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What Lies Beneath the Rapids: The History of the Ocoee River

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While the Ocoee River offers all the excitement of world-class whitewater, it also has an interesting story on its development as one of the most popular whitewater rafting adventure areas in America, with more than 200,000 rafters braving the rapids every year. The river also offers spectacular views as it cuts through the rugged Ocoee River Gorge, a landscape dominated by rock bluffs and historic hydroelectric dams, powerhouses and a 1912 wooden flume line.

Since the late 1970s the Ocoee River in southeast Tennessee has offered five miles of challenging Class III and IV rapids on one of the country's premier rivers with over twenty continuous rapids with names like "Slingshot," "Diamond Splitter" and "Hell's Holes." Site of the 1996 Olympic whitewater slalom events, the upper Ocoee River is known around the world as the premier place for whitewater competition, but both the upper and middle sections of the river are also a great playground for the growing number of paddlers with guaranteed water release days available on this Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) dam-controlled river. Commercial outfitters offer guided trips on the middle section of the river March- October but it is open to private paddlers as well.

The site of a series of TVA hydroelectric power plant dams, the Ocoee River was a dry riverbed from 1912-1978. Its now-famous wooden flume, which diverted the river water around the riverbed and into each power plant, was condemned in 1976 for safety reasons, which put water back into the original riverbed. There was talk of disabling the flume, its size unprecedented for the region -14 feet wide and 11 feet deep- or of removing it altogether, but an outcry from local residents, preservationists, sentimental engineers and many others saved this monument to early hydraulic engineering. With TVA's help, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places. TVA rebuilt the old flume with treated wood, and by 1983 it was back in business, as it is today. Parts of it are visible from U.S. Highway 64, the nation's first National Forest Scenic By-Way, which runs alongside the Ocoee River.

As water again flowed down the riverbed and groups began showing up with army surplus rafts to run the rapids, local whitewater enthusiasts, long imagining the potential of the Ocoee River, saw the opportunity. They organized together to form the Ocoee River Council to lobby for downstream releases and in 1984 an act of Congress made that possible. By the mid-1980s, the Ocoee had hosted national and international slalom events and kayak rodeo championships. In 1996 the Olympic Slalom event put the Ocoee River on the international map. In 1977 there were only 3 companies owning a license to operate commercial rafting on the Ocoee. Today there are 24 whitewater companies and the result is a significant number of people

enjoying the river ever year bringing \$20 million dollars and 500 jobs annually to the region. In the early 1980s, an average of 60,000 people per year used the river. Today there are more users in July 2004 than there were in an entire average year in the 1980s and several whitewater outfitters are now expanding their services to include mountain bike riding excursions suitable for all age groups and abilities.

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