Citizen Guide to Alabama Rivers

Alabama, Coosa and Tallapoosa
Alabama’s rivers, streams and lakes are priceless in terms of the ecological, economic and social benefits they provide.

The purpose of this guide is to provide an introduction to the unique history and environmental significance of Alabama’s River Basins and invite further investigation into Alabama’s abundant but limited water resources.

It is hoped that these guides will enhance the dialogue between citizens and key decision makers and help us move toward strategies of how to best manage and protect Alabama’s waters.
The Water Environment

The World’s Water Supply
If all the Earth’s water fit into a one liter or 1000 mL container,

❖ 970 mL of the container would be saltwater
❖ 30 mL (nail polish container) would be freshwater which is in the atmosphere, polar ice caps and inaccessible groundwater.
❖ Only 2 drops of the freshwater would be in lakes and rivers.

Alabama’s Rich Water Resources
❖ Alabama contains more than 77,000 miles of streams, 3.6 million acres of wetlands and 560,000 acres of lakes, ponds and reservoirs.
❖ Alabama has longer stretches of navigable rivers (1,438 miles) than any other state.
❖ The Mobile River system is the fourth largest watershed in North America, exceeded only by the Mississippi, Yukon and Columbia river systems.
❖ About 8% of the freshwater in the continental U.S. originates in or flows through Alabama.

What is a Watershed?
A watershed is the total land area that drains to a common point, such as a river, a lake or the ocean. Watersheds come in many sizes.

Very large watersheds are also called drainage basins. For example the Coosa, Tallapoosa, Alabama, Cahaba, Black Warrior and Tombigbee River watersheds are all part of the greater Mobile Basin. We all live in a watershed, no matter how far we are from a river or lake.

The Hydrologic Cycle, or the Water Cycle, links land, air and water within a watershed. GRAPHIC: STEPHEN ADDUCI AND PENDUE PESTICIDE PROGRAMS

Nature’s Water Recycling Program
When rain falls to the earth, it sinks into the ground (infiltration), returns to the air (evaporation and transpiration) or flows over the land surface (runoff). Surface runoff carries dissolved and suspended substances, such as chemicals and sediment. Landuse activities in a watershed directly affect both water quality and quantity. Water supplies are not limitless. Water is never created, it only recycles.
The Coosa River (in blue) begins in Rome, Georgia, where the Oostanaula and Etowah rivers converge. Its mainstem is 290 miles long and 53% of its 10,200 square mile watershed lies in Alabama.

The Tallapoosa River (in green) begins in northwest Georgia and is 195 miles long. About 85% of its 4,680 square mile watershed is in Alabama.

The Alabama River (in red) is formed by the joining of the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers at Wetumpka. The mainstem is 310 miles long and all of its 6,020 square mile watershed is in Alabama.

The streams within the Coosa Basin flow through 37 counties (2 Tennessee, 20 Georgia and 15 Alabama).

The streams within the Tallapoosa Basin flow through 16 counties (4 Georgia and 12 Alabama).

The Alabama River has three U.S. Army Corps of Engineers dams:
- 20 Robert F. Henry Dam
- 21 Millers Ferry Dam
- 22 Claiborne Dam

The streams within the Alabama Basin flow through 18 counties before joining the Tombigbee River to form the Mobile River.
There are 18 dams in the Alabama, Coosa and Tallapoosa river basins (ACT Basin), which form 16 major reservoirs and create more than 170,000 surface acres of water... more than the Basins’ urban areas combined. Out of 1,338 mainstem river miles, only 56% remain unimpounded. These rivers changed dramatically with construction of dams that were begun in the late 1800’s for navigation, flood control, irrigation, and hydroelectric power generation. Dam construction brought electricity to thousands of Alabamians, but also turned hundreds of miles of rushing water into acres of elongated reservoirs.

Nine dams now form impoundments over nearly the entire length of the Coosa Basin:

1. Carters Dam, GA
2. Allatoona Dam, GA
3. Weiss Dam
4. H. Neely Henry Dam
5. Logan Martin Dam
6. Lay Dam
7. Mitchell Dam
8. Jordan Dam
9. Walter Bouldin Dam

3. Weiss Lake is known by fishermen as “The Crappie Capital of the World,” because of its outstanding fishery of this important game fish.

