

# RIVERCHAT

Winter 2021

A publication of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (CRK)

## WORKING TOWARD A TRASH-FREE CHATTAHOOCHEE

**T**rash in our watershed is a serious problem that affects the health of people, wildlife, and our economy. For more than two decades, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper members and volunteers have worked to remove trash and tires from creeks and the river. Now we have two new tools at our disposal to achieve our goal of a Trash-Free Chattahoochee.

### Trapping trash across the watershed

With six trash traps now installed in three counties, our Trash-Free Chattahoochee initiative will expand to even more locations this year. Since the program began in 2019, our traps have removed more than 1,500 pounds of trash from the Chattahoochee watershed. We are now using four trap designs, each suited for a unique stream configuration.

Soon, two new traps designed by the non-profit organization Watergoat USA will be deployed in Middle Chattahoochee tributaries. Called "Watergoats," these trash-booms will be put to service filtering polluted stormwater runoff from LaGrange's Dixie Creek and Blue John Creek.

Throughout our history, CRK has worked with municipalities and elected leaders to curtail trash pollution. So far in this campaign, Cobb, Carroll, and Fulton counties have helped to install trash traps in streams crossing along public lands.

CRK also has worked closely with the City of Atlanta to install and maintain trash traps in Atlanta's Maddox and Ardmore Parks. Now, we are working with Troup County to install a Watergoat trap near LaGrange's Franklin Forest Elementary.

### Restoring trust fund honesty

For decades, Georgians have been paying into the Hazardous Waste and Solid Waste Trust Funds through a \$1 fee for every new tire purchased and a \$0.75 fee per ton of waste sent to local landfills.

In theory, the fees in these trust funds flow from the state to local governments to clean up hazardous waste sites, address landfill emergencies, clean up illegal tire dumps, and fund recycling and waste-reduction programs.

In practice, these fees are routinely misappropriated by legislators for other uses. Since these two trust funds were created in the early 1990s, approximately 40% of the collected funds - more than \$200 million in total - has been diverted to pay for other portions of the state's annual budget.

Trash traps have removed more than 1,500 pounds of trash from the Chattahoochee watershed since 2019

Tires piled in front of the Georgia State Capitol in protest of misused funds



With our partners in the Georgia Water Coalition, CRK secured passage of House Resolution 164 during the 2020 session of the Georgia General Assembly. This called for a constitutional amendment that would allow legislators to require these fees be transmitted in full into the trust funds, and prevent legislative looting of money that should be used to clean up trash.

On November 3, 2020, Georgians voted overwhelmingly (81.6% in favor) to amend the Georgia Constitution and allow legislators to dedicate these fees. Once these fees are dedicated, we expect an infusion of resources to help Georgia communities better address litter in our waterways. If we all work together, a Trash-Free Chattahoochee is within our reach! ■



Member of the Lanier High School football team cleaning up tires

Thank you for supporting our efforts to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River.



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Our mission is to advocate and secure the protection and stewardship of the Chattahoochee River, its lakes, tributaries and watershed.

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2 RIVERCHAT

REFLECTIONS: THE HURRICANES OF 2020

2020 is a year most of us would like to keep in our rearview mirror for many reasons - a pandemic and resulting lockdown and economic crises, widespread wildfires, political unrest, and even murder hornets. It was also the most active hurricane year to date, and these storms had a tremendous impact on the Chattahoochee River. In a span of less than two months, the river was hit with a whooping three major storms - all seemingly following an identical path.

After each storm, CRK was on the river surveying damage and collecting samples. We saw extensive water quality impacts from stormwater runoff, sewage spills, and trash. Some areas experienced extreme flooding and residents had to evacuate their homes. Hundreds of trees collapsed into the Chattahoochee, causing the worst riverbank erosion that I've seen in my 35 years of boating. While water quality has since improved, we will continue to see the impacts from these storms for many years to come.

