



Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area

Comprehensive Trails Management Plan

Civic Engagement Summary Report

June 2021



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Executive Summary

From March 15, 2021, through April 15, 2021, the National Park Service (NPS) invited the public to provide input as part of a civic engagement process for the development of a comprehensive trails management plan ("the plan," "trails plan") for Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area ("the park").

To introduce the planning effort, the National Park Service held two virtual public meetings to discuss the development of the trails plan and answer questions about the project. These virtual public meetings were held on Thursday, March 25 at 6:30 p.m. (EST) and on Friday, March 26 at 1:30 p.m. (EST). During the virtual meetings, NPS staff explained the planning process, showcased methods for public comment, and answered participants' questions.

Park staff developed two methods for submitting plan comments online. In the first method, the public could submit written comments by mail, email, and on the project website at https://parkplanning.nps.gov/CRNRA_Trails. In the second method, the public could submit comments online using an interactive platform called a "storymap," which provided trail proposals and the ability to upload concerns, designs, and suggestions (accessed at <https://arcg.is/1PKmna>).

At the close of this comment period, the Park Service received more than 300 correspondences on the project website. In addition, the project storymap logged more than 190 correspondences. Of the correspondences submitted on the project website, 96% were from Georgia residents and less than 1% was from residents of Tennessee, Colorado, Alabama, and Massachusetts.

This report provides an overview of the planning process and a summary of public comments grouped into thematic topics to ensure a complete and thorough analysis.

Planning Process

The planning process began in spring of 2018 when the National Park Service contracted with Applied Trails Research to gather preliminary public input via an online "social pinpoint" interface. This valuable public input provided an understanding of public perceptions of issues, opportunities, and priorities with the trail system; what trail users value about the system; current trail uses and conflict areas; and aspects of the trail system that should be retained, expanded, or modified.

This input informed a collaborative preliminary design process between Applied Trails Research and the NPS planning team. This preliminary design process identified refined desired conditions for trails in each park unit, a draft layout of a sustainable trail system in each park unit, and a suite of preliminary management strategies that would apply parkwide. These three elements were included in the Chattahoochee River NRA Preliminary Trails Management Plan that was released for public review and comment in March 2021.

The public input on the Preliminary Trails Management Plan will inform modifications to the desired conditions, trail designs, and parkwide management strategies. The planning team is in the process of refining the plan based on this public input. The next step is for the NPS planning team to prepare a comprehensive trails management plan and conduct associated environmental compliance. The comprehensive trails management plan will undergo another round of public review and comment before being finalized. The National Park Service will announce this public comment period by media release on the project website at https://parkplanning.nps.gov/CRNRA_Trails and via other sources.

Throughout the planning process, the Park Service has sought and will continue to engage with the public and park partners to gather input on the project. The NPS planning team is grateful to those who engaged in the most recent public comment process and appreciate the robust and thoughtful input. This input is key to developing a plan that best serves the park resources, its managers, its stakeholders and community members, and its trail users.

Comments by Topic Themes

Trail Building and Maintenance

Many commenters expressed a desire for better trailhead signs, new trail markings to indicate changes in difficulty of terrain, more directional signs or arrows, more interpretive signs, and posted regulations (e.g., speed limits for bikes). Some commenters expressed a desire to keep equestrian trails, add additional accessible paved trails, and add formal river/fishing access and overlooks. A number of commenters suggested placing signs to enforce visitors to “stay off the trails when wet” to prevent erosion.

Regarding trail surfaces, commenters expressed a wide range of preferences, including crushed gravel, paved surfaces, and natural surfaces. Suggestions included more vegetation pruning, stabilizing areas along the riverbank (e.g., short boardwalks or viewing platforms); filling in ruts by bridges and walkways over water, sweeping debris on bridges, and leveling off large indentations on trails. Commenters also expressed concern with the feasibility of maintaining the additional proposed trails, given the funding and staffing limitations.

Recreational Use: Bicycling

A number of commenters noted the value of having opportunities to bike at the park and a desire for more trails to accommodate safe mountain biking and casual riding. Many commenters desire bike trails that provide diverse opportunities, such as paved, gravel, and single-track trails, for riders of all skill levels. Respondents also expressed a desire for more connecting trails to disperse visitors throughout the park and reduce congestion on trails.