10. Little River, a tributary to the Coosa River, is Alabama’s first designated Outstanding National Resource Water. Most of the river is in the Little River Canyon National Preserve, which covers 14,000 acres. This area forms one of the deepest gorges east of the Mississippi.

11. The Talladega National Forest is the largest block of public lands within the ACT Basin and contains Dugger Mountain Wilderness, a newly designated preserve harboring many unique ecological features. Nearby, Mt. Cheaha is Alabama’s highest peak at 2,407 ft.

12. When Lake Martin was created in 1926, it was the world’s largest reservoir. Today it accounts for 31% of the water storage volume for the entire ACT Basin. Camp ASCCA is located on 230 acres of Lake Martin waterfront and is the world’s largest camping, recreational, and educational facility for people with disabilities.

13. Tuskegee National Forest is the smallest in the U.S., with 11,000 acres. Prior to the federal government’s acquisition, the area was one of the most abused, eroded wastelands in Alabama with 80% cut-over land.

14. William Bartram, on first seeing the confluence of the Coosa and Tallapoosa in 1775 exclaimed, “This is perhaps one of the most eligible situations for a city in the world.” Montgomery was later built just a few miles south and became a true river town, resting on a great bend of the Alabama River.

19. The Benjamin Fitzpatrick Bridge is one of the world’s longest curved bridges. It spans 1,738 ft and lies 143 ft above the Tallapoosa River near Thurlow Dam at Tallassee.

15. Prattville is known as “The Fountain City” because of its many overflowing artesian wells.

16. The River Heritage Museum in Franklin (Monroe County) transports visitors to 60 million years ago when this area was underwater. It showcases a large collection of world renowned fossils, like the large turritella shells, as well as Native American artifacts.

Falling water, unlike any of the other generous gifts of nature, has a quality peculiar to itself, in that, when it is not being used it is wasted.

W. P. Lay, Founder, Alabama Power Co.

River Problems of Alabama, May 1915
Native Culture
Native Americans inhabited the ACT Basin for thousands of years prior to European colonization. The Alabama, Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers each have names derived from Native American culture. The indigenous groups of the ACT Basin were collectively called the Upper Creeks. In colonial times, there were thirty major Upper Creek towns and scores of smaller villages.

Indian life dramatically changed after contact with white explorers and settlers. Historically, the Creek people established a trade alliance with the British colonies and the rivers served as the primary means of transporting goods. The exchange of processed deerskins for guns, cloth, ornaments and metal farming tools brought wealth and power to the Creeks, transforming their economy and social structure.

European Settlement
In the early 1700’s, French settlers to the ACT Basin considered the confluence of the Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers to be the “key to the country.” In 1775, the English explorer and naturalist, William Bartram, proclaimed the bluffs above the Coosa and Tallapoosa conjunction as an ideal city.

The Battle at Horseshoe Bend
Conflict between settlers and Native Americans came to a head in the Creek War of 1813-1814. General Andrew Jackson, accompanied by a group of Tennessee militia, other soldiers and Indians attacked Chief Menawa and Red Stick warriors in the “horseshoe” bend of the Tallapoosa River. General Jackson’s forces destroyed the Creeks, leaving an estimated 800 dead. As one American observer noted after the battle, “the Tallapoosa might truly be called the river of blood.” Subsequent to the defeat of the Creeks by the U.S. Army, the Indians relinquished nearly 20 million acres in what is now Alabama and Georgia. Horseshoe Bend National Military Park, created in 1959, preserves a 2,040 acre site of the Battle at Horseshoe Bend.
Cotton and River Commerce

As settlement began in earnest, the fertile valleys of these river basins set the stage for Alabama’s economic boom. Cotton was the lifeblood of early Alabama and the Alabama River was its major artery. Originally goods primarily traveled in one direction, downstream. But with the arrival of the steamboat in 1821, commerce flourished upstream and down. Virtually all of Alabama’s major towns were located along rivers where logs were floated and steamboats were loaded with both cotton and passengers. The early cotton mills were located near waterfalls and rapids which served as the power source for water wheels. Mills were especially concentrated along the Fall Line (prehistoric seashore) of the lower Coosa and Tallapoosa rivers.

