a constant struggle just to maintain status quo? It was a right-foot, left-foot time for the staff and board.

"Of course, so much was at stake in our forests," she added. "So we focused on our mission and new ideas for keeping ForestWatch strong. We offered 'virtual tours' of the forest in libraries across North Georgia, we recruited people who are now ForestWatch leaders, we became more creative with our fundraising by getting the Tiger Mountain wine tasting and the directors' challenge going."

In response to the gathering storm clouds, though, on July 10, 2004, the board and Georgia ForestWatch's district leaders gathered together in Atlanta on an urgent mission – to try to resuscitate the struggling organization and craft a plan for its future. Crucial to its future – if there was to be one – was finding more stable and reliable sources of income and attracting new members. At the same time, however, they had to consider the fate of the organization if their rescue effort was unsuccessful -- the possible dissolution of Georgia ForestWatch, or a return of the organization to an all-volunteer status and operating on a bare-bones budget.

The precarious situation still stood a month later, when on August 10, the board of directors met at the office in Ellijay, primarily to figure out where ForestWatch would head without an executive director. Many e-mails flew back and forth, and phone calls sizzled the wires to many ForestWatch members' homes as the directors sought help in rescuing the organization.

The intensive effort brought quick results. David Govus, a long-time district leader from Gilmer County, stepped forward to assume one of the board vacancies. So did Lori Jenkins, also of Ellijay, a middle school art teacher and former executive director of several non-profit arts associations. Joe Gatins, a new district leader from Rabun County, filled another slot. At the same time, Larry Sanders, a staff attorney with the Turner Environmental Law Clinic at Emory University, agreed to fill the vacant president's position. With Jenkins as treasurer and Gatins as secretary, a new executive team was now in place.

Remaining unfinished at the August 10 meeting were the pressing needs of securing new funding and new members – and a possible reorganization of the group.

Answers to those needs, though, were not long in coming. At its first meeting 15 days later, the new board quickly concurred that ForestWatch's mission of protecting and preserving Georgia's national forests was of utmost importance, and that it should be kept afloat. Spurring on the board was a heartfelt letter from Brent Martin. "It is not too late to turn things around," he wrote. "The mission of the organization is too big and the history of the organization too significant to let it crumble. I hope each of you will give your all to turning this thing around."

That ForestWatch would indeed keep going was settled. Now, the board's first important order of business was filling the executive director's chair.

One option was proposed by board member Larry Winslett – he would voluntarily take over on a part-time basis and handle the duties of an executive director from his home in Dahlonega. The other option – hire Wayne Jenkins, Lori's husband, as the new paid, full-time head of the organization.

Recognizing the need for a full-time director, the board leaned toward hiring Wayne, and the vote for him carried the day. On that evening, Wayne Jenkins became Georgia ForestWatch's third paid executive director since its founding in 1986.

Then, almost immediately, through hard work and with a good bit of luck, things indeed began to turn around.

Wayne Jenkins, a former organic farmer, with much previous ForestWatch experience both as a board member and district leader, proved adept at juggling issues with the U.S. Forest Service – and raising the money necessary to pay the rent, utility bills and his own salary. In short, he restored confidence in the organization and among its members and donors. Two foundations responded with substantial, emergency-type grants that put the organization back on solid footing and gave it some badly needed breathing room.

Lori Jenkins, meanwhile, also was pivotal in getting the board on sound footing – she reorganized ForestWatch’s books and did a thorough review of its finances.

In turn, Wayne and the district leaders got back to the main business of monitoring the national forests and the activities of the Forest Service. During Wayne’s tenure so far, Georgia ForestWatch accomplishments include:

- Arriving at a settlement with the Forest Service over the closure of the Rich Mountain Road.
- Close review of the Brawley Mountain and White Bull timber sales.
- Mounting quick, successful campaigns to avert a questionable land swap in Rabun and proposed divestiture of national forestlands across the state.
- Providing key support for the Mountaintown Scenic Area legislation and concurrent wilderness additions.
- Corraling key funding for the new predator insect lab at the University of Georgia, whose aim is to find biological controls that might work against the deadly adelgid infestation killing native hemlocks across North Georgia.
- Arduous work to forge a collaborative relationship with national forest managers as they sought to implement a new forest plan.



Georgia ForestWatch photo

Lori and Wayne Jenkins with son Obadiah (left) in Homer, Alaska on a much deserved vacation. Lori and Wayne both stepped up to serve Georgia ForestWatch in 2004-2005, as the group’s treasurer and executive director, respectively.

That plan, on paper, calls for forest restoration rather than timber production – a reversal of decades of past practices, which took some getting used to on both the part of Georgia ForestWatch and that of the old guard of timber managers still in the Forest Service.

Wayne Jenkins, in particular, proved to be the kind of diplomat necessary to doing this job, while Gatins, who succeeded Sanders as president during the summer of 2005, grew into the job of helping guide the organization.

As one member put it, “Jenkins appeared to have the yin and Gatins, the yang, to make for a complementary team effort.”

The new board and staff (which included both a new office manager and a forest ecologist to replace Medlock,) continued ForestWatch's annual fundraiser – a combined native plant sale and wine tasting – and revived the fall retreat for members and volunteers.

They also revised and reshaped internal policies – in essence, an organizational renewal.

By the end of this October, Gatins will step down as president and focus on fundraising. Peg Griffith will become the new president and Ted Doll, a new board member from Sautee, joins Sarah Linn to round out the executive officers of the board.

And so, the doldrums of 2003-2004 have dissipated. Georgia ForestWatch is back on a steady course, pursuing its mission of protecting, preserving and restoring the Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests.

Georgia ForestWatch is back! As one supporter put it, "Like a phoenix." ■



Larry Winslett photo