



A Watershed Moment

Can our community spirit determine the health of our waters? **Cléa Hernandez** gets a lesson from the Ogeechee Riverkeeper. Photography by **Beau Kester**



“DO YOU NEED A PUSH?” Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman asks, as my turquoise jelly sandals squeak to gain purchase over wet pebbles.

I tow a borrowed kayak into the water and toddle in. It’s my first time kayaking, so Jesse, the watershed outreach coordinator and paddle tour guide for the Ogeechee Riverkeeper, follows protectively a few paces behind me. Seeing me safely cast off the bank, he swings into his own kayak and slides through the jade-colored water beside me.

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We’re leaving Butterbean Beach on this late spring evening, en route to Pigeon Island. I’m amazed how comfortable I feel in the kayak after just a few tips from Jesse, who demonstrates correct paddle placement, points out the steadying footholds inside the kayak, and reassures me that alligators are generally reclusive.

Back on land only a few minutes ago, I was stressing about the sprawling distance to our landmark, feeling a pre-emptive ache in my scrawny arms.

Now, I’m enjoying the moment. Birds are tweeting and trilling to each other, their voices amplified by the water’s surface. Fish are plinking away as my arms move more steadily than I imagined. Beneath an expansive panorama that soaks past the edges of sight into my other senses, the river opens up to me in soft ripples—and I get it. I feel the stillness. It’s like we’ve traveled outside of time. I can’t imagine this river any different than it is right now, forever unfurling its Stygian tendrils.

Going With the Flow

Now that I’m at ease, we start to talk Ogeechee.

“Not everyone who lives here realizes that the majority of Savannah is watershed,” he explains. “The Ogeechee itself has been

called schizophrenic. You’ll go through a slow-moving section of the river the size of a football field, then the current will suddenly go into hyperdrive, and the banks will close in until the river is so narrow that only one canoe can pass through at a time. There are trees you’ll have to dodge and it’s a nightmare, but then you’ll cross back into these bottomland swamps that look exactly as they did before Europeans came. To me, that’s very special, and there aren’t many rivers in Georgia that have that feel so consistently. You can very often pass through areas on the Ogeechee that are untouched by humans—until you see a Kroger bag or a Bud Light can floating by ... and the odd ‘No Trespassing’ sign along the banks, riddled with bullet holes.”

With a biologist’s expertise and a tour guide’s flair, Jesse explains the sights as they

unfold. He also gives me a preview of what we might see on one of the other paddle tours the Riverkeeper hosts along the Ogeechee’s 294-mile length.

A natural storyteller, Jesse casts the key wildlife players into complex societies. He points out herons, egrets and cormorants, then enlightens me to the fact that the adorable river otter is a bloodthirsty bird hunter. He dishes about the ubiquitous redbreast sunfish, the cheeky roseate spoonbills and the prehistoric build of the Atlantic sturgeon. As we approach Pigeon Island, an osprey stretches five feet of wings out of its palatial eyrie and glides overhead to meet its mate.

The Secret River

The Ogeechee Riverkeeper is a 501(c)3 organization that has been working to protect

the Ogeechee, Canoochee and coastal rivers in southeast Georgia since 2005. It is part of a larger framework of advocacy organizations that includes the Waterkeeper Alliance and the River Network. Today, the Ogeechee Riverkeeper staff consists of Jesse and executive director Emily Markesteyn. With the help of more than 10,000 volunteers and research cooperation from universities such as Georgia Southern and the University of Georgia, the Riverkeeper monitors the

RIVERS AND TRAILS. (from left to right)

A grand osprey nest hides two new chicks. Ogeechee watershed outreach coordinator Jesse Demonbreun-Chapman and writer Cléa Hernandez approach Pigeon Island. A laughing gull hunts for dinner. Ogeechee Riverkeeper executive director Emily Markesteyn stands watch.

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waterway and its tributaries for pollution, educates adults and children about clean water, and promotes sustainable living solutions.

Though it can seem like nothing changes on the river, a lot has changed in a relatively short period. Increasing intrusions from agribusiness, animal processing operations, population growth, water withdrawals, industrial discharges and municipal wastewater discharges are causing a drastic decline in water quality.

“All of our rivers are special and sensitive for different reasons,” Emily tells me when we meet after the tour. “We like to call the Ogeechee the hidden gem because, up until recently, it was relatively unheard-of. The banks of our river still consist of much privately owned land, so the masses haven’t really discovered and explored it. That’s one of the reasons why we exist: to make sure that it’s protected for those future generations, but also to keep the public aware of its importance and appreciating what we’ve got.”

Armed with a background in environmental studies, Emily started at the Riverkeeper a month before the infamous fish kill in 2011,

“Something that has struck me time and again during the four years I’ve worked at the Riverkeeper is how much private property rights and clean water go hand in hand.”

which was one of the largest in Georgia history. More than 38,000 fish were discovered below local manufacturer King America Finishing’s discharge pipe in Screven County. State regulators from the Environmental Protection Division traced the fish kill to a bacterial infection caused by the company’s five years of illegal waste discharge.