At the height of the steamboat era, there were more than 200 landings along the Alabama River. The landings served as social centers and places to load cotton, fat pine fuel, and river travelers. The Tallapoosa River was too shallow and narrow for steamboats, so upriver trade was relegated to flatboats. Historians often refer to this period as the Golden Age of Alabama, and to the recreational steamboats as “Floating Palaces.” This era ended with the proliferation of railroads, a decade after the Civil War, and life along the rivers has never returned to its former splendor.

William and Cummins Lay

William Patrick Lay, the founder of Alabama Power Company, grew up on the Coosa and envisioned a river harnessed for the benefits of power production and barge transport. During the Civil War his father, Cummins Lay, was the only steamboat captain to successfully run a steamboat down, then back up the Devil’s Staircase rapids, saving his boat from the Union troops. The Devil’s Staircase, now flooded under the waters of Lake Jordan, was never photographed.

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Native Sons and Daughters

Famous folks from the Alabama, Coosa, and Tallapoosa Basins include:

❖ Nelle Harper Lee (Monroeville) - Pulitzer prize author, To Kill a Mockingbird
❖ Nat “King” Cole (Montgomery) - entertainer, 1985 Lifework Award for Performing Achievement
❖ Dr. Percy LaVon Julian (Montgomery) - world renowned chemist, synthesized cortisone
❖ Alabama (Ft. Payne) - nationally known country band, Mountain Music
❖ Hugo L. Black (Ashland) - Associate Supreme Court Justice
❖ Jim Nabors (Sylacauga) - singer, actor, “Gomer Pyle”
❖ Freddie Hart (Loachapoka) - songwriter, two Grammy Awards for Easy Loving
❖ Lionel Ritchie and the Commodores (Tuskegee) - Internationally known pop group, Brick House
❖ Rosa Louise Parks (Tuskegee) - Civil Rights activist, 1996 Medal of Freedom
Alabama ranks among the top ten states in the nation for freshwater mollusks, according to The Nature Conservancy of Alabama. There are over 250 species of freshwater mollusks (snails and mussels), including nearly 250 species of freshwater mollusks (snails and mussels), making it one of the most biologically diverse states in the nation.

Two of Alabama’s endangered plants, the Alabama Canebrake pitcher plant (in Autauga, Chilton and Elmore counties) and the Green pitcher plant (in Cherokee, DeKalb, Etowah, Jackson and Marshall counties) grow on the moist soil of boggy areas, streambanks and seeps. To survive and grow, pitcher plants need periodic fire to maintain an open, sunny habitat.

The ACT Basin is acknowledged as one of the most biologically diverse and threatened river basins in the nation. It harbors a high number of federally protected species including 10 fishes, 10 mussels and 3 snails. There are dozens of other species that are considered at-risk.

For eons, Striped bass (Morone saxatilis) and Gulf sturgeon (Acipenser oxyrinchus desotoi) made spring migrations from the Gulf of Mexico to the falls at Tallassee (Tallapoosa River, Elmore County). Called anadromous fish, they inhabit coastal waters during most of the year but return to freshwater to spawn. The dams on the Alabama River now block migrations of these and other fishes.

The threatened Pygmy sculpin only occurs in Coldwater Spring (Calhoun County) in the Coosa Basin. The fish’s colors blend perfectly with the gravel on the spring bottom. The spring is protected to conserve this special fish and because it is the primary drinking water supply for the city of Anniston.

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The fact that these rivers now are ‘elongated lakes’ with little if any of a once-abundant biota should be a constant reminder to us all of the price paid for ‘civilization.’

Douglas E. Jones
Former Director, Alabama Museum of Natural History

Only three Alabama sturgeon have been captured since 1993, all from the Alabama River. They are nearly extinct because of past overfishing, dam construction and ongoing, human-caused habitat loss.

