

South Carolina Department of Natural Resources

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DNR

COWASEE Chronicle



Newsletter of the COWASEE Basin

Vol. 1, No. 1



Breath taking views, like this one from the Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve in Calhoun County, are notable features of the COWASEE Basin.

This is the first of what we hope to be other newsletters to follow that will educate and inform landowners, the general public, policy makers and others about the COWASEE Basin Focus Area in central South Carolina. COWASEE is short for the Congaree-Wateree-Upper Santee River system. Containing about 215,000 acres, it stretches from I-20 in Kershaw County south to near the railroad trestle at Upper Lake Marion between Rimini and Lone Star, then back up the Congaree to as far north as I-77 (see map). Most of the focus area consists of the bottomland

hardwood forests of the Congaree, Wateree and Upper Santee Rivers, but it also includes the river bluffs, high hills and uplands that border them. It includes parts of Kershaw, Sumter, Richland, Calhoun, and Lexington counties.

About 32% of the COWASEE Basin consists of state and federal lands including South Carolina's only national park, the Congaree National Park, as well as such significant state lands as Sparkleberry Swamp, Congaree Bluffs Heritage Preserve, Poinsett State Park, and Manchester State Forest.



Kensington Mansion in Lower Richland is one of the most beautiful and distinctive antebellum homes in the South.

Why COWASEE?

People new to the Midlands of South Carolina, and even long-time residents, may know little about the natural resources, conservation values, and human history within the COWASEE Basin. Conservationists, biologists, hunters, fishermen, foresters, naturalists, historians, archaeologists, and others, however, are keenly aware of the many outstanding natural, cultural, and historic treasures within the COWASEE Basin. The bottomland hardwood forests that make up much of the basin, for example, are some of the most productive and valuable wildlife habitats in North America. They also provide outstanding aquatic resources and watershed protection.

The COWASEE Basin is the only focus area in South Carolina that can boast of a national park, a state park, a state forest, a DNR heritage preserve, and the spectacular Sparkleberry Swamp. It also has a significant portion of the Palmetto Trail, including one of the trail's most beautiful sections, the Wateree Passage.

The wetlands and waterways of the COWASEE Basin have long been known to sportsmen as providing unparalleled hunting, fishing, and boating opportunities, but naturalists, birders, photographers, hikers, and canoeists have also discovered the many wonderful attributes of COWASEE.

COWASEE Basin was the scene of the very first exploration of the North American interior by Europeans when Hernando DeSoto and his 600 Spanish conquistadors came through in the spring of 1540 searching for the legendary Indian town of Cofitachequi, thought to be located on the east bank of the Wateree River a little south of Camden.

In 1701, the English explorer and naturalist John Lawson came through the "High Hills of the Santee" on the east side of the Basin. Lawson provided some of the earliest and best accounts of Indian life and culture of the state's interior. He also described in some detail the area's geology and natural history, including perhaps the first written description of Cooks Mountain in eastern Richland County, which he described as an "alp shaped like a sugar loaf which extended above all others."

COWASEE Basin was important ground for both sides during the Revolution. General Nathanael Greene, the architect of victory in the South, made his camp in the High Hills of the Santee while Francis Marion, the "Swamp Fox," and Thomas Sumter, the "Gamecock," used the area to hit British forts and supply lines.

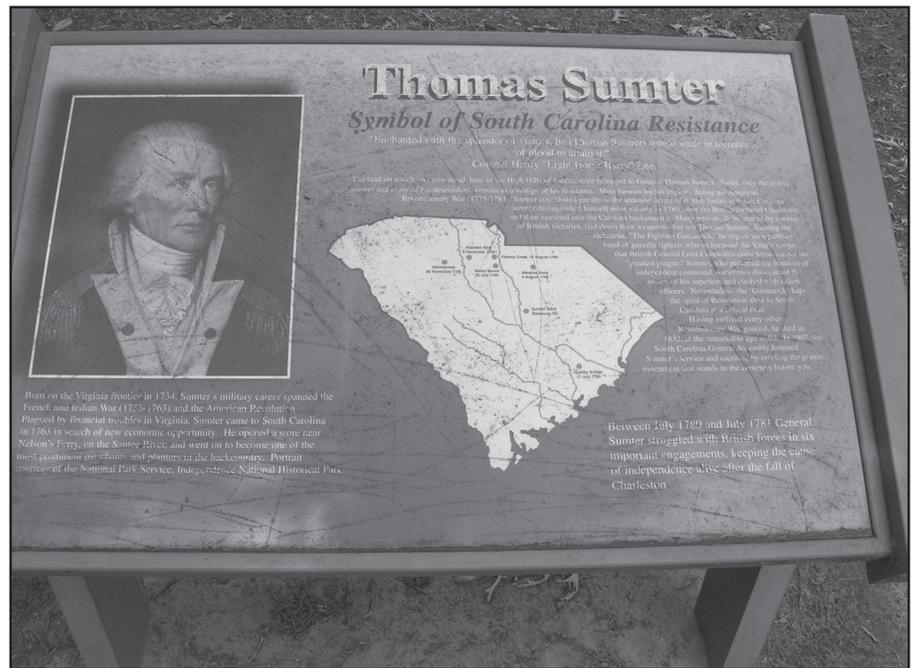
Some of the most distinctive and beautiful antebellum plantations and churches in the South are found in the COWASEE Basin including Kensington

Mansion, Millford Plantation, the Borough House, and the Church of the Holy Cross at Stateburg.