The Ogeechee Riverkeeper sued King America under the federal Clean Water Act, resulting in a settlement that tightened the pollution permit, required greater public access to discharge data and ordered a \$2.5 million payment from the company to the Riverkeeper to fund its continuing efforts to

protect the river. Emily credits public awareness with saving the day.

“There’s a shift happening now,” Jesse adds. “A generation ago, many locals were concerned that Atlanta paddlers, for example, would discover the Ogeechee and tourists would take over. Now those same locals are realizing that we need outsiders to become aware of the river to help us protect it.”

For its tenth anniversary this year, the Ogeechee Riverkeeper is hosting paddle tours through September to raise public awareness and garner a deeper appreciation for this resource. To help celebrate this milestone, the Georgia River Network chose the Ogeechee for the first time as the site of its annual Paddle Georgia event—the country’s largest canoe and kayaking trek held every June. In addition, the Riverkeeper organizes an annual benefit concert called “Rivers Rock” at Moon River Brewing Co., which local low country string band The Accomplices played this May. Zach Smith, the band’s bassist/vocalist and kayak enthusiast, describes himself and his bandmate, Matt Eckstine, as avid water people.

“I would suggest to any traveler that he or she explore an area’s waterways to get a richer understanding of the place’s history, and how it developed around that source,” he says. “The Ogeechee is ours, and it’s pretty wild. We’re always eager to support the Riverkeeper’s work in any way we can.”

Protect and Defend

Emily describes her working partnership with Jesse as “yin and yang,” an ideal balance. He’s a teacher and environmental nurturer who’s “one with the river,” while her own protective instincts drive her deep into

paperwork and litigation—and sometimes to the state and U.S. Senate.

“Clean water is a necessity for everyone: fishable, drinkable, swimmable water,” Emily says. “We believe we can achieve this by being proactive in our development, our planning and our education. And by making sure Jesse’s in the classrooms, educating young people about where their water comes from, where it goes and how to keep it clean. Our goal is to ingrain the importance of protecting our waters now, so that it becomes a mindset. Industry, agriculture and individuals all have the right to use the water, but it has to be used responsibly, with others in mind.”

Common Ground

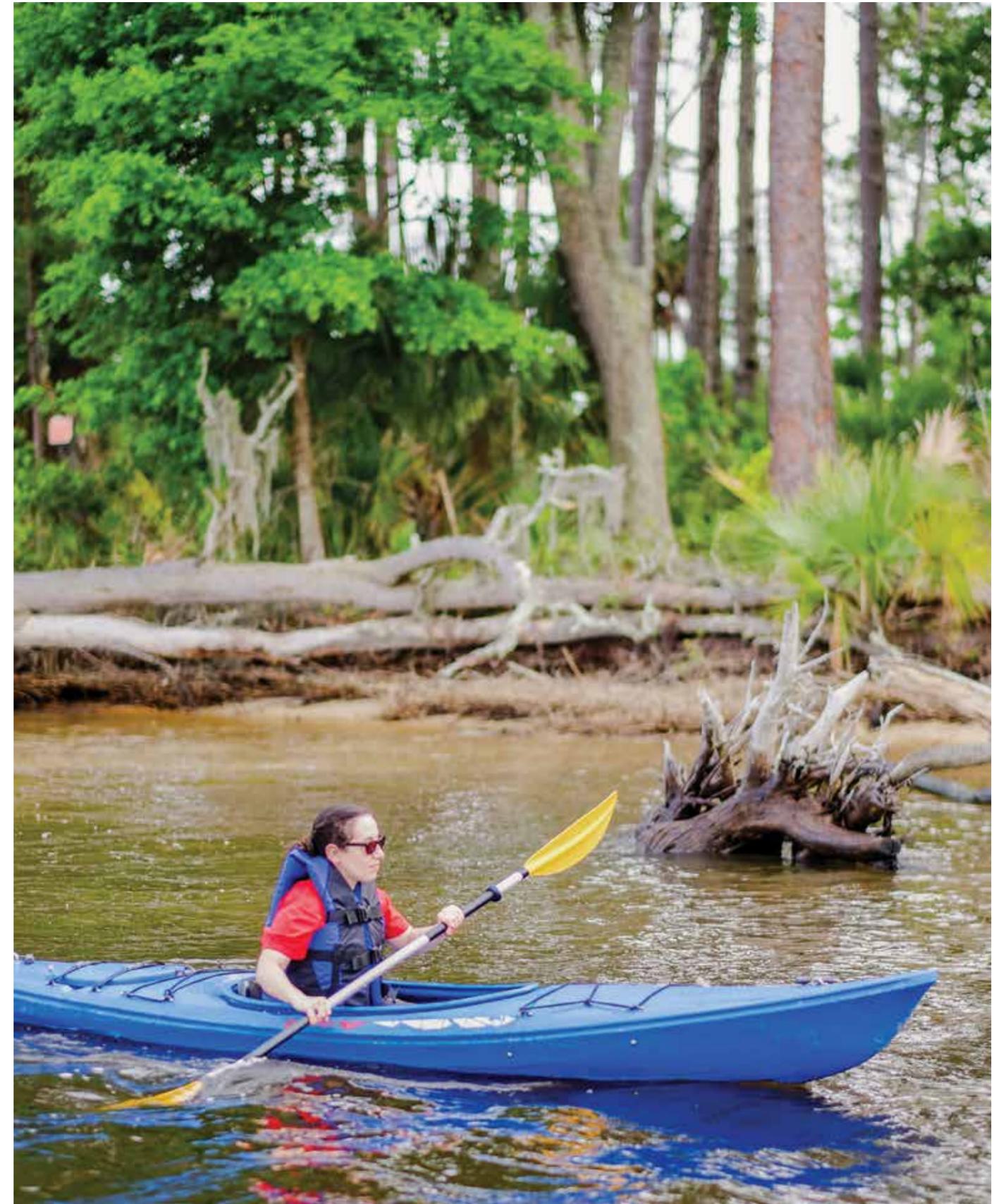
Before that mindset can take hold, unfortunately, there are certain battles ahead. Texas-based Kinder Morgan’s \$1 billion proposed Palmetto Pipeline is one that comes to mind.

