



GEORGE MITCHELL, www.lighthouse-aerials.net

In Praise of The White Oak

There are too few places in the coastal region with pristine natural features. The White Oak River is a place worth preserving for future generations.

In the quiet solitude of a canoe, the hustle and bustle of the everyday world melts away. One's private thoughts are interrupted only by a fish jumping or birds taking flight. Man's handiwork is not as evident on the White Oak River. No dams and few bridges cross it. The river is a place where the wild things are. The American alligator calls these waters home, as does the osprey, wading birds and waterfowl. Even the endangered manatee makes an occasional visit.

The White Oak River stretches 48 miles from its freshwater source in Hoffman State Forest to the ocean's edge in Bogue Inlet. Along the way, there are 70 known historical and archaeological sites, remnants of 10,000 years of habitation.

"The river is symbolic of all the mystery and serenity of the South. Native Americans and settler families have fed and raised their children on the river. Wildlife moves safely between nearby areas, and we have a resource for personal renewal and closeness to all things natural," explained Lauren Hillman, the district ranger at the Croatan National Forest.

Weetock River

The Weetock Indians called the river "Weetock." Maps from the first half of the 1700's used the name Weetock River. Around 1770, the name White Oak River began appearing on maps. There are no existing groves of white oak trees near the river.

Unique among coastal river systems, the White Oak both begins and ends in the coastal plain. Most coastal rivers, like the Neuse, Tar-Pamlico, Roanoke and Lumber trace their headwaters to the Piedmont region.

The river's source is at the east end of the White Oak Pocosin in northern Onslow County. A pocosin is a raised bog or swamp containing black organic muck. Moving downstream, mature forests dominate the landscape as magnificent cedars, pines and cypress trees tower towards the sky. The river above the Town of Maysville is narrow, shallow and fast moving. Beavers favor it and their dams make transport by boat a challenge.

Below Maysville, the river is navigable all the way to Bogue Sound, making it a delight for canoeists or kayakers. The river flows through a series of five quarry lakes and then meanders slowly through the depths of a blackwater swamp.



"It is hereby declared to be the policy of the United States that certain selected rivers of the Nation which, with their immediate environments possess outstandingly remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."
— Wild and Scenic Rivers Act

A Paddler's Guide to Eastern North Carolina rates the river between Maysville and Haywoods Landing an "A", and the section between Haywoods Landing and Stella an "A-AA". The double A rating means the river is "Unusually beautiful even to the spectacular, generally remote and wild." The A rating denotes "Generally remote and wild. Perhaps some signs of civilization but mostly uninhabited."

Yet threats of over-development abound in coastal North Carolina. Population in the 322 square mile area near the White Oak River rose from 27,748 in 1970 to 39,388 in 1990, an increase of 42 percent. Population density followed suit. In 1990, there were 122 people per

square mile living near the river.

Population density causes increased stormwater runoff, carrying fecal coliform bacteria, nutrients, toxic chemicals and sediment from the landscape. The result in the White Oak has been the closure of shellfish beds on a temporary or a permanent basis. Most of the shellfish beds in the White Oak River are currently rated as impaired by the state Division of Water Quality. The only waters that are rated as fully supporting commercial shellfishing are located in Bogue Sound.

Even so, the White Oak River is endowed with a diverse ecological base worthy of protection. It contains five distinct natural communities, including Tidal Red Cedar Forest, Brackish Marsh, Coastal Plain Bottomland Hardwood Forest, Tidal Cypress Marsh and Tidal Freshwater Marsh. The Tidal Red Cedar Forest is considered extremely rare.

Near the Stella Bridge, the river widens considerably and the fresh water from upstream meets the salt water from downstream. Saltwater marshes, consisting of black needlerush, sea ox-eye, spike grass and smooth cordgrass, line the sides of the river all the way to Swansboro.

Jewel of the Coast

The US Forest Service owns and manages the Croatan National Forest with an expanse of 159,832 acres within Carteret, Craven and Jones counties. The Croatan National Forest straddles both the Neuse and the White Oak river basins, including seven contiguous miles of shoreline on the eastern bank of the White Oak River.

With the hope of preserving the natural resource values of the White Oak, the US Forest Service conducted studies to determine whether portions of the river would be eligible and suitable for designation under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. This federal law, passed by the US Congress in 1968, provides safeguards from federal water resource projects that can cause a river to lose the scenic beauty and recreational opportunities that make it so unique.

If designated by Congress, the White Oak would become the first coastal blackwater river to gain Wild and Scenic status. Designation would accomplish several things. First, it would prevent the federal government from constructing dams or other obstacles that significantly impede the natural flow of the river. In a tidal river like the White Oak, water flows both ways. Salty water from the

Atlantic Ocean moves upstream, driven by tides and wind, until it mixes with fresh water flowing downstream from inland areas. Where they meet they form a brackish estuary that provides important habitat for shellfish and finfish.