The Basin produced a Pulitzer Prize winner in 1929 when Julia Peterkin of Lang Syne Plantation wrote “Scarlet Sister Mary.” Mary Boykin Chesnut of Stateburg and Camden was another COWASEE Basin author who produced one of the most significant Civil War documents with her “Diary from Dixie.”

What is a Focus Area?

The focus area concept started years ago when duck hunters and other conservationists realized that in order for wildlife management and conservation to be most effective, it had to be practiced at the landscape level, meaning over thousands of acres rather than at smaller parcels of a few hundred acres. And it was quickly realized that the government and private conservation organizations alone could not afford to buy all the land needed for effective landscape conservation. Most focus areas are comprised primarily of private land and *the private landowner has always been at the forefront of focus area conservation projects*. Private landowners have always been good stewards of their properties and the voluntary use of conservation easements has been the primary means for land protection within focus areas.



Thomas Sumter was one of the great partisan leaders of the Revolution and the last surviving general of that war.

There are currently 12 focus areas in South Carolina. Undoubtedly the most successful and well-known is the ACE Basin south of Charleston. Consisting of 350,000 acres, the ACE Basin currently has about 175,000 acres or 50% in some form of conservation protection, mostly private conservation easements. The ACE Basin has been so successful that all focus areas within the state, including the COWASEE Basin, have modeled their efforts after it.

What is a Conservation Easement?

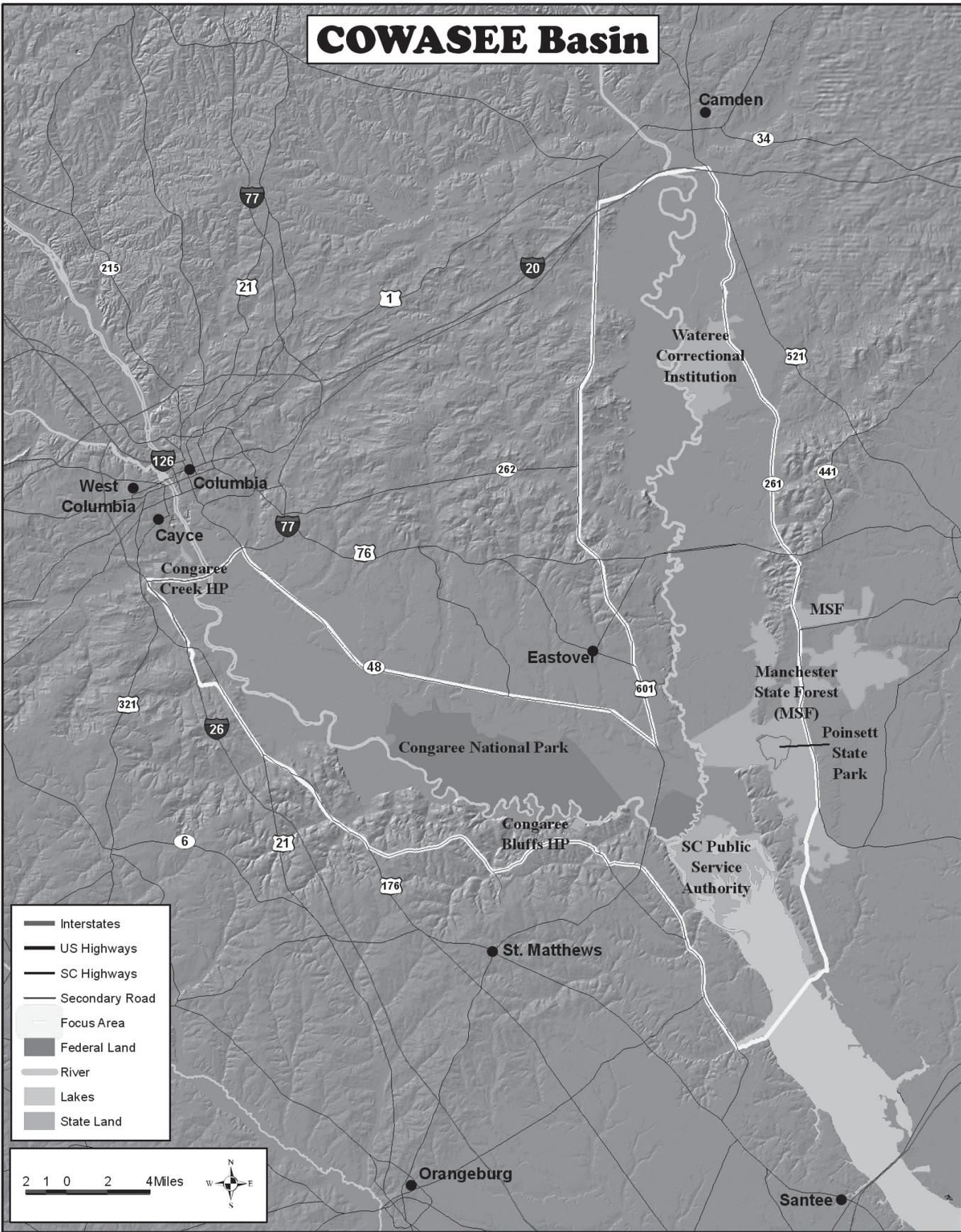
Conservation easements have been around a long time but it has only been in the past 25 years or so that they have moved into the vanguard of land conservation for the 21st century.

