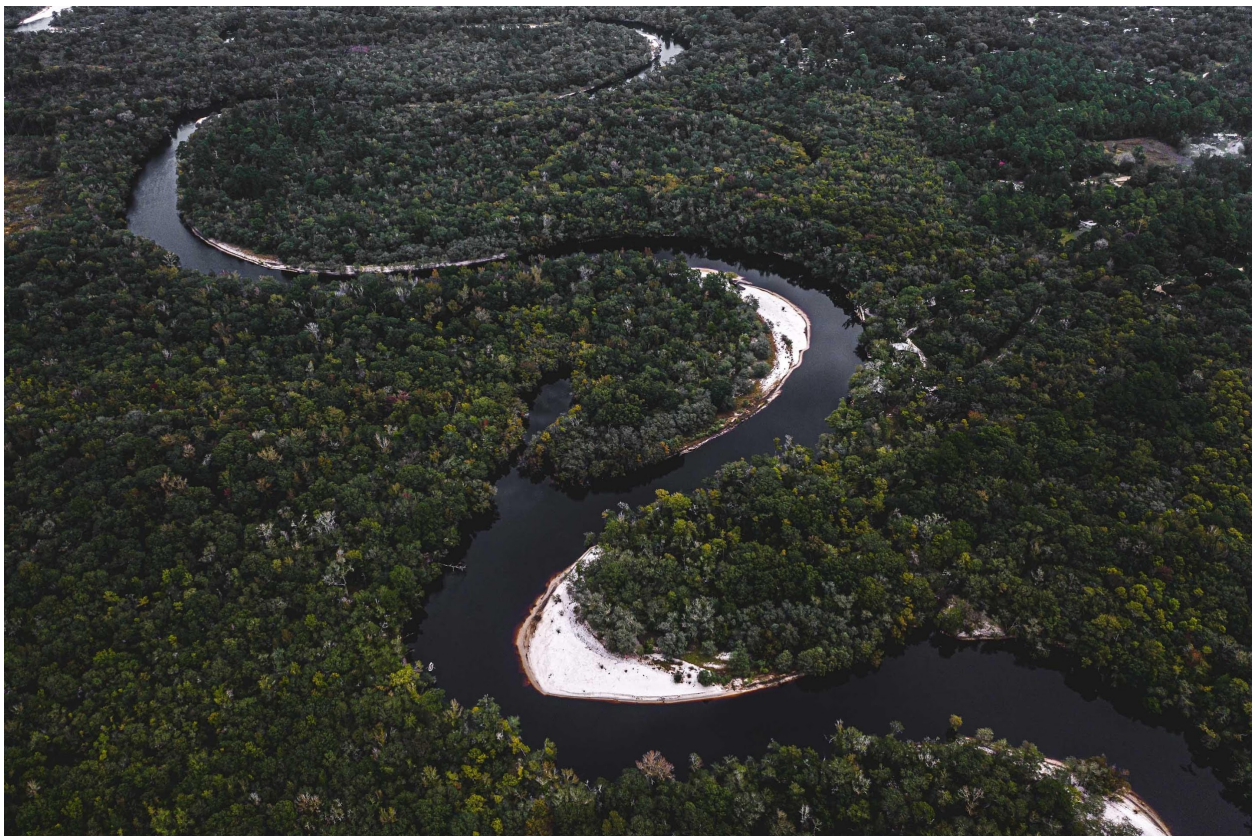


A BRIEF SATILLA RIVERKEEPER HISTORY

Introduction

The Satilla River is a biologically rich and beautiful river in Southeast Georgia. It is a blackwater river that begins just east of Fitzgerald, Georgia, flows for approximately 230 miles, and then empties into the Atlantic Ocean between Jekyll Island and Cumberland Island. Outside of Southeast Georgia, the Satilla River is not widely known and many of its anglers would prefer it stay that way. The river is a prized fishing location and currently holds the record for the state's largest redbreast sunfish. The Satilla River is largely undeveloped and wild and is also one of the few major rivers in North America that is undammed on its mainstem. The river is ecologically unique and flows uninterrupted under its own name with no tributaries that could be considered its equal. The Satilla River is an incredible river and deserves to be protected.



The Satilla River meandering along. Photo Credit: David Cannon.



Quint Rogers with one of the Satilla River's signature redbreast sunfish. Photo Credit: David Cannon.