The Travels of William Bartram
In the 1770’s, the King of England commissioned the naturalist and explorer, William Bartram, to study local culture and collect plants and animals in the Southeast U.S. His journal, Travels, documents a wild and pristine land, including a “magnificent forest” and a litter of red wolves, now eliminated from Alabama. An 8.5 mile trail in the Tuskegee National Forest (Tallapoosa Basin) marks part of Bartram’s travels.
The water quality and quantity of the ACT Basin are influenced by a variety of urban and rural land uses. The landuse maps on these pages were generated from 1992-93 satellite images. River basins are outlined in white. The orange line represents the Fall Line, which is the border between the Piedmont (foothills) and Coastal Plain of Alabama. Virtually all of the **Alabama River** is in the Coastal Plain, whereas much of the **Coosa** flows through the Valley and Ridge Province and the **Tallapoosa** is in the Piedmont.

### Forest

Three quarters of the ACT Basin (15,400 sq. miles) is covered by forests, which filter and purify water, conserve soil, and enhance wildlife. The most abundant native vegetative community in the ACT Basin is the oak-hickory-pine forest.

In the early 1920’s, thousands of acres of virgin long leaf pine trees were harvested along the proposed shoreline of the Lake Martin reservoir. Timber not used to build a camp at Cherokee Bluffs was lashed together and piled on cleared land below the proposed waterline. Hundreds of these trees lay perfectly preserved in the lake today.

### Agriculture

Agriculture is still an important factor in the economy of the basins, making up about 17% (3,500 sq. miles) of the landuse. In the **Alabama Basin**, corn, hay, peanuts, potatoes, and soybeans are the principal crops, and livestock, poultry production and dairying are increasing in importance. In the **Tallapoosa Basin**, agriculture is primarily restricted to poultry and livestock operations and Carroll County, GA ranks in the top ten counties nationally for cattle and broiler chicken production.

### Urban/Suburban

Most of the ACT Basin’s nearly three million people live in cities and suburbs. Urban centers impact water quality by such things as stormwater runoff and soil erosion from construction sites. By decreasing tree cover to make room for homes and paved roads (impermeable surfaces), flooding often increases.
Urban centers also have demanding water needs. For example, the Atlanta metropolitan area is one of the fastest growing urban areas in America and greatly affects the upper Coosa and Tallapoosa basins. For almost a decade, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida have been negotiating a water resource allocation plan, because of Atlanta’s increasing demand for additional water sources. Future flows within the ACT Basin will be vital to the health and prosperity of residents within these states. Water quantity and allocation has become a critical and contentious issue.

**WETLAND**

Wetlands cover a significant portion of the southeastern United States and support a diverse population of plants and animals. They receive stream overflow from floodwaters, which helps to reduce erosion and creates habitat for fishes, amphibians and other animals. They are also valued as sources of carbon for the stream environment, for filtering runoff that enters the groundwater, and for recycling nutrients. Wetlands are abundant in the ACT Basin below the Fall Line, where the rivers widen and meander. These wetlands consist primarily of bottomland hardwood forests with many types of vegetation such as oak, gum, and cypress trees.

**QUARRY/MINING**

There are many raw materials sought after in the ACT Basin including gravel, limestone, platinum, gold, granite, coalbed methane, and oil. For example, a large marble formation extends northeast from the bank of the Coosa River in Talladega County for about 60 miles, creating the Marble Valley. Although quarries and mining occur in less than 1% of the Basin, their potential impacts on streams and groundwater are significant. Impacts may include acid drainage, sink holes, metal contamination, increased turbidity and low dissolved oxygen.
Balancing Economy and Environment in the River Basins

Abundant water, timber, rich soils, coal deposits, and other natural resources have been important for boosting Alabama’s economy, creating jobs and providing necessary products for all of us. The way these natural resources are used can cause environmental problems that negatively affect human health and our quality of life. More than half of these problems come from nonpoint source pollution that enters streams from broad areas of both urban and rural portions of a watershed. Possible problems may include...

- **Agriculture**
  - Excess nutrients and bacteria from animal wastes, especially CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations)
  - Runoff of pesticides and other chemicals from cropland and pastures

Nitrogen and phosphorus are essential nutrients for plant and animal growth, but excessive amounts can stimulate blooms of algae and other aquatic plants in waterbodies. In turn, algal blooms can impair water suitability for a variety of uses, such as drinking, swimming and fishing.