Basically, a conservation easement is a legal agreement between a landowner and a private or governmental conservation organization or agency that determines the future use of the property. A conservation easement typically prohibits industrial usages, residential subdivisions, billboards, cell towers, and mining. However, land uses and activities that don't affect the conservation values of the property, such as forestry, farming, hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation, are allowed. Landowners can continue to reside on their land and in some cases add a limited number of homes if the property is large enough. Landowners can sell



A landowner proudly displays his COWASEE Basin sign in the heart of the focus area.

COWASEE Basin





Sparkleberry Swamp is one of the most scenic and popular paddling destinations in South Carolina.

The Wetland Reserve Program (WRP)

their property or leave it to their heirs. A conservation easement, however, is permanent and is recorded with the property at the county court house like a deed. The bottom line for a conservation easement is that it basically ensures that the land will remain pretty much in the same condition that it is today.

In exchange for giving up their development rights, landowners can, in some cases, realize substantial tax savings. The difference between what the land is appraised at for its fair market value versus the value with a conservation easement can be used as a charitable deduction for both state and federal income tax purposes. A conservation easement can also qualify for tax credits on the South Carolina state income tax form.

Conservation easements are not for everyone but offer many advantages, especially to those landowners with strong sentimental and generational ties to their property. One landowner calls a conservation easement the “ultimate property right,” as it provides a blueprint for what the land will look like in the future.

For further information on conservation easements, contact the Congaree Land Trust at info@congarie.lt.org Ducks Unlimited at cvaughn@ducks.org or the Richland County Conservation Commission at WilsonJ@rcgov.us

The Wetland Reserve Program, or WRP, is a conservation easement program of the US Department of Agriculture administered by the Natural Resources Conservation Service. The WRP program focuses on enrolling degraded wetlands into conservation easements and restoring wetland functions and values. Unlike many easement programs, the WRP purchases a conservation easement on offered land as well as providing resources to restore lost wetland functions and values. As part of the easement acquisition, landowners are typically compensated for management activities such as timber rights, vegetative management, and hydrology management. Typical conservation practices to restore hydrology involve the removal of road barriers, undersized culverts, dikes and berms to promote the natural hydrology on the land. Payment rates range from \$1,000 per acre to \$2,500 per acre depending on the land use. Easements applications are ranked and awarded on a competitive process.

For more information, contact Dick Yetter, State Biologist, USDA – NRCS,
1835 Assembly Street, Rm 950, Columbia, SC 29201
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Cell: 803.360.0366



Church of the Holy Cross, Stateburg

The COWASEE Basin Focus Area Task Force

Part of the focus area effort is the creation of a task force of landowners within the focus area as well as representatives from various private and governmental conservation organizations and agencies. The task force meets at periodic intervals to discuss collaborative conservation efforts and goals for the focus area. The COWASEE Basin Task Force was first convened by the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources under the leadership of DNR Biologist Buddy Baker in 2005. Currently, 12 members represent eight conservation organizations and agencies as well as landowners on the COWASEE Basin Task Force. They are:

Richard Watkins, landowner and Task Force Chairman; also represents Friends of Congaree Swamp, 803-655-7091; watkins.richarde@mindspring.com

Brett Moule, represents SCDNR, 803-734-3886; MouleB@dnr.sc.gov

Billy Cate, landowner; also represents the Congaree Land Trust, 803-988-0000; billy@congarzelt.org

John Cely, represents the Congaree Land Trust, 803-988-0000; johncely@congarzelt.org

