

LITTLE RIVER CHAPTER OF TROUT UNLIMITED

HISTORY AND MISSION

The little River Chapter of Trout Unlimited was formed in 1992 by a group of anglers from Blount and Sevier Counties. The original seventeen members had a vision to operate as a support group for the fisheries department of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.

Trout Unlimited is a National organization founded in the 1960's with a goal of protecting and preserving the coldwater fisheries. There are approximately 150,000 TU members, mostly in the United States. Trout Unlimited national works with its grassroots chapters, over 200 strong, to raise money and provide volunteer labor for stream enhancement projects and to work with local, state and federal agencies to eliminate or reduce pollution that affects trout streams.

The little River Chapter's vision caught on. The group grew from 17 to 150 members in only three years. By working directly with the fisheries department at the national park as a support arm and not an adversary, the relationship between the two grew strong. Steve Moore, fisheries biologist at the Park who is in charge of the department recalls one of his first meetings with the little River Chapter leaders when he said, "If your interest is for us to deal only with regulations, then we won't have much mutual ground. If you want to help us learn more about the aquatic resource, then we may have a solid foundation." And that foundation has remained as the rule for the partners for over ten years,

The Little River Chapter, though very small by national standards was able to accomplish more than larger organizations by enlisting volunteers from nearby chapters to assist in fundraising and stream or riparian enhancement projects. By teaming up with the Great Smoky Mountains Chapter in Knoxville, they were able to jointly hold a banquet that netted \$18,000 for coldwater fisheries protection. It turned out to be the largest banquet ever held in Tennessee. With the Great Smoky Mountains Chapter to help with fund raising and volunteer labor, several miles of Abrams Creek, which runs through Cades Cove in the park was fenced to keep cattle out of the stream, and the banks were tilled and planted with native vegetation to stop erosion.

A complicated and time-consuming project was envisioned by the park and TU to monitor acid deposition, a stream-destroying problem commonly known as acid rain. The project would require ongoing water sampling and testing in remote reaches of the park streams often requiring miles of hiking by volunteers who were trained to perform the complicated scientific procedures. Over time, it could be determined if the acid pollution was getting worse, and if it were, legislation to reduce emissions from polluters could be influenced by Trout Unlimited national organization in Washington DC. Again, the little River Chapter partnered with the members of the Great Smoky Mountains Chapter to acquire the volunteer hours needed to carry out the task, one that never would have happened without partnering with larger groups.

Volunteers from the Little River Chapter have, for almost ten years, worked with park personnel to conduct fish population monitoring in the park. Each year, several sites are checked to see if populations are changing. The sites, usually 200 meters long are electro-shocked to enable the biologists to capture all fish in the section to weigh, measure and count the species of each fish. The fish are not injured but temporarily stunned and captured. They are later returned to the stream alive and unhurt. This type of monitoring allows for a large and useful database. A procedure at one site requires 20 to 40 people to handle the many tasks that are involved in capturing hundreds or even thousands of fish to be used to gather the data. Several sites in the park are checked each year.

VISION

The vision of the Little River Chapter and its remarkable success has been due basically to the following philosophy and procedures:

1. Work as a support group for the National Park. Don't tell them how to do their job; just help them do it.
2. Ask for help and share with neighboring chapters or with anyone else who wants to help. We are not a large chapter and probably never will be. What are most important are the final result, more money and volunteer labor for the fisheries department of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
3. Raise large sums of money for the National Park. Hold national banquets whereby a lot of money can be gained for the benefit of the park and National Trout Unlimited. Apply for every grant that is available every year.
4. Schedule small, fun projects that anyone, young or old can participate in such as stream cleanups or small fundraisers like our old chili cook-offs. This gets everyone involved.
5. Get a lot of people involved. Offer something for everyone so none feel left out. Call on members for help. This will keep the chapter from getting into the old "a few people doing all the work" situation. That situation leads to a few people who feel they own the chapter, people who don't welcome change or even help from others. That eventually creates resentment from both ends and spells death to the chapter.
6. Grow the membership. Try to increase membership by 1/3 per year. With lots of projects involving many people, the word will get out and membership will grow. Put TU membership applications in sporting goods stores and fly shops. Every angler should have a few in their fishing car to hand out.
7. Advertise. Keep the story of our efforts in front of non-members. Work with local newspapers to have articles published describing our mission and our accomplishments.
8. Communicate. Through the monthly newsletter, let people know what projects are available for them in the future. Give them a financial report so they know how much money we are making to contribute to the park.
9. Continue the acid-deposition monitoring project.
10. Don't become a fishing club. This has historically been the kiss of death for chapters. Fishing is important for programs to draw people in but a chapter needs to stay focused on the conservation efforts that TU was founded to perform. Also don't snub spin fishermen or those who keep fish. TU is not a flyfishing, catch and release only, organization.
11. Take leadership development very seriously. For chapters to grow and keep conservation efforts active it takes new leadership. New leaders keep the old ones from burning out. Also, as the chapter grows, more committees can be developed, the board can be expanded and more will get done. The way to have leaders ready to take the job is to plan ahead. Have a President elect position filled at all times so that person can have a year or two to prepare for the job.
12. Work closely with and support financially our national TU organization.

Originally drafted by Byron Begley

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