

Taking advantage of our unique attributes

We are attracted to water. Mountain paths always wind down to water ... down to springs, creeks and rivers. Water is the essence of our very being. Old-time mountaineers picked home sites according to the location and purity of springs. Long before the first Europeans arrived, the Cherokees had developed ceremonials focused on the spiritual power of running water.

— Naturalist and writer **George Ellison, October 2002, The Smoky Mountain News**

The recently announced plans for a Blueways Trail focusing on the recreational uses of Western North Carolina's waterways is one of the better recent ideas for promoting our region. Its focus on the unique natural wonders of our mountains will make for a broad appeal that will speak directly to those who love the outdoors.

Officially dubbed the N.C. Smokies Blueways Trail, the concept is to develop tools that will help locals and tourists make better use of our rivers, creeks and lakes. That includes just getting to waterways to picnic or swim, improved access for canoeing and kayaking, and more information on fishing.

Duke Energy is in the process of making many recreational improvements to the region's waterways, including boating put-ins and river access points for the public at-large. Some of these will have bathrooms, concrete boat ramps, parking areas, and new or improved fishing piers. In addition, Duke is also increasing the number of releases aimed at expert-level kayakers. These are tangible improvements that will get more people into the water.

"What you have is this whole new mix of recreational products coming into the region as a result of the Duke relicensing," said Mark Singleton, executive director of the Sylva-based American Whitewater, a national paddling advocacy organization.



Scott McLeod

Editor

"Each one of these access areas is a pretty big deal. It connects people to the river," said Singleton.

The hope is that the WNC project will eventually earn a federal designation as part of the National Blueways System, which is under the auspices of the Department of the Interior as part of President Barack Obama's America's Great Outdoors initiative. Officials heading up the project say it is one of the initial pilot projects that is already on the radar of those running the federal program.

"We have been included as one of the pilot projects. They want to work with areas that they see have potential," said Betty Huskins of Smoky Mountain Host.

I also like the fact that the project will kick-off by making use of Western Carolina University students to produce a multimedia guide promoting a section of the Tuckasegee River near campus. That river and its creeks are already included in the Jackson County Fly-fishing map, a project by the Jackson County Chamber of Commerce that has been wildly popular. The website of the map has had nearly 200,000 visits since its creation a few years ago.

We at The Smoky Mountain News can certainly attest to the popularity of information about the outdoors. Some of the most popular and well-read information we produce for our newspaper and our website are the stories about the outdoors. A digital project produced by an intern that photographed and mapped 50 waterfalls in WNC is an immensely popular landing point in the outdoors section of our website. People crave this kind of information.

Some of the credit for this new initiative has to go to Fred Alexander, area manager for Duke Energy. The Duke Energy Foundation has provided an \$85,000 grant that will pay for the work required to move this project toward federal recognition. Alexander has proven his personal commitment to helping this region through all kinds of volunteer work, and that commitment moves to whole new level when he can help convince Duke to invest in our region.

The beauty of this initiative is that it is so multi-faceted. For one, it's easy to embrace a project that focuses on our natural resources in a way that won't degrade them. It should also bring together all the local government entities that are already involved in their own marketing efforts.

The N.C. Smokies Blueways Trail has the potential to spin off benefits for every community and every tourism-related business in WNC. The big boys like the Nantahala Outdoor Center and the small inn located in rural Jackson County will both benefit. This has the potential to be very good for the entire region.

(Scott McLeod can be reached at info@smokymountainnews.com)