The uppermost headwaters of the Satilla River outside of Fitzgerald, Georgia. Photo Credit: Chris Bertrand.



Sun reflecting off tannic waters on the Satilla. Photo Credit: Chris Bertrand



Fishing on the Satilla with Quint Rogers. Photo Credit: David Cannon.



The Satilla River near Woodbine, Georgia. Photo Credit: Chris Bertrand.



A beautiful sandbar on the Satilla. Photo Credit: Chris Bertrand.

The Riverkeeper Movement

The Riverkeeper movement began in 1966 when a group of concerned Hudson River fishermen decided that they needed to take action to protect their river. This group of commercial and recreational fishermen were tired of seeing the declining fisheries in the Hudson and were worried that polluters were killing the river and stealing it from the public. The government was failing to protect the river, and the fishermen decided to take matters into their own hands. The fishermen eventually formed the Hudson Riverkeeper and were successful at bringing hundreds of polluters to justice, forcing them to spend hundreds of millions of dollars to restore the river.

With the rise of the environmental movement in the 1970s more Riverkeepers began forming across the country. These organizations used the Clean Water Act to force polluters to stop degrading the nation's waters. In 1994, the Upper Chattahoochee Riverkeeper (now Chattahoochee Riverkeeper) became Georgia's first Riverkeeper. Today, Georgia has nine Riverkeepers.



On the left, the original Hudson patrol boat. On the right, the first Riverkeeper in Georgia, Sally Bethea.

The Origin of the Satilla Riverkeeper

As with many Riverkeepers, Satilla Riverkeeper was born out of conflict. In March of 2002, Satilla River advocates and fishing clubs joined together to create the “Save Our Satilla” organization as a response to a reckless titanium mining proposal in Brantley County. Save Our Satilla was concerned that this mining operation would discharge dangerous levels of pollutants into the Satilla, destroy important wetlands around the river, and deplete the groundwater supply. In 2003, Save Our Satilla and allies filed a lawsuit to challenge the mining permit.

Save Our Satilla’s legitimate concerns and convincing legal arguments prevailed and the mining company was forced to settle the lawsuit. The mining company was required to avoid dangerous discharges into the river, protect wetlands, and restore any impacted wetlands to their pre-existing condition. Lastly, the mining company agreed to fund a new Riverkeeper organization on the Satilla River to keep an eye on polluters.

In 2004, the Satilla Riverkeeper became a fully licensed 501(c)(3) organization and hired its first Riverkeeper/Executive Director, Gordon Rogers. The Satilla Riverkeeper quickly got to work protecting the river. The following stories highlight some of Satilla Riverkeeper’s biggest victories.



Save Our Satilla (“SOS”) sticker and Gordon Rogers, the first Satilla Riverkeeper.

Flathead Catfish Removal Program

In 1996, the first invasive flathead catfish was found in the Satilla River. According to the Georgia Department of Natural Resources (“DNR”), flathead catfish were most likely introduced illegally by anglers. The predatory flathead catfish caused the Satilla’s native redbreast population to plummet to 1/50th of their original numbers. Channel catfish, bullhead catfish, and Atlantic sturgeon were also negatively affected.

When Satilla Riverkeeper learned about the devastation of the redbreast fishery, the Riverkeeper went straight to the Georgia Capitol to solve the problem. The Riverkeeper lobbied Georgia Representatives to allocate DNR money to remove the invasive flathead catfish in the Satilla. These efforts were successful, and in 2006, the Georgia Legislature appropriated funding for three new positions to remove invasive flathead catfish in the Satilla River. Since its inception, DNR’s removal project has removed over 99,000 flathead catfish. Thanks to Satilla Riverkeeper and DNR, the redbreast populations in the Satilla have made a remarkable recovery.

In 2011, DNR began removing another invasive catfish, the blue catfish. Currently, DNR has removed over 2,500 blue catfish from the Satilla River.