Chris Vaughn, represents Ducks Unlimited, 843-745-9110; cvaughn@ducks.org

Jason Johnson, represents The Conservation Fund, 803-829-8054; jjohnson@conservationfund.org

Jim Wilson, represents the Richland County Conservation Commission, 803-576-2084; WilsonJ@rcgov.us

Charles Broadwell, represents the Sumter County Soil and Water Conservation District; 803-469-2127; charlesb@ftc-i.net

Hank Stallworth, landowner from Calhoun County; 803-874-3046; singleton50@windstream.net

Hugh Ryan, landowner from Sumter County; 803-968-3072; jhryan@ftc-i.net

Dick Yetter and Sudie Thomas, represents the Natural Resources Conservation Service, 803-253-3948; dick.yetter@sc.usda.gov

Progress So Far

Even though the COWASEE Basin Task Force has been active for less than five years, considerable progress has been made.

Currently there are 27 conservation easements totaling more than 23,000 acres within the focus area. This represents 16% of the private lands within the Basin. The Natural Resource Conservation Service's (NRCS) Wetland Reserve Program (WRP) is the largest holder of conservation easements with 11,199 acres, followed by the Congaree Land Trust at 5,988 acres, and Ducks Unlimited with 5,919 acres. Counties with the most acres of conservation easements within COWASEE are Richland with 7,456 acres followed by Calhoun at 6,637 acres; Kershaw, 5,596 acres; and Sumter with 3,417 acres.

Although the main emphasis of the task force has been working with private landowners on conservation easements, outreach and education have also been a big part of the COWASEE effort. In this regard, the task force has produced a brochure, bumper stickers, and signs for landowners as well as highway and boat landing signs. We have also produced a COWASEE Basin slide show suitable for civic and garden clubs. In the works is a COWASEE Basin Tour Guide, similar to the one produced by DNR for the ACE Basin, and there is now a COWASEE Basin website at www.cowasee.org

COWASEE Basin Book

The last 15 years or so has seen a spate of very nice coffee table books celebrating South Carolina's incredible beauty and natural resources. These books have focused on either the coast or the mountains but we believe that the scenery, wildlife, cultural, and historic resources of the COWASEE Basin are second to none. With this in mind, the Congaree Land Trust has embarked on putting together a coffee table book on the COWASEE Basin. We are in the process of obtaining sponsors to publish the book. We are also very interested in having donated photography. All profits from the book will go to the Congaree Land Trust for its COWASEE Basin efforts. For further information, contact Billy Cate at billy@congreelt.org or John Cely at johncely@congreelt.org

Conservation Bank

The South Carolina Conservation Bank was established to improve the quality of life in South Carolina through the conservation of significant natural resource lands, wetlands, historical properties, and archaeological sites. To date, the Bank has been responsible for protecting more than 150,000 acres in South Carolina of forest and farm land, wetlands, historical properties, and urban parks.

The Conservation Bank works by either buying lands outright or paying landowners for a portion of the value of the conservation easement. This has been especially attractive to landowners who would like to see their property protected but who would not benefit that much from an income tax deduction.

The Bank is funded through a very small percentage of the real estate documentary deed stamp. During the past five years it has spent about 15 million dollars annually to protect significant lands throughout South Carolina. The Conservation Bank has been an overwhelming success but recent state budget cutbacks

have nearly eliminated the Bank's funding. We hope the Bank will soon get back on secure financial footing.

The Conservation Bank awards funding through a competitive application process. Applications have to be submitted by the qualified 501 c(3) organization or governmental agency that will hold the easement, not the landowner. Due to state budget cutbacks, funding for the Conservation Bank has been curtailed. However, we have learned that the Bank continues to accept and evaluate applications in the order in which they were received, with the idea that funding will eventually be restored. For further information on the Conservation Bank, contact DavantM@dnr.sc.gov

MAJIC

MAJIC is an acronym for the Military Area Joint Installation Committee, a consortium of governmental and non-profit agencies and organizations seeking to protect the missions of five Midlands military installations: Fort Jackson, Shaw Air Force Base, Poinsett Weapon Range, McEntire Air National Guard Base, and the McCrady Army National Guard Training Site. The

idea of MAJIC is to prevent development and urban sprawl from surrounding the installations and jeopardizing the training, and even the future, of the bases.

The method of protecting the installations is by working with adjoining landowners on a voluntary basis with conservation easements to prevent development encroachment. In certain cases MAJIC has actually paid

landowners for the partial value of the conservation easement. Like all conservation easements, a qualified non-profit conservation organization or governmental agency has to hold the easement. To date, MAJIC has helped fund three conservation easements within the COWASEE Basin totaling more than 1,500 acres.



A pastoral setting within the COWASEE Basin Focus Area.



Prothonotary warbler feeding its young.

Joe Kegley

Acknowledgments

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COWASEE Basin Task Force
See list on page 6.

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