



Lake Conestee Nature Park Greenville, South Carolina 2017 Region 4 Winner

Key Project Lesson:

Overview

The **Conestee Foundation** was formed in 1998 for the **purpose** of acquiring and rehabilitating Lake Conestee, a watershed-derived brownfields site, into a **public greenspace to provide outdoor recreation, wildlife habitat, and an environmental education venue for the benefit of the Upstate region** of South Carolina. The site was comprised of a large millpond, over 135 acres, impounded by a large stone masonry dam constructed on the Reedy River in 1892.

The Lake Conestee project has been remarkably successful, and serves as the “poster child” for watershed-derived brownfields stories across America. Every old, industrial city in our country has the common legacy of having discharged their wastes to their “hometown rivers,” especially during pre-regulatory periods. In the case of Lake Conestee hundreds of sources in the 65 sq.mi. watershed upstream of our historic site contributed to the contamination accumulated in our lake over its 125 year history.

Lake Conestee Nature Park, opened in 2006, now expanded to **over 400 acres**, welcomes **over 100,000 visitors per year** to enjoy its **more than 12 miles of trails and wetland boardwalks**. The park provides exceptional ecosystem diversity with over three miles of riverine corridor along the Reedy River, extensive wetlands, uplands, forests, meadows, and an abundance of wildlife. LCNP has become extremely popular as a regional bird watching center and has been recognized by the Audubon Society as an **Important Bird Area of Global Significance** due to its diversity of its birdlife and unique and imperiled bird species at the site. The entirety of the park was granted special status as a **Wildlife Sanctuary** by an act of the South Carolina Legislature in 2016. In 2010 **the entirety of the Lake Conestee brownfields site, and the Lake Conestee Dam, were listed in the National Register of Historic Places.**

As a result of this project an area cursed with the reputation of “**Lake Co-Nasty**” has been resurrected to become a now beloved asset to Greenville. The surrounding area is no longer stigmatized and **development activity valued at over \$50M** is underway within a half-mile of the park. This economic impact is expected to more than double over the next ten years. Not only has the park contributed dramatically to the local economy, but also it provides amazing access to experience remarkable wildness within our urban community.

Featured Partners

- **The Conestee Foundation, Inc. (a non-profit corporation)**
- **South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control**
- Hargett Resources, Inc. / Pinnacle Consulting Group, Inc.
- Greenville County (to include Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism)
- City of Greenville
- South Carolina Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism, Recreational Trails Program
- South Carolina Conservation Bank
- Community Foundation of Greenville
- U.S. EPA, Region IV / American Recovery and Reinvestment Act
- USDA, Natural Resources Conservation Service

Primary Reason for Redevelopment

In the early 1990s Lake Conestee was recognized by the founders of the Conestee Foundation as a unique ecosystem on the Reedy River that manifested brownfields characteristics, although no industrial activity had occurred on the lake site *per se*. Based on the environmental history of the contributing 65 sq.mi. watershed area, the site was suspected to be seriously contaminated. The area surrounding the site was extremely economically depressed, with low housing stock, low income, low education levels, a high density of elderly residents, and highly stigmatized due to the perceived condition of the lake property. This was an **“environmental justice” community reeling from over a century of discharge of contaminants to the Reedy River from upstream municipalities and hundreds of industrial sources within the watershed.** Hence, this was a **“watershed-derived brownfields” site.** This site was so significantly stigmatized in a classic brownfields context that no developer, no agency of government, and no lending institution would remotely consider involvement or investment in the site. Contamination of lake sediments was suspected to be so substantial and extensive as to pose insurmountable hurdles in terms of costs, time, and efforts to address. The founders of the Conestee Foundation recognized that this site was a “time-bomb” that could release potentially huge volumes of contaminated sediment to the Reedy River, to hundreds of private properties, and to a public potable water supply reservoir serving Greenwood and Laurens Counties downstream. Alternatively, the founders envisioned the potential for stabilizing the site, including the Lake Conestee Dam, to provide a large nature park and wildlife sanctuary in the center of metropolitan Greenville County.

Approach

The **creation of a non-profit charitable organization to acquire the property as a non-responsible party** and to solicit public and private funds to convert the property into a park was **truly innovative, a perfect and elegant solution to a site no one wanted.** To the best of our determination, **this project approach, by a non-profit organization, to reclaiming a large, complex, NPL-caliber site, not for a real estate development project, but for a nature park, wildlife sanctuary and public greenspace is unprecedented nationally.**

The Lake Conestee brownfields project was conducted under a Voluntary Cleanup Contract negotiated by the Conestee Foundation (a non-responsible party) with the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control, signed in 2000. A series of in-depth studies of the Lake Conestee site were conducted from 2000 to 2008. These studies included two rounds of Targeted Brownfields Assessment studies, Human Health Risk Review, Ecological Risk Assessment, Groundwater Assessment, and Fish Tissue Analysis. The assessment confirmed **extensive contamination of the entirety of the lake site by metals, polyaromatic hydrocarbons, pesticides and PCBs, the “smorgasbord” of residues from 20th century industrial development upstream,** washed into the site via the Reedy River from hundreds of discrete sites upstream.

These studies determined that **“monitored natural recovery”** was the optimum management and recovery strategy for the site. The certification of the VCC provided for a Restrictive Covenant stipulating long-term site management measures. The MNR management strategy allows natural sedimentation processes to continue to naturally cap the older contaminated lake sediments. In addition, the Restrictive Covenant requires that the site be managed to prevent recreational patrons from disturbing sediments, and to minimize human exposure. Importantly, the **Restrictive Covenant requires that the Lake Conestee Dam be maintained in a manner that prevents the release of substantial quantities of contaminated sediment** downriver.