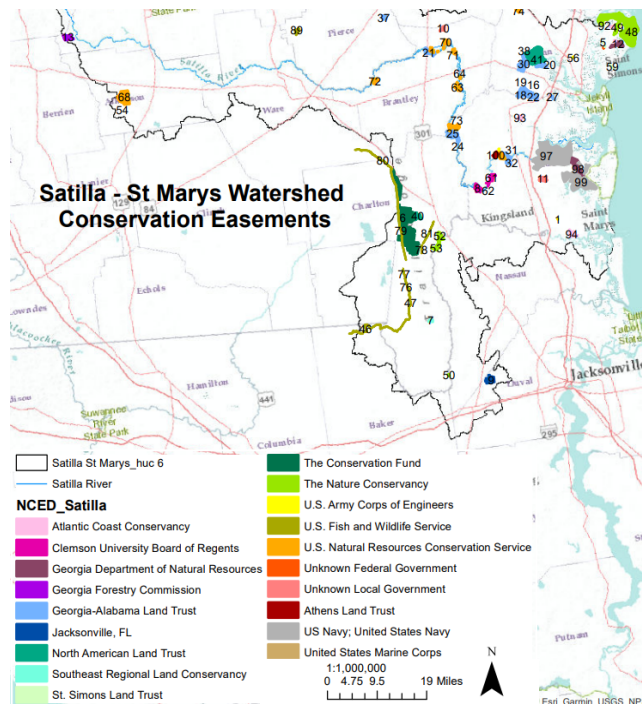
Current DNR Commissioner Mark Williams and former Senator Tommie Williams out shocking flathead catfish with DNR.

Conservation Easements on the Satilla River

In 2005, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (“NRCS”) called Satilla Riverkeeper to seek help with investing over six million dollars in conservation easements¹ on the Satilla River. In just thirty days, Satilla Riverkeeper was able to spend all that money by finding numerous landowners who were willing to permanently protect their property adjacent to the river.

Satilla Riverkeeper, Gordon Rogers, believes facilitating these easements and those that followed was his biggest contribution to protecting the river because “these conservation easements effectively make the Satilla River into a wild and scenic river without needing legislation to do so. Conservation easements are the back door way to guarantee the Satilla River is protected and looks the same for generations to come.”

NRCS has put conservation easements over 160 linear miles of stream and 100,000 acres of floodplain forest in the Satilla River watershed. This includes thousands of miles of oxbows and swamp sloughs.



A map of the conservation easements on the Satilla River.

¹ Conservation easements protect land in perpetuity by forbidden any development on the portion of the property covered by the easement.

Development in the Salt Marsh

In 2004, developers proposed a large marina and housing development that would destroy over 150 acres of salt marsh alongside the Satilla River in Woodbine. At almost the same time, on the Saint Marys River, developers proposed creating another enormous marina project with over three miles of docking space.² After looking into these massive development projects, the Satilla Riverkeeper learned that as planned these marinas would needlessly destroy significant quantities of salt marsh. In 2005, Satilla Riverkeeper and allies sued to protect the salt marsh bordering the Satilla and St. Marys.

The lawsuit went all the way to the Georgia Supreme Court where Satilla Riverkeeper lost its primary argument but was able to create some positive case law for Georgia's salt marshes. After the dust settled from the lawsuits, the developers at both sites decided to scratch their original projects. While the Riverkeeper did not win its lawsuit, the developers did not build the marinas, and countless acres of salt marsh were saved.

The Satilla Riverkeeper continues to protect wetlands in our watershed and has reported hundreds of acres of illegal wetlands fillings to the Army Corps of Engineers.



Salt marsh near Woodbine on the Satilla River.

² Prior to the founding of the St. Marys Riverkeeper in 2016, the Satilla Riverkeeper protected the St. Marys River as part of its jurisdiction. The Satilla Riverkeeper was responsible for many early St. Marys River victories. For example, the Satilla Riverkeeper facilitated the creation a St. Marys watershed improvement plan and obtained a 319 grant to repair septic tanks on the St. Marys River.

Coal Ash in Waycross

In 2004, the Waycross County Commissioners approved a contract to create a landfill in Waycross for 11 million tons of imported coal ash waste. Coal ash is the toxic waste that remains after burning coal. The local community and Satilla Riverkeeper were afraid that heavy metals from the proposed landfill would leach into Satilla River and into residential drinking water wells. In 2008, the Satilla Riverkeeper and local citizens filed a lawsuit to stop this dangerous landfill. Local citizens then filed a second lawsuit to challenge the County's contract allowing the landfill. The landfill was stopped when the second lawsuit prevailed and the contract was voided. During these lawsuits, the Waycross community voted out their County Commissioners twice to ensure that the County did not reinstate a valid contract for the coal ash landfill.