As we enter 2021, I can't help but wonder if this is becoming the new normal. The earth is warming, as five of the hottest years ever recorded have occurred in the past six years. Impacts of a changing climate are evident all over the world,



including on our local water supply. CRK is learning, participating in research studies and innovating to adapt to these changing conditions and impacts on the river. For example, we are doubling down on advocating for green infrastructure to control stormwater runoff. Will it be enough? Will we continue to see this alarming trend of major storms? These questions have this Riverkeeper concerned yet determined as ever. ■

*JASON ULSETH*  
**JASON ULSETH, RIVERKEEPER**

FACES OF THE CHATTAHOOCHEE: THE HARGROVE FAMILY

The Hargrove Family is deeply connected to the Chattahoochee River as it flows through Columbus, Georgia and Phenix City, Alabama. Whether coordinating the Team River Runner Fort Benning Chapter, hosting a whitewater kayaking session with other families at the RushSouth Whitewater Park, or just enjoying an evening on the water with the kids, parents Melissa and Matt Hargrove lead by example.

“The time on our river blends the chaos of our family circus into the enjoyment of connecting the family’s different ages and athletic abilities,” said Melissa. “Our greatest times together have been unplugged moments and the fresh air, the camaraderie, and the exercise leaves us feeling refreshed.” ■

**FUN FACT**  
In 2019, their oldest son, **Mason Hargrove**, won a gold medal in his first ever **Whitewater Kayaking World Championship!**

*Pictured left to right Mathis, Melissa, Mary Claire, Makinley Kate, Matt, and Mason Hargrove*





# ON PATROL WITH CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVERKEEPER

## Lake Lanier nutrient monitoring

This fall, CRK wrapped up our annual nutrient monitoring of Lake Lanier to determine the amount of excess algae from nitrogen and phosphorous. Our 2020 results reveal a continued increase in nutrient pollution; we have seen exceedances of the state standards at all five stations for the second consecutive year. Sources include fertilizer runoff, failing septic systems, and treated wastewater. CRK is an active member of the Lake Lanier Stakeholders group, which is working to avoid harmful algal blooms in our beloved Lake Lanier.



## Douglas County Section 404 permit

On September 11, 2020, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers issued a Section 404 permit to the Douglasville-Douglas County Water & Sewer Authority to enlarge the existing Dog River water supply reservoir. The Authority will spend nearly \$100 million to raise the dam 35 feet, adding approximately 4.5 billion gallons in storage capacity. CRK was pleased to learn minimum stream flows below the dam will continue to be protected as required by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division.

## Rubber manufacturer needs industrial stormwater permit

CRK is investigating PolyBlend, a rubber recycling and manufacturing facility located in the Utoy Creek watershed in Fulton County, because it is operating without the required stormwater permit. The facility stores rubber materials outside. A permit is required to certify that heavy metals found in rubber products do not mix with stormwater and contaminate the river. The operators have committed to coming into compliance in the first quarter of 2021, and CRK is closely monitoring their progress as they develop stormwater protection plans and report to the Georgia Environmental Protection Division.



## Monitoring Green Rock quarry

A proposed rock quarry that would border the Chattahoochee River in Carroll County continues to trouble residents and officials. Zoning laws were adjusted to deter the proposal (mining activities are no longer allowed on agricultural property) and a subsequent building permit was denied by the Carroll County Attorney's office; the developer, Green Rock, is appealing that decision. After many conversations with concerned residents and a site visit with Green Rock to review their plans, CRK will continue to monitor any developments and review all permit applications as they become available. It is critical that water quality in this region of the river be protected.



Photo by Alice Richards

## Smart trash trap

CRK installed our first ever "smart trash trap" in Villa Rica's Bay Springs Creek, made possible by the Alice Huff Richards Fund. A CASSI water monitoring device was attached to a Litter Gitter trash trap, enabling the device to report real-time temperature and conductivity data to an online portal. The smart trash trap is located on a tributary to Dog River, which has been monitored for litter pollution throughout the past year. Now, weekly trash cleanups and forensic litter analysis combined with CASSI data will provide an unprecedented level of water quality monitoring in the stream.

