

The Charlotte Observer

Posted on Sunday, October 17, 2004

Dry rocks no more

Water flow on 2-mile section of Catawba River only temporary

JACK HORAN

Special Correspondent

Imagine a whitewater paddling run in the S.C. Piedmont where there's no whitewater to speak of.

Gerrit Jobsis of Columbia knows an ideal place for a run. It's the Great Falls on the Catawba River. One big problem, though. Great Falls is a 2-mile-long rocky riverbed with not enough water to float a kayak unless floodwaters spill over a diversion dam.

Jobsis, an environmentalist with the Coastal Conservation League, and others want Duke Power Co. to restore water to the Great Falls for both kayakers and fish.

Returning flows to the moonscape channel would revive the rambunctious, roaring "Great Falls of the Catawba River" that existed before 1907. That's the year Duke's predecessor diverted the river to create hydroelectric power, drying up the Great Falls.

A century later, the Great Falls, 60 miles south of Charlotte, will get its first official test run of kayakers and canoeists.

Next Saturday and Sunday, Duke contractor Bunny Johns will oversee flow tests with 25-28 selected boaters. Water released by generation at the Fishing Creek Dam will spill into the Great Falls. Boaters will paddle the main channel, as well as a three-quarter-mile "short channel" below Great Falls Reservoir, and rate the experiences at four release levels.

The tests are part of requirements for Duke to renew its 50-year hydro licenses on the Catawba. Environmental groups, including American Rivers and American Whitewater, hope the results will lead to whitewater releases beginning in 2008 as a recreation component of Duke's new licenses.

Johns, of Bryson City, has paddled the section four times since 2003. She took advantage of water spilling over the diversion dam from heavy rains, including those from last month's hurricane remnants. The highest flow occurred in spring, 2003, when, Johns estimates, 5,000 cubic feet per second poured into the main channel. The section drops an average of 35 feet per mile.

"At that level it was Class II-plus, maybe Class III (rapids). It was not horrendous, except for the trees. It's like Section 9 of the French Broad River (near Asheville), without the bigger rapids."

She said that standing trees grow in the riverbed on the upper part, creating hazards in the swift-moving water.

Duke spokesman Rick Rhodes said the event is for experienced whitewater paddlers only and discouraged people from going into the bypass channels during the flow tests.

Over the summer, Johns conducted similar studies on free-flowing sections of the Catawba below Lake James, Lake Wylie and Lake Wateree.

Jobsis said environmental groups want a minimum continuous water flow restored to the Great Falls as well as monthly whitewater releases.

"Another of our objectives is to have 'event' flows for recreational events," he said. "One three-day weekend per month for whitewater boaters to go down Great Falls. It

would be good for the economy of Great Falls (the town on the west side of the river)."

Federal and state fish agencies also support re-watering the Great Falls bypasses. A continuous flow would open up habitat for local fish like suckers and shiners and the rocky shoals would provide spawning habitat for saltwater fish such as American shad and Atlantic sturgeon.

Before the Catawba-Wateree dams were erected, shad and sturgeon swam from the ocean to as far as the lower N.C. Piedmont to spawn. At Great Falls, people used long-handled scoop nets to catch the fish during spring migratory runs, according to historical accounts.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Marine Fisheries Service and the S.C. Department of Natural Resources in 2001 published a plan to allow the saltwater fish to reclaim historic spawning grounds. The plan calls for fish passages, where feasible, on dams in the Santee River Basin, which includes the Broad, Catawba and Congaree rivers.

At present, said fisheries biologist Amanda Hill of the fish and wildlife service office in Charleston, fish can go no farther upstream than the Lake Wateree Dam near Camden, S.C. One other dam, at the Cedar Creek Reservoir south of Great Falls, lies between the Wateree dam and the Great Falls. Hill said no decision has been made on fish passages at the dams.

Jack Horan: jhoran@charlotteobserver.com