Feedback suggested that bike use on trails contributes more to erosion than pedestrian use on trails. Many commenters noted safety concerns on multiuse trails related to user conflicts between bicyclists and pedestrians, hikers, and runners and a few commenters noted concerns with bicyclists’ high speeds. Both bicyclists and pedestrians expressed concerns about the safety of multiuse trails. Commenters provided the following suggestions to address safety concerns with multiuse trails: separation of users by trail (bicyclist-only trails and pedestrian-only trails), exclusive use days (e.g., Monday/Wednesday/Friday/Sunday for bikes and Tuesday/Thursday/Saturday for hikers), enforcing a bike speed limit on multiuse trails, and opening up the entire park to bicycles and pedestrians to disperse use throughout the park.

Commenters also noted specific locations where bike connections would improve the user experience and suggested improvements to enhance the user experience within Cochran Shoals, including stabilizing soft shoulders, maintaining challenging terrain, and improving navigability of rock armoring.

Recreational Use: Climbing

Some commenters appreciated the inclusion of climbing resources at Bowmans Island and Vickery Creek in the plan and urged this planning effort to also include and recognize specific additional climbing access trails in other units (such as Vickery Creek, Cochran Shoals, Palisades, Medlock Bridge, Jones Bridge, and Island Ford).

Resource Concerns

Several commenters expressed support for protecting both water quality and wildlife and removing invasive vegetation on trails when implementing the plan. Feedback also included concern about dogs, such as conflicts between dogs and park visitors and resources. Suggestions to address these concerns included enforcing the dogs-on-leash policy and installing receptacles to hold pet waste.

Partnerships and Volunteers

A few commenters suggested that the park explore partnerships with various organizations (e.g., nonprofits, cities, federal agencies) to assist in the planning and ongoing maintenance of the trails and to integrate justice, equity, diversity, and inclusion into the plan.

Other suggestions included using a volunteer program to help support trail design, install educational signs, and promote safety on the trails. These commenters suggested offering “part-time” and “full-time” volunteer opportunities with targeted marketing to veterans, retired individuals, college students, and academic departments at local high schools and colleges.

Facilities

Several commenters conveyed appreciation for facilities in park units. Others expressed a desire for restroom facilities in every unit (especially in parking areas) and more trash receptacles and bicycle racks at key locations throughout the park.

Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway

Many respondents expressed support for integrating the recently completed Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway Study into the comprehensive trails management plan (see “Additional Context on the Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway Study and National Park Service” on page 5). These commenters support the full integration of the RiverLands Greenway for the following reasons: enhanced regional connectivity, dispersed visitor use across communities, enhanced bicycle access to the park, and enhanced recreational opportunities.

Some respondents opposed integrating the RiverLands Greenway into the trails plan for the following reasons: reduction of the natural character of park units through increased development and use, increased congestion, and impacts to natural resources in the park.

The majority of commenters expressed appreciation for the integration of the RiverLands Greenway in certain park units. However, other commenters were concerned that the proposed RiverLands’ Preferred Alignment (see the callout box on page 7 for additional context) is not proposed for inclusion in the following units: Bowmans Island, Orrs Ferry, Abbotts Bridge, Johnson Ferry (outside the scope of this plan), and a portion of Settles Bridge. Some commenters would also like the plan to include a new pedestrian bridge/crossing to connect Morgan Falls Overlook Park (owned and managed by the City of Sandy Springs) to the Johnson Ferry North unit and also to nearby sections of the RiverLands’ Preferred Alignment.

Many commenters expressed frustration around the park’s proposed adoption of the RiverLands’ Practical Alignment in certain units instead of uniformly integrating the RiverLands’ Preferred Alignment in the trails plan. Commenters expressed concern that if the Preferred Alignment is not fully integrated into the park’s plan, the RiverLands Greenway would be limited in its success and viability. Some commenters also expressed frustration about perceived communication issues between the RiverLands team and the NPS planning team. Commenters conveyed frustration that some local jurisdictions have already procured funding to develop trails proposed in the RiverLands’ Preferred Alignment that travel through park units and are not proposed for adoption in the park’s trails plan. Respondents recommended holding meetings with all affected cities and counties before publicizing the next draft of the trails plan.

Additional Context on the Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway Study and National Park Service

The recent Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway Study reconsiders the region's relationship to the river and proposes a 100-mile uninterrupted multiuse linear network of greenways, blueways, and tributary trails connecting people to parks, the river, and other key destinations. Portions of the proposed greenway connect to units at Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area, and the National Park Service is committed to advancing these regional trail connections. The Chattahoochee RiverLands Greenway Study is funded in partnership by Atlanta Regional Commission, The Trust of the Public Land, and Cobb County.

