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## **435-mile journey down river reaches finish line, participants reflect on what they saw along the way**

ATLANTA - 2019 marked 25 years of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper keeping watch over the Chattahoochee River with comprehensive water quality monitoring, trash cleanups, educational programs and advocacy efforts. In celebration of this silver anniversary, the organization embarked on the Relay Down the Hooch, a momentous 435-mile Olympic-style relay from the Chattahoochee's source spring in the North Georgia mountains all the way down to Lake Seminole at the Florida border, which the Relay reached on Thursday, December 9, 2019.

More than 33 partner organizations and hundreds of volunteers carried the custom sassafras paddle, which served as the Relay's symbolic baton, along the way. The project further highlighted the countless ways people experience the Chattahoochee and embraced hikers, tubers, paddlers, anglers, sailors, boaters and more.

One thing frequently spotted throughout the upper segments of the Relay was trash, despite Tammy Bates, CRK Outings and Events Manager, empowering more than 1,750 volunteers to collect nearly 50 tons of trash in 2019.

"We hope that the Relay will help raise awareness of the issues this area faces," said Bates. "I'd encourage everyone to be considerate when exploring the river – leave no trace, but also leave it better than you found it. If everyone pitches in by bringing a garbage bag and picking up trash, we'll make a real positive impact."

But it's not just recreationalists who are responsible for the river's health. During the tour down the river, participants saw evidence of industries that depend on the Chattahoochee's waters: wastewater treatment plants return treated water back into the river at approximately 163 outfalls along the river; Alabama Power's Farley Nuclear Plant releases coolant water into the river near Columbia, Ala.; toxic coal ash waste has leached into groundwater near the river at Plant McDonough; and sediment pollution as a result of construction and land-clearing activities remains the most prevalent pollutant in the river.

The Relay allowed Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and participating partners the opportunity to mix work with recreation while patrolling stretches of the river not frequently observed. In the southernmost stretches of the Relay along the Georgia-Alabama border, CRK staff was shocked at the stranglehold of invasive vegetative species like hyacinths that have overtaken the river, and

the fact that these species first appeared farther north than expected. Additionally, at several points along the journey, CRK staff took samples where contamination was suspected or made note of potential permit violations that may be affecting the quality of the water.

Despite the challenge of keeping watch over 435 miles of river banks as well as the numerous tributaries and creeks that feed water into the Chattahoochee, the Relay Down the Hooch was an important occasion to bring together the community surrounding this natural resource, and rally support for the issues it faces. The river touches three states, countless communities, and more than five million people who depend on it for drinking water. The Chattahoochee also provides crucial wildlife habitat and is a valuable resource for recreationalists and nature-lovers.

“Our Relay Down the Hooch demonstrated the incredible diversity that exists not just within the people, organizations, and industries that rely on the river, but within the river itself,” said Jason Ulseth, Riverkeeper, who regularly patrols the river for pollution and regulatory violations. “We carried our paddle from the North Georgia mountains where the river is just a trickle by the Appalachian Trail, all the way down to Lake Seminole, where it widens out and coastal plants and wildlife begin to make an appearance. Regardless of where we were along the river, I was always amazed at the true beauty of our river system.”

*Partners included:*

<i>Atlanta Rowing Club and Junior Rowing Club</i>	<i>Lake Lanier Convention and Visitors Bureau</i>
<i>Bill Brooksher</i>	<i>Lake Lanier Olympic Venue</i>
<i>Blue Heron Adventures</i>	<i>Lanier Canoe and Kayak Club</i>
<i>Chattahoochee Hills</i>	<i>Lanier Rowing Club</i>
<i>Chattahoochee Nature Center</i>	<i>Lanier Sailing Club</i>
<i>Chattahoochee River Conservancy</i>	<i>Nantahala Outdoor Center</i>
<i>Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area</i>	<i>Newnan Paddlers</i>
<i>Cool River Tubing</i>	<i>River Through Atlanta</i>
<i>Don Carter State Park</i>	<i>Shoot the Hooch</i>
<i>Elachee Nature Science Center</i>	<i>Unicoi Outfitters</i>
<i>Foundry High School</i>	<i>United States Army Corps of Engineers</i>
<i>Gainesville Marina</i>	<i>United States Army Corps of Engineers at</i>
<i>Gary Gaines</i>	<i>Buford Dam</i>
<i>Georgia River Network</i>	<i>West Point Lake Coalition</i>
<i>GLL Outdoors</i>	<i>Whitewater Express</i>
<i>Hall County Parks and Leisure</i>	<i>Wildwood Outfitters</i>
<i>High Country Outfitters</i>	<i>and hundreds of volunteers</i>
<i>Lake Lanier Association</i>	

*Chattahoochee Riverkeeper’s mission is to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River, its lakes and tributaries for the people, fish and wildlife that depend upon it.*

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