## TMDL Lake Eufaula

The Georgia Environmental Protection Division will draft a "pollution budget" for Lake Eufaula/Walter F. George. The agency will develop a total maximum daily load - or TMDL - to address increasing nutrient levels and chlorophyll-a. CRK participated in the development of TMDLs for Lake Lanier and has requested to be a stakeholder again. The agency must be proactive in addressing rising water quality issues in the Middle Chattahoochee region before any impacts are felt within the area or farther downstream. Rising nutrient levels in the Chattahoochee's lakes are likely linked to increased runoff and rising temperatures due to climate change.

For more information, visit: [chattahoochee.org/our-work/enforcement](http://chattahoochee.org/our-work/enforcement).



# CRK 2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

## BY THE NUMBERS

### WATER MONITORING

**16,805** WATER QUALITY TESTS CONDUCTED IN CRK LABORATORIES

**132** Neighborhood Water Watch volunteers

 **105** BacteriAlert samples collected

**4** CASSI real-time water quality sensors deployed

 **62** Nutrient samples tested from lakes Lanier and West Point



### ADVOCACY

**1** SUCCESSFUL CLEAN WATER ACT LAWSUIT TO CLEAN UP INDUSTRIAL SITE ON BURNT FORT CREEK RESULTING IN \$60,000 TO BENEFIT TWO WATERSHED PROJECTS

**104** Industrial sites investigated

 **266** Hotline calls answered

**38** LETTERS AND TESTIMONIES BEFORE GOVERNMENT BODIES TO MAINTAIN AND ADVANCE ENVIRONMENTAL LAWS



### EDUCATION

**90** INDUSTRIAL OPERATORS AND INSPECTORS TRAINED IN STORMWATER COMPLIANCE

**406**  
Rain barrels distributed

**28**  
Interns trained

**62** PRESENTATIONS TO MEMBERS AND STAKEHOLDERS

### OUTREACH & CLEANUPS

**1,225**  
VOLUNTEERS REMOVED TRASH

**9** In-stream trash traps maintained

 **10** TONS OF REFUSE RECYCLED

**1,549**  
NEW CRK MEMBERS

**1** Published guide to planned giving





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*\*CRK receives 100%  
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To become a member, visit [chattahoochee.org/become-a-member](http://chattahoochee.org/become-a-member).



# NEW BOAT RAMP

## SIGNIFIES IMPROVEMENTS IN CHATTAHOOCHEE RIVER



The new ramp was officially opened to the public on November 20, 2020 in Chattahoochee Hills, Georgia.

**A new boat ramp will provide direct access to the Chattahoochee River for an estimated 5,000 visitors every year in an area that, previously, had limited access to this beloved natural resource.**

The ramp – only the second of its kind south of Atlanta – was officially opened to the public on November 20, 2020, in Campbellton Park in Chattahoochee Hills, Georgia. Made possible by federal Sport Fish Restoration funds as well as matching state contributions, the park now includes an 18-foot-wide concrete boat ramp that will give boaters, paddlers, and anglers easy entry into the water. Visitors can park in spaces specifically for trailered vehicles, five additional car spaces, or at American Disabilities Act-compliant parking.

While federal funding of the ramp is intended to support and maintain healthy natural fisheries, its benefits will extend beyond the water. According to a statement from the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (DNR), “the availability of ramps in a community brings visitors to those areas, as well as increased economic benefit.”

But the potential benefit from the river can’t happen without a cost. For years, wildlife and water quality south of Atlanta suffered because of the City continuously allowing raw sewage overflows directly into the river and its tributaries. Water from Georgia’s capital flowed south through cities like LaGrange and Columbus, where the reputation of the river as “dirty” emerged as a result of waste and garbage that came from their northern neighbor, stifling opportunities to develop

the river as the resource that it was for those upstream.

In 1995, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper successfully sued the City of Atlanta, who, for the past 25 years, has made tremendous investments in infrastructure and treatment according to a consent decree designed to improve the region’s water quality. Thanks to this lawsuit and ongoing efforts to preserve water quality led by CRK, water quality is now 80% cleaner than it was decades ago.

“We’ve worked hard over the last quarter-century to secure clean water not just where we’re based in Atlanta, but throughout all 435 miles of the watershed,” said Jason Ulseth, Riverkeeper at CRK. “It’s taken a lot of resources and dedication, but the fact that people are interested in a boat ramp down

here proves that the perception of the river is changing and our work is paying off.”

