

Film looks to Western North Carolina river champions

By Derek Lacey Times-News Staff Writer



Rivers are an inseparable part of life in Western North Carolina and have always played an integral role in the life of communities along their banks, but those waterways continue to face threats and challenges.

A new film by the Center for Cultural Preservation and Executive Director David Weintraub, “River Heroes of the South,” seeks to take a close look at the region’s waterways, their deep connections to communities and the people who have championed their protection and continue to do so.

The film, set to be released in about a year, has been an idea growing in Weintraub’s mind for the last number of years, he said, as streams and rivers are part of what makes this place so special, though they’re often overlooked.

It’s amazing how many streams or rivers people drive over on their way to work, but folks are often more focused on the driver who just cut them off on the interstate or the music on the radio, he said. But the flowing waterways are the arteries of Western North Carolina’s communities.

“Without clean water, we wouldn’t have people living here,” Weintraub said. “It’s the water that sustains us.”

From drinking water and recreation to tourism and economic

development, the waterways play a critical role in everyone’s lives, and the new film, he said, is about reconnecting people to the lifeblood of their communities.

Work is ongoing and more than 120 interviews are on

Weintraub’s list for the film, covering everything from Cherokee storytellers talking about their connection to the waterways to the family and friends of French Broad River hero Wilma Dykeman and the people who fought more than a dozen dams planned by the Tennessee Valley Authority for the Upper French Broad.

So far, those interviews have been stunning, Weintraub said, including the unexpected mix of people who have fought for the rivers over the years — often not those who generally fall under the umbrella term of environmentalist, but collaborative groups of people who may be viewed as strange bedfellows today.

From the Upper French Broad Defense Association, the first to stop a big TVA plan in the 1960s and ’70s that would have flooded Mills River and Rosman with more than a dozen dams, to the folks who fought Champion Paper in the following decades, all are examples where farmers, locals, conservationists and relative newcomers fought side by side — and along the way garnered the support of people like former Republican state Sen. Charles Taylor and former President Richard Nixon.

“That to me was really eye-opening in a lot of ways,” Weintraub said.

Wednesday, Weintraub sat down in Rosman on the banks of the rain-swelled French Broad for his latest

interview, one with a person who lives the connection to the river every day — David Whitmire of Headwaters Outfitters.

Whitmire opened Headwaters with his wife 26 years ago, and they now operate the paddling and fly fishing guide company nestled at the Forks of the River, where the French Broad originates.

Whitmire’s family has lived in the area for generations, and he said he never would have thought that one day he’d own the land where he played as a child and make a living on the water.

“We’ve always felt privileged to live here and enjoyed the rich history of the river, and I feel very connected to it,” Whitmire said. “I got caught skipping school right here fishing in high school, and here we own the property... It’s noisy from the road, but it’s a special place. This is where this great river gets its name, right here at this location.”

The Whitmires started the first outfitters in Transylvania County in 1992 with a 15-passenger van and 10 canoes. It was tough in the first years, with the French Broad full of what Whitmire calls “historic trash,” like old cars and farming or industrial equipment.

Even before that, Whitmire and others worked against a plan for 21 dams on the French Broad’s headwaters in the late 1980s as the Headwaters Paddling Association.

Right of the bat, they started doing spring river cleanups that brought out about 25 or 30 people to pick trash from the river. Today, he said, they sometimes turn people away and take to the river with crowds of 75 or 100 people for a river cleanup.