Bandalong Litter Trap

The Waycross Canal (Tebeau Creek) drains more than 8,000 acres of urban development directly into the Satilla River. If you leave a water bottle in a Waycross parking lot, chances are it will end up in the Satilla River. In the early 2000's, the trash problem below Waycross was so serious that it impaired boat navigation.

Satilla Riverkeeper worked cooperatively with the City of Waycross to install Georgia's very first litter trap on the Waycross Canal. From 2010 to 2022, the trap prevented over 1,000 cubic yards of trash or more than 100 dump trucks worth of trash from entering the Satilla River. While Satilla Riverkeeper has taken huge steps in solving the Waycross trash problem, the Riverkeeper still conducts regular trash cleanups below Waycross to address litter issues.



Photo By RONNIE SHE

The trash pile-ups on the Satilla River between U.S. 84 and Highway 121 bridges are challenging the maneuverability of some boaters and marring the beauty of the waterway and forest.

Satilla River Clogged With Clump Of Trash After Recent Heavy Rain

Newspaper article complaining that trash was impairing navigation of boaters on the Satilla Riverkeeper below Waycross, Georgia.



Photos taken by a founding member of Save our Satilla showing the incredible amounts of trash accumulating in the Satilla River below the City of Waycross.



Riverkeeper Gordon Rogers discussing the trash problem below Waycross.



Two city workers at the bandalong littertrap.

ATVs in the Riverbed

The Satilla Riverkeeper supports using the river and its corridor for recreation, but ATV use in the streambed tears up essential habitat and spawning areas for fish. These practices negatively impact water quality and fish populations. Additionally, some ATV owners use the riverbed to trespass and destroy private property.

In the mid-2000's, the Satilla Riverkeeper went to the Georgia General Assembly to solve this problem. In 2010, after teaming up with property owners, anglers, and local sheriffs, the Satilla Riverkeeper successfully passed a law that banned ATV use in all Georgia streambeds.



Illegal ATV activity in the streambed can damage fish habitat and ruin fishing opportunities.

Noyes Cut Restoration Project

In the early 1900's the Army Corps of Engineers made several cuts in the Satilla River Estuary to improve navigation. These shortcuts through the marsh connected streams that were not supposed to meet and confused the water's natural flow. The mixing of these waters jumbled the creeks' salinity gradients and ruined vital habitats for important fish species. Soon after the cuts were established, locals realized that these cuts were causing abnormal sediment buildup, harming their private property, and impairing their access to the marsh. In 1935, Dover Bluff community members sent a letter to the Army Corps describing the problems landowners were seeing.

Almost one hundred years later, the problems had worsened and community members had seen their recreation opportunities and environment deteriorate in front of their eyes. In the early 2000's, the Voight family of Dover Bluff engaged Satilla Riverkeeper and convinced the organization to advocate for a restoration effort. The Riverkeeper began lobbying the Army Corps and building support among local elected officials. However, not much progress was made until 2011, when Interim-Riverkeeper, Clay Montague, took up the fight. As a former ecology Professor, Clay coordinated and drafted a proposal for a feasibility study to close Noyes Cut and several other manmade cuts in the Satilla River Estuary. Satilla Riverkeeper communicated the closure of these cuts as not only a navigation fix for local landowners but also an excellent habitat restoration project which could help restore American shad and other important fish species.

In 2011, the Noyes Cut Project began to gather statewide attention when Satilla Riverkeeper entered the project in Georgia Water Coalition's Dirty Dozen report. Satilla Riverkeeper learned that the Army Corps was interested in doing the restoration project if there was a local entity to split the project costs with. The Satilla Riverkeeper went to the Georgia General Assembly and worked with Senator William Ligon who helped spearhead the effort to find the money and the state interest needed for the restoration project. In 2013, the Georgia Senate unanimously passed a resolution supporting the Noyes Cut Project. After a stunning presentation on the benefits of the project, the Satilla Riverkeeper pushed the resolution through the House Committee on Natural Resources. In the 2013 session, the resolution supporting the Noyes Cut Project passed the Georgia House of Representatives.

One month after the resolution was passed, the Army Corps responded to the state of Georgia agreeing to conduct the restoration project if Georgia could provide matching funds. Satilla Riverkeeper again lobbied the Georgia General Assembly and successfully found the state funds necessary to complete an Army Corps feasibility study.³ In 2020, Satilla Riverkeeper applied for and won the very first Georgia Outdoor Stewardship Act grant. This grant was passed through Georgia DNR’s Coastal Resources Division to front the matching costs to complete the Noyes Cut Restoration.