This ramp, along with other projects to increase access to the Chattahoochee such as the ongoing Chattahoochee Riverlands initiative, would not have been considered 25 years ago, demonstrating that demand for ways to enjoy the river is growing.

There is still work to do, however. “As more people start to explore these parts of the river, we may start to see more trash,” said Tammy Bates, CRK’s Outings Manager. “But that’s another great thing about this ramp; it will help us to get to the parts of the river where we need to do extra trash cleanups and river patrols.” ■

*You may find details of this ramp and more DNR ramps near you by downloading the [Outdoors GA app](#).*





# DRIVE-THRU WESTSIDE RIVER RENDEZVOUS MAKES A SPLASH

For the seventh year in a row, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper’s River Rendezvous brought Atlanta’s Westside community together for a day of water sampling and discussion about local water resources.

This installment looked a little different, however, as CRK and partner West Atlanta Watershed Alliance invited participants to “drive thru” stations to collect sample collection gear and receive pre-recorded video instructions. From there, volunteers ventured out to collect water from 46 stream locations in Proctor, Sandy, and Utoy Creeks, logging hundreds of data points and helping to provide a wide snapshot of watershed health.



“The annual River Rendezvous is rejuvenating. The community comes together, and this year they all gladly adopted the COVID-19 safety measures,” said Mike Meyer, CRK’s Neighborhood Water Watch Program Director. “This event embodies Atlanta’s commitment to understanding and protecting our urban streams, which are showing improvement in many areas.”

Once Rendezvous-ers returned to the drive-thru point, CRK staff went to work testing and analyzing the samples for water quality indicators like E.coli, cloudiness, electrical conductivity, and optical brighteners. Participants later regrouped via Zoom to share observations and CRK lab analysts dove into the results.

60% of sites met the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) safe swimming and fishing recommendation, while 40% exceeded it – a fantastic achievement for these urban streams. Approximately 12% of the sites indicate the need for follow up investigations. CRK tracking teams are using this data to conduct follow up in-stream inspections, which is leading to a potential contamination source in upper Proctor Creek.

The River Rendezvous not only helps CRK and other stakeholders identify threats to water quality but also serves as a community engagement and education opportunity. River Rendezvous-ers are now well versed in local water issues and empowered as clean water ambassadors in their communities.

See the results of this year’s Drive-thru River Rendezvous water quality tests at <https://chattahoochee.org/results-from-westside-river-rendezvous-2020/>. ■



## FLOATING CLASSROOMS GO VIRTUAL

During the last two decades, more than 80,000 students, teachers, and adults have experienced the Lake Lanier and West Point Lake Floating Classrooms. These on-the-water programs involve hands-on science experiments, wildlife viewing, and more, all to help students get a personal understanding of the Chattahoochee watershed.

While the Floating Classrooms were docked due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper used that time to create the Virtual Floating Classroom to deliver the same curriculum online. The idea of creating online programming has been floating around CRK for some time, as classrooms outside of the watershed and others asked about alternatives to the in-person Floating Classroom.

Using the online learning platform, Kahoot!, the Virtual Floating Classroom features videos of all the water and land-based activities that take place on the Floating Classrooms followed by interactive questions in a game-like style. As of now, four activities are available for middle school grade levels. Development of curriculum to serve elementary and high school grade levels is underway.

“It’s exciting to think about the potential to reach a far broader audience with this virtual program,” said Robbye Smith, a teacher in Chambers County, Alabama. “These activities are wonderful! I love the videos and the slide attachments that can be embedded in Google Classroom.”

To provide additional support to educators, CRK staff can remotely guide groups through these activities. Some scholarships are available for Title 1 schools and disadvantaged groups. Teachers also have the option to guide students through the activities themselves or send links to students for individual assignments.

Today, CRK is scheduling a few small in-person trips. In time, even when the Floating Classrooms return to full capacity, their virtual counterpart will continue to add value with in-depth pre-trip learning and informative opportunities for students far and wide.