Designation also serves as a magnet for federal, state, and private funds to purchase and forever preserve the natural areas adjacent to the river. Funds could also be sought to provide public access and promote the recreational enjoyment of the river.

Lastly, designation requires the development of a management plan based on local input from citizens to insure that the river never loses its scenic or recreational values. The management plan covers an area ¼ mile from each shore, but does not prevent landowners from utilizing their property as they have in the past.

The US Forest Service currently owns 28 percent of the 3,584 acres under study for Wild and Scenic designation. The remaining 72 percent of the area is in

private hands. As a result, any effort to preserve the White Oak must involve active participation by local residents.

According to Kristen McDonald with the conservation group, American Rivers, "Today, the chief benefit of wild and scenic river designation is it launches a unique community-driven process of creating a comprehensive river management plan that ensures the river can be enjoyed by future generations."

A broad group of stakeholders has joined together to inform citizens and generate community support for the designation. Consisting of a canoe and wildlife club, local restaurants and Realtors, environmental groups, and government agencies, the group plans to approach the US Congress to add the White Oak River to the Wild and Scenic River System.

Gene Heath, who owns a restaurant overlooking the White Oak, believes, "Obtaining a Wild and Scenic River designation will benefit tourism, the environment, business, and future generations of coastal Carolinians."

Preserving the White Oak River

The White Oak is a relatively unspoiled river system, which lends itself to preservation. By comparison, nutrient sensitive rivers like the Neuse, Tar-Pamlico, Chowan or New require a comprehensive regulatory approach and restoration plan in order to improve degraded water quality.

The North Carolina Coastal Federation (NCCF) has undertaken two land preservation projects on the White Oak.

White Oak Buffer Acquisition

In 1999, NCCF was awarded a grant from the state Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) to secure purchase options for property along the White Oak River. NCCF identified a property and was awarded a \$2.1 million grant from the CWMTF to purchase a 776.6-acre parcel of land bordering the west bank of the White Oak above Swansboro in 2001. A portion of the property may continue to be used for agriculture, forestry and extremely low intensity residential home sites so long as any use is compatible with maintaining a healthy river system. Funds derived from the remarketing of the land for these uses will be used for additional land purchases along the river.

Huggins Island

With a grant from the CWMTF, Huggins Island near Bogue Inlet at the mouth of the White Oak River was purchased in 2000. The island was under heavy pressure to be developed. NCCF worked to submit the funding proposal in cooperation with the NC Coastal Land Trust and the NC Division of Parks and Recreation. The 110-acre island is now part of Hammocks Beach State Park.



Planning to visit the White Oak River?

If you would like to see first-hand the beauty and ecological diversity of the White Oak River, you can find information on planning your trip in the following resources.

Exploring North Carolina's Natural Areas, edited by Dirk Frankenber. In this book, Frankenberg outlines a 30-mile road and ferry tour that follows the White Oak River from its source to the sea. The tour takes a full day, or half a day if you skip the ferry trip to Hammocks Beach State Park on Bear Island.

Our advice is: **Don't skip it!**

A Paddler's Guide to Eastern North Carolina, by Bob Benner and Tom McCloud. The authors describe two paddling trips on the White Oak River. One begins at Belgrade, near Maysville, and continues to Haywood's Landing. It takes three to five hours to complete. The second trip begins at Haywood's Landing and ends at the Route 1442 bridge. This part takes three to four hours. Both segments are appropriate for beginners with river instructions.

The Crystal Coast Canoe and Kayak Club has produced a map of paddle trails along the White Oak River. For more information, point your web browser to www.cckc.org or call the Carteret County Tourism Development Bureau at 252-726-8148.

CALL TO ACTION ...

You can help to preserve the White Oak River for future generations. It's as easy as 1, 2, 3.

1. It's possible that Senator John Edwards will be willing to introduce legislation to designate the White Oak River as a recreational and scenic river under the National Wild and Scenic River System. Please write a letter to Sen. Edwards telling him that you support such a designation and ask for his help. You might also request that additional funds be provided to the Croatan National Forest to purchase land bordering the White Oak River.
2. Address the letter to:
The Honorable John Edwards
US Senate
225 Dirksen Senate Office Bldg.
Washington, DC 20510-3306
3. Find a stamp and mail it off.

You can also send an electronic letter to Senator Edwards, by pointing your browser to: <http://edwards.senate.gov/mailform.html>

Remember, it takes a community to protect and restore a river!

