

THE NEXT

BIG

BY GRAHAM AVERILL
THING

Predicting the future is a hard thing to do. Mark Twain, the British scientist at the turn of the 20th century who said radio had no future, flying machines were impossible, and the Studios said talking movies were a fad. Decca Recording Company rejected the Beatles in 1962, saying "guitar music not going to stop us from trying, particularly those of us interested in the ever-fickle world of paddling. Trends move



BEN EDSON

fast in the paddling industry. Records are celebrated in the morning and broken in the afternoon. Boaters fall in and out of love with rivers faster than the characters on a WB teen drama. So you can't help but wonder, what's next for Southeastern boaters? What river will take the place of the Green in the near future? What city will start building a whitewater park next?

We at Blue Ridge Outdoors can't help but speculate, so we talked to the experts, analyzed the trends and are willing to divulge the "Next Big Thing." From the next hot creek boating destination to troubling environmental issues yet to be battled, we've discovered what's on the horizon for southeastern boaters.

THE NEXT BIG SUCCESS STORY CHATTOOGA RIVER

Nobody's paddled the headwaters of the Chattooga in 30 years. Back in the 70s, Sumter National Forest banned boating of any kind on this remote stretch of class IV-V+ water, which is famous for its narrow gorges and steep drops, due to adverse environmental impacts. The ban was based largely on anecdotal evidence given by fishermen who didn't want to share their favorite river with boaters. When the Forest Service renewed the ban in the '90s, American Whitewater was quick to appeal the decision.

"We're ten years into the process of getting boaters back into the headwaters of the Chattooga," says American Whitewater's access director, Kevin Colburn. "It's the only river in the entire National Forest System that is off limits to boaters."

The Chattooga that's currently open to boaters is considered some of the most remote whitewater in the Southeast, but the headwaters go a step further. The dense forests and narrow gorge that surround 20+ miles of the headwaters make the current popular run on the Chattooga look like the James through Richmond.

Because of American Whitewater's appeal, the Forest Service will begin a User Capacity Analysis of the headwaters in order to develop a broader management plan. Analysis is scheduled to begin this month and last for a year, during which time the Forest Service will look at paddling and other recreation along the headwaters.

RUNNER-UP: Releases on the West Fork of the Tuckaseegee were scheduled to begin in 2005, but things got delayed on the federal level, and there's been grumbling from local landowners who would like to see any agreement with Duke Power benefit a larger spectrum of residents. Still, things are looking good for creek boaters. Test runs on the West Fork went well and American Whitewater is optimistic about the seven releases previously negotiated with Duke. The West Fork of the Tuck is a 9.5-mile class IV creek with steep, long slides and impressive drops through a narrow gorge. Regular releases are now tentatively scheduled to begin in 2007.