The Virtual Floating Classroom was made possible by donors including the Stockel Family Foundation, Georgia Pacific, AEC Trust, George Brown Trust, Alice H. Richards Charitable Fund, Charter Foundation, Sweetgrass Foundation, and the WestPoint Fund. ■



# IS THE CHATTAHOOCHEE OVER-PERMITTED?

For nearly three decades, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper has engaged in Georgia’s water supply decision-making. Our goal is to ensure there is enough clean water in the Chattahoochee River basin for all those who depend on it, today and in the future.

We are often asked, is there enough water? All major water withdrawals - for drinking, industry, and agriculture - are permitted by the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD), but some argue that too much water is allowed to be pulled from the river.

To understand how much water had been permitted for withdrawal from the river, CRK started with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineer’s 2017 Water Control Manual. Then, to see what permits were changed or eliminated, CRK consulted EPD’s current list of permitted withdrawals.

This comparison revealed that many permits have expired and some permittees have agreed to dramatically decrease their demand during the last ten years. The energy sector’s transition away from dirty coal toward less water-intensive fuels is one reason for this change. The generation of electricity through natural gas demands less water than coal, so utility companies have requested reduced withdrawal allocations.

Georgia Power, for example, reduced water withdrawal limits at their McDonough-Atkinson and Yates plants, both of which have transitioned from primarily burning coal to natural gas. In the early 2000s, the combined maximum withdrawals at these two facilities were 1.5 billion gallons of water per day. After



modifying two permits and retiring a third, Georgia Power’s withdrawal maximum was reduced to 134 million gallons per day (MGD) at the two plants. Similarly, after Longleaf Energy Associates abandoned a planned coal fired power plant in Early County, their 27 MGD water withdrawal permit expired.

While there has been a reduction in energy-related water withdrawal permits since publication of the Water Control Manual, the Chattahoochee River has witnessed or will see an increase in the total permitted municipal surface withdrawal of more than 120 MGD. This is due to EPD recently issuing four new or modified surface water withdrawal permits to the Middle Chattahoochee Regional Water and Sewer Authority, the Carroll County Water Authority, the City of Cumming,

and Forsyth County Water & Sewer. Three communities have also applied for new or modified surface water withdrawal permits: the cities of Cornelia, Roswell, and West Point. Coweta County is also contemplating the new withdrawal permit.

The Chattahoochee River may not be over-permitted today, but a combination of increased municipal water withdrawals and the anticipated climate change impacts of deeper droughts and hotter temperatures threatens our water supply. A comprehensive understanding of all of these dynamics makes aggressive water conservation and efficiency strategies not only the best tools to secure enough water for now and for everyone in the future, but also reveals the urgency for their implementation. ■



Photo courtesy of City of Atlanta



# RECREATION ON THE RIVER A RESPITE FOR THOUSANDS

**The global pandemic has driven many to seek solace in our natural environment. Thankfully, the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area (CRNRA), stretching 48 river miles and offering 20% of all public green space in the metro Atlanta region, exists to welcome millions of visitors desperate to find a safe outlet outside their homes.**

2020 was a unique year for this expansive park system. Despite a brief closure beginning in March, park visitation began to increase in May when trails re-opened. Between then and the end of November, the park hosted 2,658,921 visitors. While overall annual visitation at the park was lower than the previous year, in July, August and September, monthly visitation was higher than the same months in 2019.

“We have noticed many new visitors enjoying the recreation available in the Chattahoochee River National Recreation Area,” said Ann Honious, Acting Superintendent for the CRNRA. Ann also serves as Deputy Superintendent at National Capital Parks East in Washington, D.C., but began her 120-day posting at CRNRA in mid-April. “With the pandemic, visitors are heading outside to hike or enjoy the river.”

Perhaps one reason so many choose to recreate on the river is to cope with a stressful year. Numerous studies have revealed that time spent outside can have powerful positive effects on mental health.

