

Another view on release of water from Lake Oglethorpe

Editor,

Two articles in The Oglethorpe Echo in the last few weeks have addressed the issue of the drought, and referred either hypothetically or directly to Lake Oglethorpe in the Wolfskin Community of Oglethorpe County. The latter article, August 30, 2007 by Jessica Colquitt, cites a list of reasons given by a number of experts as to why a release of water would not benefit the watershed downstream of Lake Oglethorpe.

Two of us have been in the company of scientists our entire professional lives and this is the first time we've encountered such a monolith of agreement – generally scientists quibble and qualify. Yet every reason for not releasing water was the same, and there were no qualifications or alternative considerations reported. Miracles do happen, we guess, but it was puzzling that not a single scientist was quoted as entertaining a proposal for a unique controlled experiment.

Yes, we are in the second (or ninth, really) year of extended drought. Yes, we must expect that creeks, streams, and lakes will be down and even dry. But Lake Oglethorpe, in contrast to any other body of water around here, seems as high as ever and has been all summer. There's a reason for this, of course, and we'd like to present for your consideration a few points that the experts seem to have neglected to mention.

1. Lake Oglethorpe interrupts the flow of Goulding Creek through the downstream watershed. That flow would normally nourish the watershed during rough times such as these. The Lake Oglethorpe Association has not released water since the beginning of summer. So the Goulding Creek watershed is in worse shape, at least, particularly beyond the one-mile point downstream where two of us live, than it might have been with judicious releases, even keeping the drought in mind.

2. The experts fail to mention that stream beds are quite different from a plowed field. They are not, as one put it, simply a bed of sand. Stream beds have rock and hard clay bottoms that slow down the percolation of water, helping to retain it, otherwise they would not be streams! Water is not sucked into the bed of a stream as soon as it hits, to disappear forever. So it's every bit as reasonable an hypothesis that good water management and proper release would benefit the watershed.

3. Downstream residents did propose an experiment: release of water over a period of about two weeks during which observations of the effect downstream would be made. This release would have lowered Lake Oglethorpe no more than one foot during that period. The parameters for our experiment were a flow of water about two inches deep and ten feet wide, moving one mile per hour. The intent was to attempt to increase, or at least maintain, the size of isolated pools downstream, and to minimize stagnation.

4. In the Echo column on August 23, a bewilderingly ambitious scenario was presented for a flow rate in Goulding

Creek six times higher than our target. A time of two and half weeks was estimated to drain the lake. Of course the writer was led to conclude that such a release would be a detriment to the Lake, and struck fear into the hearts of its residents. Our proposal fell on deafened ears.

5. One of us has been doing photography and making measurements in the last few weeks, at the 1-mile point downstream. Last week we had a modest amount of rain, a total of 1.2 inches over six days. Pathetic, yes, but pools expanded measurably, and some flow along 1-3 inch streams increased. Goulding Creek is obviously sensitive to small inputs and can be effectively nourished by reasonable water release.

6. What explains a full Lake Oglethorpe when it has no significant input from Upper Goulding Creek? Given the large amounts of water lost by evaporation from the lake itself (much larger than would be lost by the creek if a lake did not exist), we don't have to beg for an explanation. There are additional balancing inputs to the lake through springs or groundwater that a full lake makes clear must exist. Simply monitoring that single upstream Goulding Creek input, which LOA wasn't doing anyway, just isn't enough.

7. While the expectations for older, smaller dams are unclear as yet, contemporary dams are expected to release water to the watershed downstream. That consideration reflects two things: first, that the impounded water does not belong solely to the lake and its residents, but to the entire watershed. Second, it reflects the policies of the Department of Natural Resources, the Natural Resources Conservation Service, State Hydrology, and Army Corp of Engineers, at least. All these agencies consider downstream watersheds to be critically important ecosystems. None of us is particularly jolly about governmental regulation, but think this situation shows what can happen when complete control of water rights lies solely with the interests of lake owners.

One of the August 30 experts said of Lake Oglethorpe, "This is the healthiest lake in the region, and should be protected for its unique ecosystem." Lake Oglethorpe is indeed a very nice lake, but leaving aside its highly perturbed ecosystem, there's a perfectly good reason for its health. Unless we misunderstand, its lake managers are completely withholding water from downstream watersheds, waving goodbye only when the lake overflows.

Wayne Hughes
Glenn Galau
Pat Nolan

Wolfskin District
Oglethorpe County