

February 18, 2016

Executive Committee Members

Kim Sparks, Mike Gangloff, Brena Jones, Bryn Tracy
North Carolina Chapter of the American Fisheries Society

Dear Executive Committee:

On behalf of numerous Little Tennessee Native Fish Conservation Area partners, including non-profits (Mainspring and NC Wildlife Federation) and government agencies (Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, US Forest Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the US Park Service), I write to request that the NC Chapter of the American Fisheries Society consider funding the **Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project**. We request the amount of \$6,385 in order to fund a set of shared gear to hold educational snorkeling trips.

The Little Tennessee River Basin is characterized by a highly diverse aquatic community and concentrated efforts by multiple partners to restore native taxa to streams in North Carolina, Tennessee, and Georgia. The Little Tennessee River Basin, which includes the Oconaluftee, Tuckasee, and Cheoah Rivers in North Carolina, was designated as a Native Fish Conservation Area (NFCA) in 2015. NFCAs are areas where rivers are managed for the conservation and restoration of native fish and other aquatic biota through a non-regulatory, collaborative approach to conservation that incorporates both biological needs and local community values. The Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project is part of a multi-faceted NFCA education and outreach program to raise awareness of native fishes and the citizen's role in watershed conservation.

We propose to conduct guided snorkeling trips in the clear, clean streams of the Little Tennessee River Basin where there is an abundance of fish and other aquatic organisms. These trips would provide teachers, students, and the general public with exciting and educational outdoor events. Equipment needed includes wetsuits, masks and snorkels plus other equipment and supplies, all of which would be shared across the basin. This program would raise public awareness of aquatic issues while opening eyes to the incredible abundance and diversity of aquatic organisms in the Little Tennessee River watershed.

Ecotourism and environmental education provide adventure activities that are gaining popularity with the public. The public demand for this type of activity is largely overlooked in the aquatic environment. The Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project will be tailored after a highly successful snorkeling education initiative established by the Cherokee National Forest (CNF). In the past 5 years, the CNF snorkeling program has provided snorkeling opportunities to about 800 people each year. The CNF hosts 40 events each year and often has repeat visitors. This program has been the subject of many news media stories, as well as a short documentary film, "A Deeper Creek", by Freshwaters Illustrated: <https://vimeo.com/103358996>

For the Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project, each snorkeling event will be tailored to the audience and setting, using the guidelines provided by the Freshwater Snorkeling Toolkit designed by the US Forest Service (see

<http://www.fs.fed.us/outdoors/naturewatch/tools/toolkits/snorkeling/>). Events will be led by Little Tennessee NFCA partner organizations, such as Mainspring (formerly the Land Trust for the Little Tennessee) and the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians. Events will be conducted on the Little Tennessee River and tributary streams at parks or other sites with easy access, limited facilities (rest rooms, picnic tables, etc.), and a good diversity of aquatic habitats and animals.

A typical event lasts about four hours, with snorkelers in the water for two hours with at least one guide and safety person. Between twelve and twenty snorkelers are expected to participate in each event. The target audience is children twelve years old through adults.

2016 kick-off events

In order to kick off the program, several events will be held in 2016 with NFCA partners:

- The Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) has performed multiple aquatic outreach events involving Cherokee youth with a focus on integrating cultural aspects of aquatic wildlife conservation. Presently, they are in the planning stages of outreach events that would be an ideal fit for including a snorkeling activity. This includes a Cherokee Choices Summer Camp event focused upon providing outdoor educational experiences that promote healthy lifestyles for Cherokee Youth ages 11-14. The second event will involve the Snowbird Cherokee Language program which involves both youth and traditional Cherokee speakers, with a goal of exposing community members to aquatic biology while also promoting the development of Cherokee language curriculum.
- Mainspring plans to have snorkeling events with several groups over the summer and fall including the Mountain Learning and Retreat Center, Franklin High School biology class, and Swain County Kids in the Creek.
- The US Forest Service will lead an event at Citico Creek, where snorkelers will have the opportunity to see over 30 fish species at one site; some species will number in thousands at the site. Feeding, spawning, territorial fighting, and schooling activities are commonly seen. Tadpoles, mudpuppies, and turtles are present and easy to catch for closer observations.

Budget and equipment

The following equipment list is from the USFS' Freshwater Snorkeling Toolkit. Costs are from 2014, and it is expected that actual costs may be higher. Efforts are underway to find additional funding to support equipment purchase.

30 Wet Suits	\$4,500
30 Masks and Snorkels	\$1,050
4 Viewing Scopes	\$300
2 Changing Tents	\$200
4 45-quart tubs to transport wetsuits	\$75
1 10x12 ft. Tarp	\$20
2 Jugs of Cleaning Solution (i.e. Virkon)	\$200
10 bottles of Defogging Solution	\$40
Total	\$6,385.00

Gear will be maintained and stored at secured facilities operated by the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and Mainspring. Both organizations maintain storage areas which can be utilized for cleaning, drying, and storing equipment between planned events. Decontamination methods will be determined with the aid of agency partners.

A plan will be developed for replacement and maintenance of gear, with long-term support of this program through agency partners such as NCWRC, and corporate partners such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, REI, and other outdoor recreation related businesses.

Spreading the Word

Based on the experience of the USFS, we anticipate that these snorkeling events will be very popular. We hope to use snorkeling as a tool that will foster an informed, conservation-minded public. Diverse audiences will be targeted, including students, interested adults, the media, and local decision-makers. The Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project is not politically oriented.

The strength of the Little Tennessee Native Fish Conservation Area partnership lies in building capacity to reach broad audiences within the basin and promote conservation at the local level. Effectively conserving native fresh water biota and habitats will rely on communicating why the Little Tennessee drainage is exceptional through interactive experiences within our streams. Snorkeling provides a unique and sensually rich opportunity to view the often concealed beauty and complexity of the aquatic biodiversity found within the Little Tennessee basin. Promoting appreciation through direct experiences, such as snorkeling, is necessary to ultimately instill care and effective action to protect these tremendously valuable resources. On behalf of non-government and agency partners involved in the Little Tennessee Snorkeling Project, I humbly ask your support of this proposal.

Sincerely,

Fred Harris