

A Human Spark: George Owen, Pathfinder Extraordinaire

People who care for the planet's well-being surely are imbued with the human spark. Their concern for preserving, exploring, and protecting nature's bounties certainly help to make this nation a more perfect union.

Such a person is George Owen, an area resident who has laid out and supervised construction of more than 125 miles of trail in the Chattahoochee National Forest. These include all 81 miles of the Benton MacKaye Trail in Georgia, the Duncan Ridge Trail, and important additions to the Appalachian Trail. His efforts, over a half century, are the most long-lasting and significant of any single individual's voluntary trail development in the Chattahoochee forest. His trail efforts went above and beyond his several occupations.

George's love of and veneration for nature began in childhood, with his enjoyment of fishing and hunting with pals in Lakeland, Florida. After graduating from Stetson University, then completing two master's degrees from other universities, he served in hospital administration as

well as other fields. With his growing family – wife Sandy, two sons, and grandchildren – George often made excursions into the southern Appalachian's wilderness and public forest areas for the peace and beauty they offered.

Today's hikers, campers, and other outdoor enthusiasts may not be aware of how the terrain they enjoy now was enhanced and protected over decades earlier by the efforts of George and others. Extension of governmental public ownership has given greater protection of wild lands, but never enough for his wishes. Much recent expansion of mountain population growth, along with often intense commercial development, is an ever-growing threat for the flora and fauna on public lands, according to George.

In past years George served in many environmental groups such as Georgia ForestWatch and the Wilderness Society by locating and promoting higher levels of protection for certain areas in the national forests, including the designation of more National Wilderness Areas, National

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Recreation Areas, and National Scenic Areas. His two long-term concerns for over forty years have been climate change and overpopulation.

Today, hiking clubs, such as those in which George has been a member and a leader, teach useful and proactive behaviors. And an active Forest Service provides maintenance, clean-up, wildfire control measures, and hiker and camper protection.

George was co-founder and a past president of the Benton MacKaye Trail Association, incorporated in 1980. The association's vision was to construct the now completed Benton MacKaye Trail stretching over 280 miles through the mountains of Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina to the northeastern end of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. All but a few miles of this trail are on public lands of the U.S. Forest Service and National Park Service.

For 10 summers in his retirement, George served as a part-time guide in the Swiss Alps. On other occasions he has guided groups for one week or another in other parts of the USA, especially in national parks in the western Rockies and Sierra Nevadas. For years before the Covid epidemic he was an annual guide in the Wilderness Wildlife Week in the Smokies.

As well as serving in the 1970s as maintenance director of the Appalachian Trail in Georgia for the Georgia Appalachian Trail Club, George has served as president of three trail clubs over the years: Benton MacKaye Trail Association, Mountain High Hikers, and the Southeastern Foot Trail Association, comprising more than 30 regional trail clubs.

He continues to teach courses at Young Harris College's Institute for Continuing Education. His courses range from hiking to the American Revolution, early Greek philosophy, and modern "happiness studies." All exhibit his wide-ranging education and interests.

We acknowledge and thank George on the stewardship he has undertaken on behalf of our natural treasures.

Footnote: if you know someone with "A Human Spark," please let us know for future editions of the Towns County Herald or North Georgia News by contacting willow-2mtn@gmail.com.