

What is the Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan?

by Candace Stoughton

Etowah River Project Manager, The Nature Conservancy



Some of you may have heard of an on-going planning effort to protect the many threatened and endangered darter species (the Cherokee darter, the amber darter and the Etowah darter) in our Etowah watershed, while encouraging economic growth and development. The plan, called the Etowah Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), will remove many of the permitting headaches developers face when developing in an area with streams containing darters. At the same time, the plan will ensure the protection of the endangered darter species in the Etowah basin by addressing development issues that pose significant threats to the fish. The methods included in this plan will address stormwater runoff, erosion and sedimentation, and stream crossings by new roads. The plan offers engineering and economic solutions, not limitations and restrictions.

Under the current system and laws, developments in the Etowah watershed, which encompasses Fulton, Cobb, Cherokee, Dawson, Forsyth, Pickens, Bartow, Paulding, Polk and Floyd counties, may be put on hold if the project is in an area containing threatened or endangered darters. Developments may be stalled for months or years while research concerning is conducted, and mitigation plans for darter habitat are developed. During that time, each developer must write an individual HCP for each project site. However, if the regional HCP plan is successful, most developers will be excused from writing their own HCPs and will be covered by the watershed-wide plan.

The Etowah HCP is being developed by appointees from each local government in the watershed. Funded by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the plan includes the hiring Curt Gervich, outreach coordinator for the Etowah HCP.

In his new role of outreach coordinator, Gervich is working with community and professional groups and local governments to explain the mechanics of the HCP and to gather input on implementing it within the Etowah River watershed.

“This HCP promises a lot, but it can deliver,” says Gervich.

As part of the HCP plan, governments in the

region will receive incidental take permits protecting civic projects and approved private developments, which will protect them from law suits if some darters or habitat are destroyed.

“There will be something for everyone in this plan. It will protect darters and darter habitat, and protect developers from litigation,” he said

For this plan to be successful, Gervich knows that many diverse groups will need to be involved in the process.

“This plan will need buy-in from folks all over the watershed. Not just developers, not just elected officials, and not just the environmental folks. It will be important for everyone to feel like they benefit from the plan once it is in place,” Gervich said. “Not only can the plan help protect endangered darters, it can also help maintain the quality of life in the area by preserving the rural character of the region, giving us clean water, and bringing economic gains.”

To get the buy-in he knows is necessary for success, Gervich plans to identify key places, community groups and professional groups in the watershed, and to introduce them to the concepts and issues the plan will address.

“I’ll let people know about the basic components of the developing plan, and then I hope they’ll respond with their ideas, suggestions and concerns. After hearing about the plan, I encourage folks to contact me so I can get them involved,” said Gervich.

Gervich attended Emory University where he studied biology, ecology and anthropology. He then moved north to Alaska where he worked with the forest industry, community groups, and native Athabaskan villagers to promote local sustainable forestry. Curt recently completed a master’s degree in natural resource planning at the University of Vermont where he worked in one small mountain community with a group of professionals that sold forest products.



Curt Gervich

Gervich is originally from a farming community in Iowa where he experienced first hand the agriculture crisis of the 1980s.

“As I began thinking about college and the time after, I knew I wanted to work in a field that would let me help rural communities cope with growing pains. Working in the Etowah is a very exciting opportunity to do just that,” said Gervich.

Please help me welcome Gervich to the Etowah watershed. His work is critical to the ongoing efforts to protect the Etowah for current and future generations.

For information about the Conservancy's work

in the Etowah watershed visit www.nature.org/georgia. If you would like to receive regular email updates about the Conservancy's work in the Etowah River watershed, please contact the Etowah River Project Office at 770/704-7280 or email Candace Stoughton at cstoughton@tnc.org.

To find out more about the HCP plan, you can contact Curt Gervich at 678/801-4013 or email curt@etowahhcp.org. For more information, go to the HCP's website, www.etowahhcp.org.

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The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.

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