Becca Powell, Chattahoochee Riverkeeper’s Development Director, knows firsthand how powerful the river can be. “Fly fishing became a healthy mental escape, bringing me to the Chattahoochee River during the weekends and even after work,” said Becca, who is living with metastatic breast cancer. “When I was fishing, I wasn’t thinking about my diagnosis, or my lists of things to do. I was living in the moment... I personally felt the importance of our river and connected, with my whole heart, to the work CRK was doing to keep our waterways clean and healthy.”

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**“The past year showed just how important the river is for all people looking for a peaceful escape from the stresses of the pandemic,” said Tammy Bates, CRK Outings Manager. “We have seen visits to the CRNRA spike just as we’ve had a record year for cleanup volunteers.”**

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CRK also noticed an increase in interest from people looking to engage in community service while limiting exposure to the virus. After initially putting several events on hold, we organized safe trash cleanup events throughout the watershed to serve this need. Altogether, more than one thousand volunteers participated in cleanups throughout the year and we removed more than 30 tons of trash.

“The past year showed just how important the river is for all people looking for a peaceful escape from the stresses of the pandemic,” said Tammy Bates, CRK Outings Manager. “We have seen visits to the CRNRA spike just as we’ve had a record year for cleanup volunteers.”

Plans to provide more ways to connect with the Chattahoochee in 2021 are underway at CRK, including our annual [Sweep the Hooch](#) cleanup on Saturday, March 27, 2021, with dozens of sites within the CRNRA and many more throughout the watershed. No matter what happens in 2021, efforts to keep the river a safe place to recreate will continue going strong. ■

## SAVE THE DATE

# SWEEP THE HOOCH

SATURDAY, **MARCH 27**, 2021

[sweepthehooch.org](https://sweepthehooch.org)

Show your love for the  
Chattahoochee! Registration  
opens Valentine’s Day,  
February 14, 2021.



Paddlers at Powers Island

Photo by John Kelly





3 Puritan Mill  
916 Joseph E. Lowery Blvd, NW  
Atlanta, GA 30318

Keeping Watch Over Our Waters Since 1994



If you prefer to receive RiverCHAT electronically, contact Christina York at [cyork@chattahoochee.org](mailto:cyork@chattahoochee.org). | Address service requested | Printed on 10 percent post-consumer recycled paper. | Donations accepted at: [www.chattahoochee.org](http://www.chattahoochee.org)

# VIRTUAL “CELEBRATING THE CHATTAHOOCHEE” RAISES THOUSANDS TO PROTECT THE RIVER

On September 10, 2020, supporters of Chattahoochee Riverkeeper and the river it works to protect gathered virtually for a celebration of this precious resource.

More than 1,500 people tuned in to “Celebrating the Chattahoochee” to hear updates on innovative river protection initiatives, bid on silent auction items, and converse virtually.

Through generous sponsorships, silent auction items, and donations to help us fund the future, we raised more than \$315,000 to work toward a Trash-Free Chattahoochee.

“CELEBRATING THE CHATTAHOOCHEE” PROGRAM IS ONLINE [WATCH HERE](#)

SAVE THE DATES

**SWEEP THE HOOCH**  
Saturday, March 27, 2021  
Chattahoochee Watershed

**VALLEY RIVER RALLY**  
Saturday, May 1, 2021  
West Point, GA

**WILD & SCENIC FILM FESTIVAL**  
Saturday, May 15, 2021  
Gainesville, GA

**PATRON DINNER**  
Thursday, September 16, 2021  
The Stave Room in Atlanta, GA

Follow CRK on social media to stay up to date on additional events like, cleanups, webinars, and more.

## WE ARE DEEPLY APPRECIATIVE OF SPONSORS FOR THIS YEAR’S EVENT, INCLUDING:

### PRESENTING SPONSORS



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### RIVER CHAMPIONS



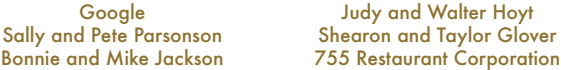
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## NEW PLANNED GIVING GUIDE

As you plan for your future, please consider including CRK in your plans. Our new Planned Giving Guide tells of the many ways to support our work to protect and preserve the Chattahoochee River. This guide was developed in consultation with a certified financial planner and an estate attorney.

