

# River cane could stand tall again

## Restoration focuses on habitat, basket craft revival

By Sammy Fretwell

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Standing near the site of an ancient Cherokee village, 11-year-old Jasmine Williams marveled at the patch of river cane just a few yards from the Chattooga River.

The cane rose nearly 10 feet above her head and was so thick she could not easily walk through it. On a recent hike with her dad to the remnant forest of cane, Jasmine knew she was experiencing something rare — and that's why she's glad folks around here are working to restore canebrakes.

“This is neat,” she said. “It provides habitat for wildlife and really looks cool.”

Forests of river cane, bamboo-like grass that once flourished in this part of Appalachia, have become so scarce that Native Americans can't find enough to make traditional baskets and crafts. The loss of river cane forests, due in part to farming and development, has allowed sediment and contaminated runoff to wash into rivers across the Southeast. And the lack of expansive canebrakes has made it harder for wildlife to survive.

But federal land managers, conservationists and the Cherokees are working to re-establish native cane along the Chattooga River in northwest South Carolina. If their plan works, river cane will one day cover part of a small valley and surrounding land near the Georgia border.

Cherokees, who live mostly in western North Carolina, will have a nearby supply of cane, wildlife will flourish, and the Chattooga River will be better protected from soil erosion, project supporters say. At 29 acres, the restoration project could create one of the largest patches of river cane in the region, say experts and restoration supporters.

“This will be a model project throughout the Southeast,” said David Cozzo, who runs a Cherokee organization involved in the river cane restoration in Oconee County. “It's going to be a large restoration, and it is very ambitious.”

River cane is North America's native bamboo. It isn't as tall or as big around as Asian bamboo, but river cane forests can reach 12-14 feet in height, said Adam Griffith, a researcher at Western Carolina University. The lightweight poles used historically for fishing came from North American cane forests, he said.

Once found widely in flood plains from Maryland to Texas and the Midwest, canebrakes have dwindled as a result of farming, development and forestry practices. Individual stalks of river

cane aren't hard to find, but large stands of cane are virtually non-existent, Griffith said. A 1995 study by the U.S. Department of the Interior estimated 98 percent of the river cane forests have disappeared.

In Colonial times, "you couldn't see more than 20 feet in front of you because it was so thick," Griffith said. "In this day and age, there are only a couple of stands like that."

As forests of river cane have disappeared in the past 300 years, the loss has taken a toll on wildlife.

Nearly 50 different types of animals once inhabited canebrakes, including the Bachman's warbler, now believed to be extinct, according to a 2002 article by University of the South researcher Steve Platt and others. Dwindling river cane likely contributed to the demise of that bird, as well as the Carolina Parakeet, which bred when river cane flowered, according to the Chattooga Conservancy environmental group. Predators attracted to canebrakes by other animals also lost valuable hunting grounds, researchers say.

Native Americans who make baskets, blow guns, torches, mats and other crafts have had to scratch harder than ever to find the sturdy reeds, many of which were mowed down by farming.

"Farmers saw this as an invasive plant," Native American Bo Taylor said. "We need farms, but we also need cane. I think this is an awesome idea."

Taylor, who is the archivist for the Museum of the Cherokee Indian in western North Carolina, said his mother and family made baskets from river cane in the 1940s and 50s. Cherokees traditionally used the baskets in their every day lives to hold food, carry water and for other purposes.

Today, cane baskets are sold to tourists. To make the baskets, Native American artisans scrape river cane into strips, then weave the material together.

The scarcity of river cane might seem all too familiar to other people who make crafts from native, wild plant material. That includes the sea islanders of South Carolina and Georgia, where sweetgrass used traditionally to make baskets has at times in the past been in short supply. Hawaiian islanders also have had similar concerns about supplies.

The U.S. Forest Service still must sign off on the proposal by conservationists to restore river cane along the Chattooga River, since the project is planned for the Sumter National Forest in South Carolina's foothills. In the next month, the service plans to formally notify the public about the river cane restoration plan, District Ranger Mike Crane said.

Changes might be made, but service officials thought river cane was important enough to include restoration as a goal in their most recent management plan for the Sumter forest. Small mammals, deer and birds are expected to flourish in restored canebrakes. So are butterflies, some of which eat parts of the cane plant, experts say.

Archaeologists have raised a few questions about whether the project would affect digging for ancient Indian artifacts. But most interest groups like the project – an oddity in a part of the state where skirmishes over the use of U.S. Forest Service land are common, according to the Chattooga Conservancy.

Cozzo's group, Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources, provided a \$14,000 grant for the Chattooga Conservancy to launch the cane restoration project in Oconee County.

Driven by the passion of Conservancy director Buzz Williams — Jasmine's father and recent hiking buddy — boosters hope the work can begin soon. The idea is to let small stands of cane spread from a mixed forest into a valley that once was home to a Native American village known as Cherokee Old Town, or Chattooga Town. The village, home to about 90 Cherokees, had all but disappeared by 1740.

Already, stalks of river cane can be seen extending from the forested area into the open valley. In some spots, cane will be planted strategically, while in other spots, the land will be kept clear so the woody grass can spread. The entire project would cover part of the Russell Fields Valley off S.C. 28 and surrounding areas along the Chattooga River in South Carolina.

"I think he's going to get it done," Jasmine Williams said of her father's efforts.