PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE ETOWAH HABITAT CONSERVATION PLAN

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REFERENCE: Proceedings of the 2003 Georgia Water Resources Conference, held April 23-24, 2003, at the University of Georgia. Kathryn J. Hatcher, editor, Institute of Ecology, The University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia.

Abstract. The Etowah River is one of the most diverse river systems in the United States with 91 native fish species and numerous species of mussels known from the system. The Etowah River lies in the northern edge of the Atlanta metropolitan area, and therefore is in an area of intense development. Currently there are 15 species listed as federally or state threatened, endangered, or likely candidates (9 fishes, 5 mussels, and one aquatic insect). An interdisciplinary team of scientists, lawyers, educators and policy analysts has begun the process of developing a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) for the Etowah watershed, by involving both local government representatives and public stakeholders. Research on many HCPs around the United States has shown that public participation in the development of a Habitat Conservation Plan is one of the most important aspects in the outcome of the plan. The role of the Etowah River as a resource to those who live in the watershed makes public input particularly significant in the development of an HCP. The goals of those initiating the public participation component of the Etowah HCP are twofold: 1) In the short-term we wish to educate stakeholders and interested parties on background information in order to solicit involvement in the process and to effectively and appropriately incorporate the input into the Etowah HCP; 2) In the long term we wish to increase awareness and stewardship across the Etowah watershed.

INTRODUCTION

The Etowah River is one of the most diverse river systems in the United States with 91 native fish species and numerous species of mussels historically. Currently the river is home to 15 fish, mussel and aquatic insect species listed as federally or state threatened, endangered, or likely candidates (Burkhead et. al. 1997). The Etowah, which is part of the Coosa system, lies in the northern edge of the Atlanta Metropolitan area, and therefore is in an area of intense development (See Figure 1). An interdisciplinary team that includes University of Georgia scientists, lawyers, educators, and even psychologists as well as representatives of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources, the Upper Etowah River Alliance, the Lake Allatoona Preservation Authority, The Nature Conservancy and The Georgia Conservancy (the Advisory Committee) is working with local governments within the basin to develop a regional Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) pursuant to the federal Endangered Species Act. The HCP will manage development in a manner that protects, and ideally restores, the imperiled aquatic species.

The Etowah HCP is unique amongst other HCPs in the United States in that it involves multiple county and city governments across the watershed, and therefore will require effective coordination among government representatives and stakeholders. The role of the Etowah River as a source of drinking water as well as industrial and agricultural water supply makes public input particularly significant in the development of the HCP. In early 2002, the Advisory Committee began to explore how they could most effectively encourage individuals and stakeholder groups to participate in the planning process.

Figure 1. Location of Etowah watershed, relative to Atlanta Metropolitan area, in North Georgia.

RESEARCH METHODS AND RESULTS

Student projects and public participation

Graduate students in the Etowah Environmental Practicum offered jointly in UGA's School of Law and School of Environment and Design provided much research assistance to the Advisory Committee in determining how to develop a public outreach and involvement program. Among the first tasks assigned to them was to determine how successful HCPs from around the country had involved the public.

Among the plans the students studied in depth was the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, in Pima County, AZ, which has received several awards, including honors from the American Planning Association. Their planning process was overseen by an 84-member Steering Committee with representatives from a diverse group of stakeholders including ranchers, homeowners, environmentalist, and others. The Steering Committee hosted over 400 public meetings, including 14 months of educational public workshops, to communicate to the public the objectives of the project and to solicit input to the plan. The committee worked closely with public interest groups and individuals and successfully incorporated public input into the HCP (Dycus et. al. 2002). Although the geographical scope of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is only one county, the plan covers multiple species, addresses development in the Tucson area, and includes preservation of historic resources and riparian restoration, making this plan similar to the proposed Etowah HCP.

Participants involved with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP) stressed the significance of public participation in the success of their conservation plan, but they also expressed some of the difficulties involved with this process. They were dealing with a very large public, and therefore receiving and filtering through a lot of information and opinions, and the farming and ranching community in the area was very organized and explicit about participating and providing input into the plan. Regarding these difficulties, as well as others, SDCP representatives suggested identifying all interested individuals and groups earlier on in the process and encouraging them to be involved, having a lot of public meetings and other opportunities to ensure education and representation of all interested parties, and effectively incorporating appropriate input into the plan. The Etowah HCP public education and outreach plan will address the issues discussed here, focusing on stakeholders and interested parties and working to learn about interests and opinions in the Etowah watershed. The Etowah HCP Advisory committee has begun this process already by working with local government officials (members of the Steering Committee) to identify interest groups and stakeholders who may be affected by or interested in the Etowah HCP to begin soliciting input and opinions about the plan. Some interest groups in this area include the farming community, Home-builders Association, development community, and environmental interest groups.

In addition to the above, the Etowah HCP Advisory Committee has taken several additional steps to develop a successful public participation plan. The committee has asked a different group of Etowah Practicum students to research the concept of environmental marketing to learn from successful environmental (and other) organizations about developing an effective education campaign (Herbert and Leathers 2002). Students also developed a poster "Etowah: Currents through Time" which emphasizes historical and cultural aspects of the river as well as its ecology, which will be distributed through out the watershed as part of HCP outreach efforts (Deganian et. al 2002). Other student research projects that contribute to the Etowah HCP include law suits and legal challenges to other HCPs, mitigation, and funding sources for HCP implementation.

Etowah HCP Survey

Another early action of the Advisory Committee was the development of a survey to learn about watershed residents' knowledge about the Etowah River, their opinions about environmental issues, their sense of empowerment to act on their opinions and be able to affect change, and the most effective means of communicating with them. The information obtained from this survey will help shape the public outreach and involvement plan.

Kennesaw State University conducted this survey, interviewing a total of 1107 people over the telephone. Preliminary results indicate that over 70% of the respondents are aware that they live within the Etowah Basin. Very few (6%) are active in river protection organizations. Around 37% have contacted public officials about a policy issue; the respondents cited lack of time (54%) and lack of information (18%) as obstacles to involvement. The respondents cited television and radio spots, newspaper coverage and educational materials distributed through the schools as the most effective means of communicating information about the Etowah basin.

CURRENT STATUS

In late 2002, after obtaining input from the local governments within the basin, The Etowah HCP Advisory Committee developed a committee structure for the Etowah HCP. In addition to the Advisory Committee, a Steering Committee, a Technical Committee, and a Stakeholder Involvement Committee are being formed. The latter will represent stakeholder groups and individual interests from across the Etowah watershed, and coordinate education and outreach efforts in the individual counties. This committee will work closely with the Steering Committee to solicit and incorporate public input into the HCP. Another goal is the development of an HCP educational program for youth through the schools.

A successful education campaign will be one that continues throughout the development of the Etowah HCP and its implementation, and that actively involves citizens of all interests in the watershed, generating widespread interest and concern for the Etowah River and its aquatic life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Georgia Department of Natural Resources, The Nature Conservancy, The Georgia Conservancy, Kennesaw State University, Lake Allatoona Preservation Authority, the Upper Etowah River Alliance, Erin Dreelin, Laurie Fowler, Byron Freeman, Mary Freeman, Beth Gavrilles, Robin Goodloe, Mike Harris, Susan Kidd, Liz Kramer, Ron Papaleoni, Elizabeth Pate, Ginger Rayburn, Garnett Stokes, Candace Stoughton, Sandra Tucker, and Seth Wenger.

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