Many Georgians, including the Riverkeeper, applauded the state Department of Transportation’s decision in May to disallow the private oil and gas company from using eminent domain to take the private property it would need to build the proposed pipeline route. However, Emily doesn’t believe that fight is over.

“We’re anticipating that Kinder Morgan will appeal the DOT decision,” she says, noting the June 17 deadline for filing, which will have passed by the time this magazine hits newsstands. She’s “fairly confident,” though, that the court will uphold the DOT commissioner’s ruling, citing both the level of due diligence followed in soliciting public comment as well as the fact that Kinder Morgan did not make the case for the public good. In the meantime, she and other environmental groups are working with their counterparts in South Carolina and Florida, states which do not have a public process to stop private companies from exercising eminent domain authority.

“South Carolina and Florida need to speak up just as Georgians have,” rallies Emily.

Emily and Jesse agree it’s clear that Kinder Morgan was not expecting the opposition they encountered from private citizens: bipartisan opposition, with conservatives



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and libertarians concerned about private property rights and liberals fearful of the environmental implications.

“Something that has struck me time and again during the four years I’ve worked at the Riverkeeper is how much private property rights and clean water go hand in hand. On the East Coast we still have that riparian right system which dictates that if you have water under or near your property you have the right to reasonable use of it, but when someone else starts polluting it or taking too much of it, then it becomes a property rights issue.”

The environmental implications are a separate issue that the Riverkeeper will tackle if Kinder Morgan gets to the permitting stage. “Groundwater does not care about political or county or state boundaries,” she says.

Mickey Youmans is a local filmmaker and environmental activist who has been working with the Riverkeeper to oppose the proposed pipeline. He was raised on the Ogeechee. He grew up an artist in a family of sign painters, later delving into photography and film.

“I spent my life on the water, in a shrimping, crabbing, fishing community,” he says.

“We relied on the Ogeechee because it was clean and stayed clean.

“If this pipeline gets built, we’ll lose something irreplaceable, not to mention our rights as citizens. So I have a lot of respect for the Riverkeeper; these are incredibly intelligent people who could be making money hand over fist in corporate jobs, but they choose to fight the good fight instead. Our society is suffering from a nature deficit disorder, and they have a higher calling to bring people back in touch with what’s real.”

The people who love and need the Ogeechee are almost as diverse as its non-human residents. Each one comes to the discussion table with her own story of the river: as a food source, a baptismal font, a laboratory, a gymnasium or a monument. The Riverkeeper’s essential role is not only advocating on behalf of the ecosystem, but also informing and amplifying all the voices along the river. As the Riverkeeper matures into its second decade, it will work to find new ways to ensure that the river itself continues to meander through the years ahead, much like it always has. ■



Take Me to the River

Want to learn more and experience the Ogeechee River for yourself? Here are a few ways to dip your toes in.

MEET AND GREET. Go to the Ogeechee Riverkeeper’s annual meeting, August 29 at Love’s Seafood, or shuck some oysters at the Riverkeeper’s annual roast in early November.

TAKE A TOUR. Guided paddle trips, now through September, are free for Riverkeeper members and \$35 for non-members (includes one-year membership). Rent a canoe for \$30; a kayak for \$20.

GO EXPLORE. Visit the Oliver Bridge up U.S. Highway 24 in Oliver, Georgia. Hike the trails and visit the museum at the Savannah-Ogeechee Canal on U.S. Highway 204. Or take a camping trip to Fort McAllister State Park in Richmond Hill.

ogeecheeriverkeeper.org



From left to right: Alex Canfield, Alice Pollak, Marion Leith, Ayanna Washington, Karen Thomas, Paul Armitage, Sarah McCoy, Jane Beare, Sherwin Prescott, Lyn McCuen, Susan Dailey

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