

History of WATeR and its Major Programs

Bill Waldrop – WATeR Founding Member and Chair of WATeR Quality Improvement Committee

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The founding committee who established WATeR's By-laws, established the Mission Statement to preserve and protect the environment of the Tellico Lake Watershed. The structure of the association is for program committees to be created under the umbrella of a Board of Directors. The Board therefore established three committees for program areas – collecting trash initially along the shoreline, building a trail along the eastern shoreline of Tellico Lake and addressing aquatic environmental issues throughout the Tellico Watershed.

Watershed Trash Collection – Much trash had obviously been deposited well before the lake was filled in 1979. Other litter had come from campers and boaters. Clear public support of this program confirmed the need to continue it as an annual event. Under the leadership of Bruce Rein, a committee structure was formed and links to various organizations created. After several years, leadership was transferred to Bill Webster where it resides today. Various governmental agencies and private organizations have provided support and grants for equipment and disposal of the trash. Annual support of hundreds of volunteers and the more than 140 tons of trash removed from throughout the watershed clearly demonstrate compliance with the Mission Statement.

Hiking Trails – Building a hiking trail near the lake was among the projects initially considered by the WATeR Board during the first year. TVA had designated the property along the downstream half of the eastern shoreline to be undeveloped and classified as “natural resource conservation” in 1972 and confirmed in their Land Management Plan of 2000. This strip of shoreline presented an excellent location for a hiking trail since most residents were driving many miles to the National Park to hike. Several sites for this trail were considered, but the Board deferred this project initially until the association became more established to undertake such a large project.

When the TVA Board ignored both land use plans and initiated sale of land to developers that was designated for natural resource conservation and was entertaining other such sales, the WATeR Board objected. To combat the claim that this shoreline property was inaccessible to the public and only of value if developed, WATeR initiated

plans to construct a hiking trail to allow public access. On March 7, 2003, TVA and WATeR complete a legal Cooperative Agreement granting WATeR the right to begin construction of the East Lakeshore Trail. In anticipation of this agreement, WATeR had begun preparation by purchasing tools for construction and sending volunteers for training in building methods and safety with those building the Cumberland Trail State Park.

Immediately after the TVA agreement, volunteers began mapping a route, training other volunteers, and constructing the trail. Jerry Barr was named chairman of the Trails Committee and began organizing volunteers. After several years and miles of construction, chairmanship was transferred to Bob Martin. Under the leaderships of these two, the East Lakeshore Trail has become a popular local hiking trail extending about 30 miles along the shoreline and designated a National Recreation Trail.

Water Quality – The third major organ area established by the WATeR Board dealt with the lake and creeks of the watershed. The intent was to include all aquatic issues under the umbrella of a single committee because they are all so closely interrelated. The intent was to encompass not only water quality, but also issues related to fisheries, reservoir operations, permitting and enforcement of discharge permits, environmental policy, and any other such related aquatic issues that might develop in the future. The committee selected the title Water Quality Improvement Committee (WQIC).

The Board wanted to hear from the various agencies with environmental responsibilities of Tellico Lake. Representatives of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC), and the Tennessee Wildlife Resource Agency (TWRA) were invited to speak and answer questions at a public meeting in June 2001 entitled the State of the Lake. About 150 enthusiastic people attended. The speakers were asked to address three issues concerning the Tellico Lake Watershed – what are your agencies responsibilities, what are the environmental concerns and how can WATeR best contribute to protecting and improving the environment.

This meeting not only provided a clear understanding of how and where WATeR might contribute, but also cemented a working relationship with the government agencies charged with environmental responsibilities. Shortly thereafter, the WQIC was established with John Rogers as chair. With guidance and financial support of TVA, the committee began to develop plans to improve the water quality of Fork Creek, and then Baker Creek, both of which were classified as impaired streams by TDEC. These efforts have contributed to local government agencies receiving cost-share grants from

government agencies to date totaling \$1.43 million to assist farmers to modernize farming methods which will improve water quality of Fork, Bake, and Bat Creeks.

As originally envisioned, in addition to supporting better farming methods, the WQIC has dealt with a diversity of aquatic related environmental concerns. The list includes preventing bank erosion, changes in TVA annual reservoir operations, restrictions for floating cabins, litigation to force compliance of a discharge permit, Asian Carp, Catfish Consumption Advisory, environmental education in schools, trends in lake quality, and most recently promoting methods for reducing pollution from urban stormwater runoff. In doing so, WATeR has developed respect and solid working relationships with Local, State, and Federal environmental agencies as well as residents throughout the watershed.