

Introduction to Flow Workshop
Bob Bendick, Southern U.S. Regional Director
October 18, 2007

I am very sorry that I cannot attend this Flow Workshop; I had been looking forward to it. Mark Burget has asked that all Regional Directors participate in the Board of Directors meeting in Dallas this week so I can't be with you.

Your meeting in Atlanta in the midst of an historic drought here highlights the challenges we face in conserving freshwater systems in the South and elsewhere in the U.S. A recent article in the *Atlanta Journal Constitution* said that Atlanta has only 90 days of water supply left in its reservoirs; this situation is having profound impacts downstream on one of TNC's important freshwater sites—the ACF basin.

The Apalachicola, like so many southern rivers, is extremely important for aquatic biodiversity and for the health of its estuary, thus the tension between direct human use of water and reserving sufficient flow for the river's biological health is particularly challenging.

And like the rivers of the ACF basin, southern rivers face increasing threats from many sources:

- Growth and development have exceeded water supplies in many places
- There is a legacy of damage from past public water projects a number of which were ill conceived to begin with
- Changing weather patterns cast doubt on long term flow projections and introduce new risks to water managers
- Agriculture to produce fuel as well as food and fiber is adding still more non-point pollutants to rivers and streams and may also increase the demand for irrigation water
- Environmental groups are often at odds with each other on water issues
- The most powerful special interests are involved in water politics

The Nature Conservancy began to address such threats long ago with traditional land acquisition of river shorelines such as in the "Rivers of the Deep South Project" which protected the Pascagoula among other waterways. More recently, TNC's Freshwater Initiative, working with the states, pioneered ecological flow analysis in the south for the Green River in Kentucky; the ACF system; the Roanoke River in North Carolina; and the Savannah River in Georgia and South Carolina. This analysis has resulted in tangible water management accomplishments on the Green, Roanoke and Savannah and helped fend off a bad outcome for the ACF Compact. We owe much to Bryan Richter and his team for their help in all of this.

TNC has also played an important role in documenting the biological values of Southern rivers such as through the field research that resulted in publication of *Rivers of Life* in 1998 and subsequent research projects.

In 2003, the old Southeast Division completed a Freshwater Strategy designed to ramp up our freshwater engagement. This plan was incorporated into our 2005 Strategic Plan and then into the Southern U.S. Region's 2015 Goal Three-Year Implementation Plan. We were already accelerating our freshwater conservation efforts before the 2015 Goal was adopted, and our freshwater projects and staff continue to grow at a remarkable rate. The SUSR regional and chapter staffs now include more than a dozen people with advanced degrees in water-related disciplines. I expect this is more than all the other NGO's in the South combined and probably more than many public agencies and universities. We owe great thanks to the Mott Foundation among others for believing in and supporting our freshwater work.

Given our investment in time and talent, we hope to build on the successes of the Green, Roanoke and other projects to produce results at an even larger scale. We will do more individual projects and will attempt to influence fundamental state water policy as is now happening in Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, and Tennessee.

I am convinced that we can have a profound impact on achieving freshwater conservation in the South. Every public opinion poll reveals that there is great public concern about water. We (all of you) have the talent and determination to meet the challenges of water policy work. We are earning respect within government and in other segments of the community—people are listening to us when we speak.

To realize this potential for success we must share our expertise (as we are doing in this flow workshop) and focus our resources on the most critical problems and opportunities. In my view the SUSR Freshwater Network can play a key role in accomplishing this. We must also have the courage to take the risks needed for success in water policy and be tuned into local and state politics. And we must have the consistency and staying power to succeed in what will inevitably be long term disputes.

This will all take substantial resources. The conservation campaign being announced this week by the Conservancy's Board of Directors can provide those resources. In fact, all six campaign sites involving the SUSR support some form of river conservation—Southern Rivers, the Mississippi, the Northwest Atlantic Coast, Coastal Plain Forests, the Appalachians, and the Gulf of Mexico. Success in this campaign will provide the money for your work for years to come; your help will be needed in preparing specific proposals and meeting with donors if the campaign is to realize its potential. The people who give money want to meet the people doing the work in the field.

Over the years, I have had the good fortune to visit many of the South's rivers and to experience their haunting beauty. One such visit sticks in my mind. It was a celebration of the creation of the Cahaba River National Wildlife Refuge in Alabama. (As you may know, the Cahaba refuge is the first in the nation dedicated to the conservation of aquatic biodiversity). It was a warm spring afternoon. Thunder rumbled in the distance. A country band played at an old camp near the confluence of the Cahaba and Little Cahaba, the sound of a fiddle blending with the sound of the river itself. Shoals of Cahaba lilies

bloomed among the rocks in mid-stream. In a pool by the river's edge Chris Oberholster, now Alabama State Director, was netting small fish and aquatic insects to show to a group of children gathered along the shore. It was for me a demonstration of the legacy we seek to leave to those children, a demonstration of why we gather here to marshal our skills, our science and our determination for the challenges ahead.

Finally, thanks to the staff of the SUSR Freshwater Network, Global Freshwater Team, EUSCR Freshwater Program, and Great Lakes Program for organizing this important meeting and for supporting the network and its activities..

All the best for a great workshop!

Bob Bendick