- **Dams**
  - Changes in natural river flow patterns and levels
  - Drastic water temperature and oxygen changes downstream from dam releases

Many dams in Alabama are under consideration for relicensing, which could modify how they are managed for power generation and environmental protection.

- **Forestry Practices**
  - Erosion and runoff from unprotected clearcuts

Erosion and sedimentation have been a problem in Alabama as far back as colonial settlement. In the 1930’s, the Soil Conservation Service, now called the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS), was formed to address erosion problems and other land use issues.
As paved and hard surfaces sprawl across the watersheds, less open space is left for water to soak down and filter through to the groundwater or springs that feed the river.

Randy Chafin
Birmingham Water Works

Best Management Practices (BMPs) and good planning can reduce or eliminate nonpoint source problems. Specific BMPs for each landuse activity may be obtained from the NRCS, the Office of Surface Mining, the Alabama Cooperative Extension System and ADEM.

Fish consumption advisories exist for considerable portions of the Coosa River and tributaries due to PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) that polluted the streams 20-50 years ago.

The increase in quarries and mines within the ACT Basin have prompted citizens to call for policy reforms to protect the environment and their quality of life.

Rapid urbanization and development is taking a toll on diverse ecosystems of Alabama rivers.

Industrial Discharge
- Toxic chemicals
- Heavy metals

Quarry/Mining
- Soil erosion, sedimentation and stream turbidity
- Toxic metal and acid runoff
- Altered water tables and spring flows

Urban/Suburban Development
- Erosion and sedimentation from construction sites
- Stormwater runoff (oil, litter, etc.) from streets and parking lots
- Lawn and garden fertilizer runoff
- Inadequate and failing wastewater treatment

SOIL CONSERVATION BMPs can dramatically reduce erosion and stream sedimentation.

IMPROPER MAINTENANCE OF SILT FENCES CONTRIBUTES TO SOIL EROSION.

RUNOFF FROM STREETS AND LAWNS ENTERS STORM DRAINS AND FLOWS DIRECTLY TO STREAMS UNTREATED.

AN INDUSTRY PIPE IS A POINT SOURCE DISCHARGE.

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Rapid urbanization and development is taking a toll on diverse ecosystems of Alabama rivers.
There are many water policies and laws from various federal, state and local agencies that are sometimes difficult to understand. Virtually all water quality protection laws in Alabama stem from the federal Clean Water Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1972. Since that time, the quality of our nation’s waters has improved dramatically because of the cooperative efforts of federal, state, tribal and local governments and the general public.

The Clean Water Act is subdivided into many sections that influence Alabama’s water. Three of the main sections are:

Section 305
Requires an assessment of waterbodies every two years to determine whether designated uses are being met. The Biennial Water Quality Report to Congress, or the 305(b) Report, provides summary information about the quality of the state’s waters.

Section 303
Charges states and tribes with setting specific water quality criteria and developing pollution control programs to meet them. Designated uses may include drinking water, recreation, aesthetics, irrigation, fishing, swimming or a combination of these and other activities.

Waterbodies that do not meet water quality standards for their designated water use classification are included in a 303(d) list (www.epa.gov/waters). EPA requires ADEM to develop total maximum daily loads (TMDLs) for each waterbody included on the 303(d) list. The TMDL is the maximum quantity of a pollutant that can enter a waterbody without adversely affecting the designated use classification of the waterbody.

Section 319
Provides federal funds through the U.S. EPA to ADEM for educational and technical assistance, supporting programs such as Alabama Water Watch and the Clean Water Partnerships (www.epa.gov/region4/water/nps/grants/index.htm)
Partnerships of local, citizen-based and governmental groups have a high potential for restoring degraded habitats and protecting water quality.