The RiverLands Greenway study recommends a Preferred Alignment at various locations throughout the study area but also recognizes that in many places this alignment may prove infeasible. The RiverLands Study offers multiple alignments, including a Practical Alignment, to ensure that the Greenway has continuous connections along its entire length. According to the RiverLands report, the "Practical Alignment takes advantage of existing trail infrastructure, easements, or publicly owned land where hurdles to trail implementation are comparatively lower."

Inclusion of proposed greenway alignments in specific units in the park's preliminary trails management plan was based on maintaining desired resource conditions as defined in the park's 2009 General Management Plan and other operational considerations. The general management plan guides park management and identifies zones that describe the appropriate balance between visitor activities and resource protection. In some areas of the park, the desired condition is to protect natural resources along the riverbank as buffer zones from development.

In units where park staff found that the RiverLands' Preferred Alignment was not viable due to conflicts with the general management plan's desired conditions and the park's operational capacity to manage for increased visitation, park staff encouraged use of the RiverLands' Practical Alignment.

Park staff will continue to engage and consult with RiverLands' stakeholders to identify opportunities for including the RiverLands Greenway where appropriate as the NPS planning process continues in the development of the comprehensive trails management plan.

Support for the Comprehensive Trails Management Plan

Several commenters expressed gratitude for the following elements of this plan: adding more mileage of trails, enhancing Atlanta-area sustainability and connectivity, providing big-picture trail connections, proposing different trail surface types, including a long-term vision, providing a high level of detail, expanding trails to support Atlanta's growing population, communicating through various platforms, and protecting water quality.

Critiques of the Comprehensive Trails Management Plan

Some commenters expressed concern that new trails and trail access points might result in increased congestion, higher demands on parking leading to overflow on residential streets, and increased crime in adjacent neighborhoods. A few commenters also provided specific suggestions to further refine the goals, purpose, and need language stated in this plan. A small number of commenters critiqued the trail designs in the plan for lacking familiarity of the units.

Out of Scope

A number of comments were outside of the scope of this trails plan. Park staff acknowledges that these comments are important issues to the park and surrounding communities and is exploring solutions to these concerns in separate efforts. This report includes these comment summaries to provide a holistic picture of comments received.

As a reminder, the purpose of the comprehensive trails management plan will be "to provide guidance for improving trail conditions and connecting the 15 park units within the National Recreation Area as part of a sustainable, accessible, and regionally integrated trail system."

Parking and Roads

Some commenters expressed a desire for parking expansion throughout the entire park and provided specific recommendations for locations of parking expansions. Respondents pointed to safety concerns about narrow roads providing access to park units. While this trails plan will identify potential management strategies for parking at certain trailheads, addressing parkwide parking management and expansion is outside the scope of this plan. Parking concerns will be addressed through other efforts and discussions with municipalities and adjacent landowners. The National Park Service is actively developing specific parking lot projects across the park and seeking funds for additional areas.

River-Related Recreation

Some commenters expressed a desire for paddle-up campsites, ADA-accessible river access, stabilization of the riverbank, increased opportunities for fishing and wildlife viewing, and safer river access at specific boat launches. A few commenters expressed a desire for increased enforcement to reduce the frequency of littering and visitors' consumption of alcohol on park property.

Connectivity to Trail Systems Well Outside of the Park Boundary

One of the goals of this trails plan is to "enhance or enable appropriate connectivity with existing or planned regional trail networks." A few commenters expressed a desire for the plan to connect to other trail systems well outside of the park boundary, which are geographically distant from the park and out of scope for this plan. These trail systems include The River Line, Blankets Creek and other mountain biking areas, Bolton-area Parks (City of Atlanta), Sweetwater Creek State Park, Coweta County, and Heard County.

Johnson Ferry North to Hyde Farm Connection

Several commenters stated a desire for a connection from Johnson Ferry North to Hyde Farm. Before beginning the trails plan, park staff initiated a separate planning effort to explore trail connections between Johnson Ferry North and Hyde Farm in partnership with Cobb County. Park staff intends to maintain these projects as two separate planning efforts.



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CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER NATIONAL RECREATION AREA • COMPREHENSIVE TRAILS MANAGEMENT PLAN

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