Today the Noyes Cut Project is well on its way to restoring over 4,500 acres of the Satilla River Estuary. In 2023, the Army Corps successfully closed Dynamite Cut and the Old River Run. The project now awaits the closure of its namesake, Noyes Cut.

Neill Herring, Georgia Water Coalition and Sierra Club lobbyist reflected on the Noyes Cut project, “This restoration project is a wonderful story about how a small organization like the Satilla Riverkeeper can act strategically, pull the right strings, and have an outsized impact.”



The Noyes Cut Restoration seen at Dynamite Cut.

³ The Satilla Riverkeeper also facilitated a coastal incentive grant for Augusta University to look at how the Noyes Cut Project would affect fish, crabs, and water quality.



Lobbying for the Noyes Cut Project at the Georgia General Assembly. From left to right, Dover Bluff Member Fred Voigt, Satilla Riverkeeper Employee Rachel Thompson, Interim-Riverkeeper Clay Montague, Satilla Riverkeeper Laura Early, Satilla Riverkeeper Board Chair Jim Cottingham, and Dover Bluff Member and Satilla Riverkeeper Vice Chair Wilton DeLoach.

Satilla River Water Trail

The Satilla River is a beautifully wild but relatively unknown river. Before 2014, the river did not have signs or recreation maps to lead anglers and paddlers to public access points on the river.

In 2014, the Satilla Riverkeeper created a “water trail” on approximately 150 miles of the Satilla River.⁴ Water trails are designated routes along a water body that are maintained for recreational use. The Satilla Riverkeeper and partners were able to put up road signs identifying the landings, install kiosks, and provide recreational information to the public. The Satilla River Water Trail has been highly successful in ensuring public access to multiple landings on the Satilla River for fishing, swimming, and paddling.

⁴ Recently, Satilla Riverkeeper, Chris Bertrand, paddled the entire length of the Satilla River Water Trail and created a short video documenting the experience. See the video at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P7mtr6Qv_s&t=8s.

Satilla Riverkeeper continues to ensure that the Satilla River Water Trail is maintained and accessible. In 2022, Satilla Riverkeeper facilitated the installation and maintenance of seven new trashcans across multiple river landings on the Satilla River Water Trail.



Satilla Riverkeeper Ashby Nix and the community celebrating the opening of the Satilla River Water trail in 2014.



Satilla Riverkeeper’s Water Trail Map. This map is the first of its kind and has allowed countless anglers, paddlers, and boaters to explore new stretches of the river.



Satilla Riverkeeper, Chris Bertrand, with a pair of the seven trashcans installed at landings along the water trail.

Protecting the Satilla River Water Trail for Recreation

Prior to 2022, the Satilla River Water Trail was not listed as recreational waters under the Clean Water Act. This meant that the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (“EPD”) was not committed to protecting the Satilla River Water Trail year-round for swimming, paddling, and other recreational uses. Despite this, the Satilla River Water Trail was being used year-round for recreation.

In 2019, the Satilla Riverkeeper petitioned EPD to change the “designated use” of the water trail to “recreation.” In 2022, Satilla Riverkeeper succeeded in getting over 100 miles of the Satilla River Water Trail designated as recreational waters.⁵ Satilla Riverkeeper is currently

⁵ Just because waters are designated as protected for recreation, does not mean that they are safe to recreate in on any given day. A recreational designation does mean that EPD has committed to the goal of making the Satilla River Water Trail safe for recreation. Please refer to the Satilla Riverkeeper website or our data in the Swim Guide App to ensure that E. coli bacteria levels in the Satilla River are safe for swimming.

working to petition EPD to designate the remaining 30 miles of the Satilla River Water Trail as recreational.



Satilla Riverkeeper, Laura Early, enjoying the river after working to propose the Satilla River Water Trail for the “recreation designation.”



Floating down the Satilla!

Proposed Brantley County Landfill

In early 2015, the Brantley County Commissioners unwittingly voted to allow a landfill on the north side of Highway 82 near Atkinson. Satilla Riverkeeper and the community were kept in the dark about this proposed landfill because the County failed to hold legally required meetings to notify the public and allow for their participation and input.

