

Restoring and protecting the Cahaba River and its rich diversity of life

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August 7, 2020

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Christopher M. Blankenship, Commissioner of Conservation
Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources
64 N. Union Street, Suite 468
Montgomery, AL 36130

Via email to: chris.blankenship@dcnr.alabama.gov

Regarding: Cahaba River Society support for restoration and reopening of Perry Lakes Park

Dear Commissioner,

Board Members

Kellie Clark
Stan Ellington
Kenya Goodson, PhD
Emily Harley-Reid
Bryance Metheny
Courtney Pittman
Stuart Roberts
Carolyn Ratliff
Jeet Radia, PE, CIH
Darryl Washington

The Cahaba River Society (CRS) is a 501c3 organization with a mission to restore and protect the Cahaba River watershed and its rich diversity of life. The diverse lives depending on the Cahaba include the people of central Alabama who rely on the river as well as its globally-significant diversity of freshwater wildlife.

We are writing to express our support for reopening Perry Lakes Park (PLP) as part of a new coalition of organizations, led by Alabama Audubon, committed to helping restore the park and establish sustainable, long-term solutions for ongoing PLP stewardship. For instance, our CRS Stewardship Program has engaged more than 300 volunteers annually to remove trash, invasive plants, and to restore native forests along the Cahaba's banks. We are confident there will be interest in directing some of that effort toward PLP restoration and maintenance. Also, we have a civil engineer on our Board of Directors who has volunteered to engage his staff to assess the structural integrity of PLP's infrastructure if ADCNR would like to have such an assessment. We are eager to activate other partnerships to help restore the Park.

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We believe it is essential to engage the interest and participation of Perry County and Black Belt residents in the enjoyment and maintenance of PLP, and we are working to include them in this effort. CRS is currently reaching out to expand our programs for education more strongly into Perry, Bibb and Dallas County. Our CLEAN environmental education program has brought over 38,500 youth and teachers into the Cahaba for hands-on environmental education, mainly in the upper watershed. We are exploring partnerships with schools and universities that are active in the Black Belt, and Perry Lakes Park has been, and can be again, a very special outdoor classroom and research base.

The Cahaba River Society has an Education/Recreation Program which has been introducing citizens to a variety of paddling experiences that show-case a variety of the Cahaba's settings. We do day trips, moonlight trips, overnight trips, Cahaba Lily trips, and trips to visit the ox bow lakes at PLP. Having a 10-haul canoe trailer allows us to offer the use of our canoes and gear to people who do not have that type of equipment. Also, quite a few of our participants bring their own paddle-craft so they may join us.

From 2002 through 2005, we conducted annual outings to PLP. From 2006 through 2019, we conducted both a spring and a fall outing to the Park. A rough and conservative estimate of the number of people attending our paddling/hiking trips over the past 18 years easily exceeds 600 people.

We understand you were able to see this property recently, so I am confident you have a good sense of what a wonderful place it is. The hiking trails winding through PLP provide a rare opportunity to see gorgeous, mature, bottomland hardwood and Loblolly forest. However, we want to be sure you appreciate how delightful it is to paddle amongst the cypress and tupelo forest. It is a rich and rarely-available experience that our guests have enjoyed so much.

We, and those who have joined us on our paddling adventures to the Park, have appreciated experiencing this delightful place. People are particularly fascinated to see the unusual fauna and flora that we find at PLP. To give you a sense of the wonderful creatures our guests have encountered on our outings to PLP, I want to share these photos either made at PLP or are typical of creatures found there:



Pectinatella, a freshwater Bryozoan from PLP



Paleamonetes, a freshwater shrimp common at PLP



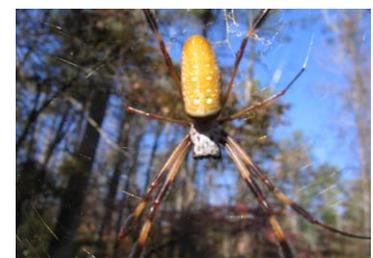
Ranatra, a water scorpion from PLP



Paddlers visit *Tupelo* at PLP



Banded Pygmy Sunfish from PLP



Nephila, Golden Silk Spider, also from PLP



Heron rookery, PLP, 2002



Crayfish burrow entrance, PLP



Dragonfly larva, *Hagenius*,



Female Anhinga, PLP 2004



Prothonotary warbler, PLP 2010



Box turtle munching a crayfish

In addition to the above examples, we also find the following:

- American alligator, especially common those years when a heron rookery was located on Round Lake. They are not seen on every trip, but are not uncommon.
- River otter, bold enough to approach or to apparently ignore our crowd of folks.
- A long list of birds that starts with Anhinga and runs the alphabet. A Bald eagle nest was readily seen from the entrance road for several years.
- Spotted gar and Longnose gar always make an appearance. The Lakes also have Bowfin.
- Wild honeybee colonies.
- Water scorpions, water boatmen, backswimmers with their inverted countershading coloration, dragonflies, damselflies, robber flies, praying mantises, and many other insects.
- Bladderwort, a carnivorous aquatic plant.
- Planorbid snails feeding on the Spatterdock.
- A variety of snakes, including Cottonmouth are seen. We yield r.o.w. and have never had a threatening encounter with them.
- ...and the list goes on.

It is fair to say that we always encounter something fascinating when we paddle the waters of PLP. Most people do not have an opportunity to encounter Alabama's wildlife firsthand the way they can paddling around on the Lakes.

Our standard visit to PLP includes a hike out to The Nature Conservancy's Barton's Beach, a spectacular sand and rock beach on the Cahaba River. You may already be aware that Barton's Beach is only accessible via PLP or by paddling the nine miles from a public access at the Heiberger bridge.

Existing challenges to paddling at Perry Lakes Park

We have used the Auburn Rural Design Studio's Suspension Bridge to access an unimproved canoe/kayak launch location. While being the best available location to put in and take out, it is a difficult access. It is a steep, earthen slope that becomes slippery and difficult for many of our participants. Previous attempts to improve this access location have failed. Along with Brian Rushing with the Center for Economic Development and the Cahaba Blueway Project, we are exploring ways to make this location easier to use. We would appreciate any guidance ADCNR might provide to improve accessibility to the Lakes for paddlers. We hope ADCNR will be amenable to the coalition designing and building a safe, sustainable and low-impact water access there.

Dr. Johnson has no doubt made you aware that a lot of people from Birmingham and all over the US visit PLP. Keeping this area open to the public will be a benefit to Perry County citizens, Alabama citizens and those visitors from all over the US. We look forward to a time when PLP may be reopened.

Sincerely,



Randall C. Haddock, PhD
Cahaba River Society

cc: Meg Ford Alabama Audubon, Black Belt Coordinator
Dr Ansel Payne Executive Director, Alabama Audubon
Dr Paul Johnson ADCNR's Alabama Aquatic Biodiversity Center
Bill Stark Marion State Fish Hatchery, ADCNR
Greg Lein Director, State Parks Division, ADCNR
Chuck Sykes Director, Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, ADCNR
Chris Green Fisheries Section Chief, ADCNR
Patti Powell McCurdy Director, State Lands Division, ADCNR
Cedrick Hudson Chair, Perry County Commission
Brett Harrison Perry County Commission
Ben Eaton Perry County Commission
Dr Thomas Wilson Perry County resident and PLP promoter