

[Home](#)[Arts + Events](#)[Outdoors](#)[Opinion](#)[On Campus](#)[WNC Calendar](#)[Mountain Voices](#)[Reading Room](#)[Public Affairs](#)[Area Attractions](#)[Classifieds](#)[Web Directory](#)[Regional Map](#)[Search Archives](#)[Subscribe](#)[About SMN](#)[Contact SMN](#)[Feedback](#)[Download Ad Rates](#)

Breathing new life into the Nantahala Gorge

By Julia Merchant • Staff Writer

Declining visitor levels and a competitive market are forcing stakeholders in the Nantahala Gorge to think creatively about how to bring back business.

A group of 42 rafting outfitters, lodging owners, tourism officials, outdoor recreation leaders and others attended an all-day workshop May 28 to spark dialogue on the future of the outdoor mecca.

The number of people going down the Nantahala River has been declining since 1998, when river numbers peaked at 219,642. By 2008, that number had declined to 182,715.

The meeting was the first in a comprehensive project to revitalize the U.S. 19 corridor that runs through the western part of the state. Regional tourism entity Smoky Mountain Host is coordinating and funding the effort.

Western Carolina University is also taking part in the project by developing an economic impact study of how the river benefits Swain County.

Though at times the relationship between stakeholders — particularly rafting outfitters — in the Gorge has been marked by competition, participants seemed aware of the need to work together to bring visitors back.

"I think it says a lot that we got this group of people in the same room together. That hasn't happened since I've been here," remarked Nantahala Outdoor Center President Sutton Bacon.

David Huskins, managing director of Smoky Mountain Host, also said cooperation on this issue was important.

"We're all in the same boat, so we may as well figure out how we're going to roll in the same direction," he said.

Getting the word out

Since the first rafting company opened its doors in 1972, the Nantahala Gorge experience has changed little. New rafting companies and new resorts have opened, but the basic experience has become a somewhat "stale product," Huskins said. While other rivers — like the Pigeon in Tennessee — have seen a rise in visitors, numbers on the Nantahala have declined.

The Gorge touts itself as a rustic, family-friendly destination. Visitors don't come as much for the challenging rapids (the hardest is a Class III) as they do for the "fun for all ages" atmosphere. And although the river is situated near hiking, biking and swimming spots, some worry these features aren't promoted enough and that families have little reason to stay more than a day in the area.

"The mentality of so many is been there, done that," said Paul Wolf, head of the outdoor leadership program at Southwestern Community College. "To me the problem is, what else can we provide? How do you keep them here?"

Echoing Wolf, breakout groups at the session theorized the reason people aren't coming is the "been there, done that," mentality, as well as "haven't heard the message," and "don't know about."

Getting the word out is an important first step in boosting the number of visitors. One suggestion offered by charette directors Rick McLaughlin and Risa Shimoda of McLaughlin Whitewater Design Group was that businesses in the Gorge adopt a logo that would promote the whole area, similar to the instantly recognizable "Wild and Wonderful West Virginia" icon.

To do so would take cooperation between outfitters, however — and some suggested that too much competition is what has prevented the adoption of a logo.

NOC vice president of operations Lee Leibfarth seemed supportive of the concept.

"(Branding) would be good for all of us," he said.

Wildwater Ltd. media liaison Carolyn Allison liked a similar idea — a Web site that would collectively promote Gorge businesses.

"We're all in this together. Even if we don't do specific improvements, I still believe a cooperative web page would benefit all of us," she said.

Getting the word out about the Gorge could also be done through establishing a festival, said Shimoda and McLaughlin. A festival would draw people in the off-season and provide a unique asset and a reason for visitors to return again and again.

The Teva Mountain Sports Festival in Vail, Colo., attracts visitors in June, a traditionally slow season, and the Reno River Festival in Reno, Nev., brings visitors to what was once an ailing downtown area. Both have been hailed as successful examples of how festivals can help.

Partnering with nearby tourist attractions could also boost business. Some talk centered around whether visitors could be drawn from the nearby Cherokee Indian Reservation. Rafting may not draw casino-goers, but families visiting the Museum of the Cherokee Indian or the acclaimed play "Unto the Hills" might be interested.

Whitewater park

Before the charette took place, some expressed concern that a proposed whitewater park that would primarily benefit NOC — the largest outfitter in the Gorge — would take center stage as a topic of discussion.

NOC submitted a whitewater park plan to the U.S. Forest Service in 2001. The project stalled, however, and the idea has recently returned in force. Shimoda and McLaughlin unveiled the first renderings of what the currently proposed whitewater park could look like.

McLaughlin acknowledged that "the river park seems to be an NOC project with less value for other outfitters."

Because a whitewater park would be primarily used by kayakers, rafting companies have questioned why the project deserves their support.

"It's really a spectator and a hard boater that would benefit," said Steven Matz, owner of Adventurous Rivers.

But the creation of a park, according to Rick McLaughlin's presentation, would be more about enhancing what is already present on the Nantahala River.

Currently, the last runnable rapid on the river is the Class III Nantahala Falls. Boaters exit shortly after that at the NOC or commercial takeouts. Past the takeouts, though, the river keeps running down through a Class V rapid known as Wesser Falls. It then pours into Fontana Lake.

At present, the Wesser section is rarely used. Rafts don't go down it and only some kayakers choose to access the rapid, which is lined by jagged rocks. There are no trails or takeouts on either side of Wesser.

Capitalizing on that last rapid by enhancing the area around it into a whitewater park could draw visitors, said McLaughlin. It would convert Wesser from a liability to an asset.

The park itself would feature a variety of hydraulic features, such as better quality play waves, which would encourage advanced whitewater instruction and skill-building.

A world-class freestyle wave would up the ability to host competitions in the Gorge and increase notoriety of the site.

"A good wave will draw people from one thousand miles away," McLaughlin said.

Construction of a whitewater park would necessitate other improvements to the area. Plans call for trails on either side of the park, a viewing terrace, larger eddies in the current takeout zones and a children's wading pool area.