Citizens can do much to protect their watershed by:
- Becoming aware of key water issues
- Neighbor-to-neighbor persuasion to reduce pollution
- Raising local awareness and public outreach
- Participating in watershed-based protection plans including the TMDL process
- Becoming part of a citizen group
- Being the “eyes and ears” for lake/stream changes and pollution
- Advocating for policy changes and enforcement

The Alabama Clean Water Partnership was created in 1998 to coordinate stakeholders for the restoration and protection of river basins in accordance with the Clean Water Act. A resulting Watershed Management Plan will represent the diverse interests of local citizens, landowners, public officials, industries and agencies. Citizens may contact ADEM to get involved in the:

Alabama River Basin Clean Water Partnership
Coosa River Basin Clean Water Partnership
Tallapoosa River Basin Clean Water Partnership

Many citizen groups have formed within the Alabama, Coosa, and Tallapoosa basins. Several also monitor water quality with the Alabama Water Watch program (marked with an *). Although citizen groups come and go, most groups below have existed for several years and have provided significant input for environmental protection.

Montgomery Water Watch*
Rambranch Creek Organization
Alabama Rivers Alliance
Boy and Girls Club of Calhoun County*
Coalition for the Preservation of Hatchet Creek
Concerned Citizens for a Better Environment
Coosa River Basin Initiative*
Coosa River Society*
DeSoto State Park*
Fort Payne High School*
Friends of Big Canoe Creek
Friends of Choccolocco Creek*
Friends of Kelly Creek
Friends of Little River
Friends of Terrapin Creek
Gadsden Area Water Watch*
Gadsden Christian Home Educators*
Georgia Adopt-A-Stream
Hatchet Creek Watershed Association
Ida Station Peckerwood Creek Association
Lake Jordan HOBO*
Lake Mitchell HOBO*
Lay Lake HOBO*
Logan Martin Lake Protection Association*
Nelly Henry Lake Association
Sand Rock Water Quality Team*
Spring Creek Conservation Association
Weiss Lake Improvement Association

Auburn Outing Club*
East Central Alabama Alliance for Quality Living
Friends of Chewacla-Uphapee Watershed*
Friends of Hodnett Creek*
Lake Watch of Lake Martin*
Lake Wedowee Property Owners Association*
Middle Tallapoosa River Conservation Association
Save Our Suagatatchee*
Tallapoosa River Watch
Upper Tallapoosa Watershed Group

Perhaps the most important ingredient in the recipe for a cleaner, healthier, economically viable body of water is an aware, active organization of citizens.

Jerry Brown, founding President, Coosa River Basin Initiative
In 1819, when Alabama entered the Union, its leaders designed a great seal that featured the state’s waterways. In adopting this symbol they affirmed their belief that the future of Alabama lay with its rivers. It did, and it still does.

Harvey Jackson, III  
Rivers of History

Want More?

For further information about Alabama’s waterways or how to get involved in protecting your watershed, contact:

Alabama Cooperative Extension System  
334-844-4444  www.aces.edu

Alabama Department of Agriculture and Industries  
www.agi.state.al.us

Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources  
334-242-3420  www.dcnr.state.al.us

Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs  
334-242-5694  www.adeca.state.al.us

Alabama Department of Environmental Management  
334-271-7700  www.adem.state.al.us

Alabama Soil and Water Conservation Committee  
334-242-2620

Alabama Water Watch  
888-844-4785  www.alabamawaterwatch.org

Ala-Tom Resource Conservation and Development Council  
334-275-3186

Coosa Valley Resource Conservation and Development Council  
256-835-0685

Geological Survey of Alabama  
205-349-2852  www.gsa.state.al.us

Legacy, Inc.  
800-240-5115  www.legacyenved.com

Mid South Resource Conservation and Development Council  
334-244-6903

National Agricultural Library  
Water Quality Information Center  
www.nal.usda.gov/wqic

Natural Resource Conservation Service  
334-887-4552  www.nrcs.usda.gov

The Nature Conservancy of Alabama  
205-251-1155  http://nature.org/states/alabama

Office of Surface Mining  
205-290-7282  www.osmre.gov/osm.htm

The Water Course (Alabama Power Company)  
800-280-4442

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Region 4)  
404-562-8357  www.epa.gov

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
334-441-5181  www.fws.gov

U.S. Geological Survey  
www.usgs.gov