Even though the landfill had been approved for a sparsely populated area on the north side of Highway 82, the landfill company decided an operation on the south side of the highway would be more profitable. A site on the south side would be located next to two elementary schools, would destroy important wetlands, and could negatively impact the health of the community and the Satilla River. Since 2015, the Satilla Riverkeeper has worked to educate and organize the community against the proposed landfill⁶ and hold the Brantley County Commissioners accountable for approving a landfill in violation of local and state law.⁷ In 2019, the Satilla Riverkeeper worked to introduce a bill in the Georgia General Assembly to prevent any landfills within three miles of Satilla River. The bill passed the Georgia Senate but was never introduced for a vote in the Georgia House of Representatives, because the Governor's Office told House leaders that the bill would be vetoed.

In 2022, the landfill company received a permit from Georgia's Environmental Protection Division to place a landfill on the south side of Highway 82 near schools, neighborhoods, and the Satilla River. Satilla Riverkeeper and the Brantley County Commissioners sued to overturn the illegal landfill permit. Satilla Riverkeeper won its case in Georgia's Administrative Court.

⁶ Not only was the proposed landfill in violation of local and state law, but it was also not needed. Brantley County has over 100 years of landfill capacity in local landfills.

⁷ Since 2016, the Brantley County Commissioners have fought to protect their constituents against the illegal landfill.

Currently, the illegal permit has been successfully overturned and the case is making its way through the appeal process.



Some of the wetlands threatened by the proposed landfill.



Satilla Riverkeeper, Chris Bertrand, and Southern Environmental Law Center Attorney, April Libscomp, in Nahunta at the Brantley County Courthouse.

Pollution Investigations and Permit Work

The Riverkeeper patrols the river by car, boat, and drone to investigate sources of illegal pollution. In 2022, the Satilla Riverkeeper conducted 38 pollution investigations and reported 11 different violations of law to state agencies and local governments. These investigations included fish kills, train derailments, and illegal construction sites.

The Riverkeeper also monitors all pollution permits and project proposals in the Satilla River Watershed. The Riverkeeper opposes and provides technical comments on any projects or permits that threaten the river. For example, in 2018, Satilla Riverkeeper commented against a proposal to build a spaceport on contaminated property in the Satilla River Estuary. This spaceport proposed launching rockets over sensitive habitats and people's homes.

Satilla Riverkeeper also leads grassroots campaigns to protect the river. For example, in 2015, Satilla Riverkeeper successfully organized riverside communities and prevented the Palmetto Pipeline from taking people's private property and tunneling across the Satilla River.



Satilla Riverkeeper, Chris Bertrand, holding up a dead fish at pollution investigation in Brunswick, Georgia.

Water Quality Testing Program

The Satilla Riverkeeper is the eyes and ears of the watershed. The Riverkeeper uses many tools to monitor pollution and threats to the river, but one of the most important is water quality testing.

In 2013, the Riverkeeper began a formal program to conduct water quality monitoring at “hot spots” on the river where pollution was suspected. In 2016, the Riverkeeper began testing the water quality at all the landings on the river to inform the community when the river was safe for recreation. In 2019, the Satilla Riverkeeper hired a full-time Water Quality Coordinator to test our waters, train a growing network of volunteer water testers, and educate the community about the importance of water quality. In 2022, the Riverkeeper conducted 235 water quality tests spanning from the river’s headwaters to its estuary.

To see if a specific stretch of the Satilla River is safe for swimming, look on our website or search Satilla River on the Swim Guide App.



New water testing volunteers getting trained at the Satilla Riverkeeper office at the Okefenokee Swamp Park.

Community Engagement

The Satilla Riverkeeper seeks to educate the community about the beauty and importance of our river. Through river-wide cleanups, paddles, social events, and fishing tournaments, the Riverkeeper engages with river lovers throughout our watershed.



Satilla Riverkeeper Gala at the Strickland's Lodge on the Little Satilla River. From left to right: Board Chair Jim Cottingham, Interim-Riverkeeper and Treasurer Clay Montague, Satilla Riverkeeper Laura Early, and Satilla Riverkeeper Ashby Nix.



Riverkeeper Gordon Rogers with James Holland of Altamaha Riverkeeper, and Burt Deener of DNR at the 2006 Satilla Riverkeeper Spring Gala.



2022 Satilla River fishing tournament winner for largemouth bass holding up his prized fish.



Satilla Riverkeeper led cleanup of an illegal dumping on the banks of the Satilla River.



Satilla Riverkeeper members celebrating an Oyster Roast.



A paddle trip on the Satilla.