The Conestee Foundation has utilized a myriad of local, state, and federal agencies, as well as private, industrial, and foundation supporters to fund park expansion, construction of over 12 miles of trails and park amenities, and to develop and sustain nature education programming.

Innovative Techniques

Economic Development: The seed funding for the lake property and dam were provided from a State civil settlement from an unrelated pollution event, a major oil spill that occurred in 1996, affecting the Reedy River.

Additional Financing: The park is managed by the Foundation, a 501(c)(3) organization, and is supported by a partnership with the Greenville County Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, and by grants and contributions from a broad spectrum of agencies, corporate partners, and private foundations.

Land and Water Conservation: The park lands have been expanded to over 400 acres, including several properties that were underutilized and stigmatized by their proximity to the Lake Conestee brownfields site. A conservation easement on the Foundation's properties guarantee protection of the park property in perpetuity. As a result of the Conestee Foundation's partnerships with local agencies, an additional 400 acres of institutionally protected lands abut the park. Thus, nearly 800 acres of wild greenspace in the center of economically booming urban Greenville County is protected.

Additional Protections and Recognition: The entirety of the Lake Conestee site, including the dam, are listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The park is recognized by the Audubon Society as an Important Bird Area of Global Significance. The entirety of the park is protected by State statute as a Wildlife Sanctuary.

Challenges

The most substantial ongoing challenge is that our dam is 125 years old and its condition and structural integrity are of serious concern. Our assessments of this "Significant Hazard" dam indicate it is in poor condition and may not be repairable due to its age and construction. We are working closely with state and federal agencies to assess alternatives going forward, to include construction of a new dam.

Benefits

The Lake Conestee project has been incredibly successful. The park opened in October 2006 and now an estimated 100,000 patrons per year enjoy the park. The park lands have been expanded to over 400 acres, including several properties that were underutilized and stigmatized because of their proximity to the Lake Conestee brownfields site. A conservation easement on the Foundation's properties guarantee protection of the site in perpetuity.

The Lake Conestee Nature Park provides exceptional ecosystem diversity with over three miles of riverine corridor along the Reedy River, extensive wetlands, uplands, forests, meadows, and an abundance of wildlife. The park has become extremely popular as a regional birdwatching and eco-tourism destination. The entirety of the park was granted **special status as a Wildlife Sanctuary** by an act of the South Carolina Legislature in 2016. **In 2010 the entirety of the Lake Conestee brownfields site, and the Lake Conestee Dam, were listed on the National Register of Historic Places.**

As a result of this project an area blighted by the epithet "Lake Co-Nasty" has been resurrected to become a now a beloved asset to the local and the regional communities. The surrounding area is no longer stigmatized and development activity near the park is exploding. The **economic impact** of this project, which started with \$200K of seed investment, is now approaching **\$50M within a half-mile of the park.** The anticipated development value in the surrounding area projected over the next 10 years is well over another \$50M. Not only has the park contributed dramatically to the local economy, but it also provides exceptional **wildlife habitat, nature recreation, healthy outdoor activities, and a venue for environmental education.**



Carolina HS - Brownfields Study Group



2nd Graders – Lake Conestee Nature Park Field Trip

Project Address:	Conestee, South Carolina
Contact Person:	Dave Hargett, Executive Director, Conestee Foundation
Phone:	864.277.2004
Email Address:	dhargett52@gmail.com
Name of Lead Participant:	Conestee Foundation, Inc.
Number of Acres:	150 (expanded to 405)
Former Uses:	Industrial Millpond
Current Uses:	Nature Park, Wildlife Sanctuary, Public Greenspace, Ecosystem Services, Recreational Trails, Nature Education
Former number/Types of jobs:	NA
New number/Types of jobs:	10 FTE (at site), Numerous others in surrounding developments
Type of Site:	Watershed-Derived Brownfields Site – Monitored Natural Recovery, Downstream of 65 sq.mi. old industrial watershed
Regulatory Program:	SCDHEC Bureau of Land and Waste Management, Brownfields Program
List of Major Contaminants:	Chromium, Lead, Zinc, Copper, Mercury, other Metals, PAHs, Pesticides, PCBs
Magnitude of Contamination:	Very extensive. 35 distinct ecologically significant risk-driving compounds. An NPL-caliber site.
Greatest Challenge(s):	125 year old dam is the waste containment structure protecting downstream natural resources, properties, and public water supply
Length of Time to Remediate Site:	Monitored Natural Recovery
Primary Reason for Redevelopment:	Imminent Threat to Downstream Public Infrastructure, including Public Water Supply
Years Abandoned or Challenged:	28 years abandoned until VCC in 2000
Cleaned up under Consent Decree:	NRP VCC. Monitored Natural Recovery strategy.
List of Financial Assistance:	SCDHEC, USEPA R.4, ARRA, State and Local Agencies
Other Financial Techniques Utilized:	Brownfields Revolving Loan Fund / ARRA / State Budget Proviso
New Tax Revenues:	NA – non-profit project, stimulation of nearby development, hospitality and tourism tax revenues
Community Outreach Activities:	Public Education, Stormwater Education, Public Recreation, Citizen Science
Innovative Environmental:	Conservation Easement, Nature Park, Monitored Natural Recovery, Watershed Education, Legacy Contamination
Regulatory Techniques:	VCC, Monitored Natural Recovery
Innovative Remediation Techniques:	Natural capping, maintaining stable sediment environment
Innovative Economic Development:	Extensive partnering w/ other agencies & other NPOs
Land Conservation:	Conservation Easement, Use of State Conservation Bank
Sustainable Development:	Perpetual Protection of the Site from Development
Federal Partners:	USEPA, USDA-NRCS, USACOE