

Subject: The Inconvenience of Conserving Nature
May 9, 2023

At the end of the day last Friday, my wife, Sallie, was exhausted, soaking wet, and sporting a black eye. But Sallie told me she had had a great day. Say what?

We had just completed the first day of competition in the Three Rivers Fly Fishing Festival, during which I had organized a fishing trip by canoe down the Cullasaja River from Cooks Sawmill to Franklin for my son, his wife, Sallie, and myself. It was an ambitious attempt to catch trout on a scenic wild river, to say the least.

The good news is that we didn't turn the canoes over while shooting the rapids. Although Sallie and I came close on two occasions, she saved the boat with some unexpected last-minute maneuvering.

And about that black eye? That happened when we hit a rock in a fast rapid, and the top of her paddle flew back and hit her in the eye. Sallie didn't tell me what happened and kept on paddling.

We survived the rapids, but as for the fishing-catching part of the trip, we were less than successful. Sallie and I didn't catch any fish because we were too focused on negotiating the perils of the Cullasaja. However, our daughter-in-law, Lauren, was more committed to fishing and caught two trout, one a 15-inch rainbow.

After the trip, and despite the failure to catch fish and a black eye, Sallie encouraged me to write about our experience. The theme for her was "the inconvenience of conserving nature." Sallie is an enthusiastic birder and was intrigued by all the birds she saw on the Cullasaja. We saw a green heron and a cedar waxing, two species she had not seen before. We also saw a wonderful pair of huge blue herons, and they escorted us down the river for about a half mile before peeling off.

Nature and other species can be conveniently ignored or forgotten by us humans. Our river trip through its presentation of the crystal-clear water, the magical sounds of the waters tumbling over the rocks, the magnificent trees that lined our way, and the new and exciting bird finds underscored our concerns for conserving wild and untouched spaces in Western Carolina.

Many visitors come to this region to reconnect and experience nature, and those experiences are restorative and healing experiences that people need more than ever.

Others come with economic interests, and those economic interests and environmental interests need not be mutually exclusive. Some people may think I am anti-business and development, but I am not. I am cautious and believe we all share in the stewardship of the environment. I see some folks moving to Western Carolina from metropolitan communities from all areas of the country. My message to them is to expect some "inconveniences" that conserving these natural places will bring. And I suggest they leave that city baggage behind and seek a lighter load that creates less of an environmental footprint.

As mayor, I hear those metropolitan cargo demands all the time. Mayor, we need more of this and that. Instead of more city amenities, I suggest the trading for the amenities that wild rivers,

wildlife, and mountain forests can provide. Another benefit can be the embracing of a small and somewhat simple community life. In short, people long for connectedness to nature and with other people. Highlands and Western Carolina is a place where these relationships can be made.

As for me, I discovered a couple of things during the trip: First, after 43 years of marriage, I discovered I am connected to a wild river woman, as Sallie displayed an intuitive sense for negotiating the whitewater on the Cullasaja. And second, nature's "inconveniences" that we encountered on our river adventure were far outweighed by the connections we made to nature and to one another.