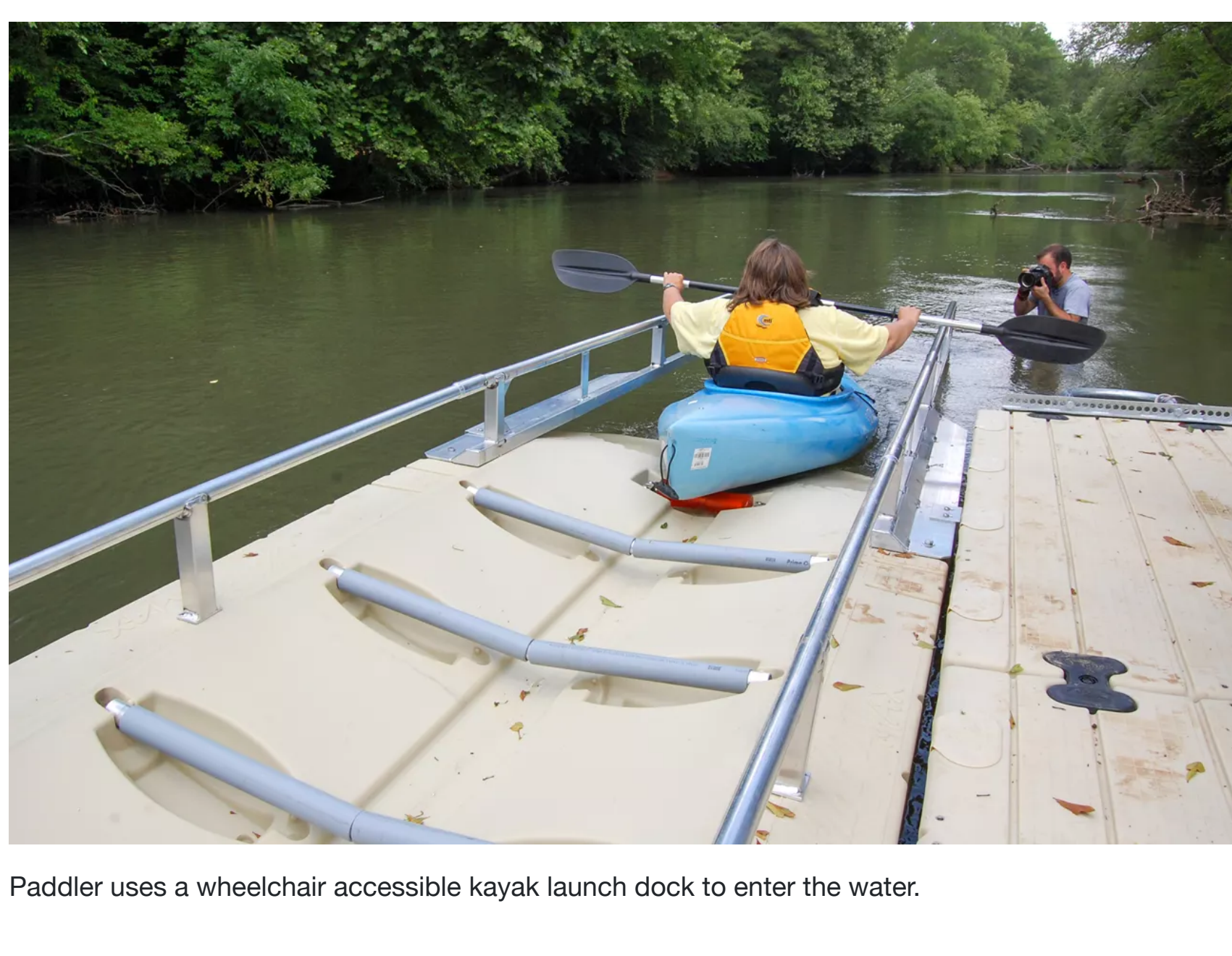


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Wheels to Water: Inclusive Recreation on the Saluda River



Paddler uses a wheelchair accessible kayak launch dock to enter the water.

By Ember Rensel

Winding calmly toward the Atlantic Ocean from the Blue Ridge Mountains, the Saluda River makes its way through northwestern South Carolina, brushing past old mill towns, rolling countryside and historic landmarks. Once a vital piece of the area's textile industry, the river became a quiet source for hydroelectric power while its potential for recreation went unnoticed. Until recently.

About 10 years ago, Matt Schell, the manager of Anderson County's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism, saw a chance to create a recreational space available to everyone along the Saluda River. Since the project's public debut in 2009, Anderson County has been committed to meeting and exceeding the requirements set for accessibility by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Determined to make the Saluda River an opportunity for all people to connect with an incredible natural resource, he reached out to the National Park Service – Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program.

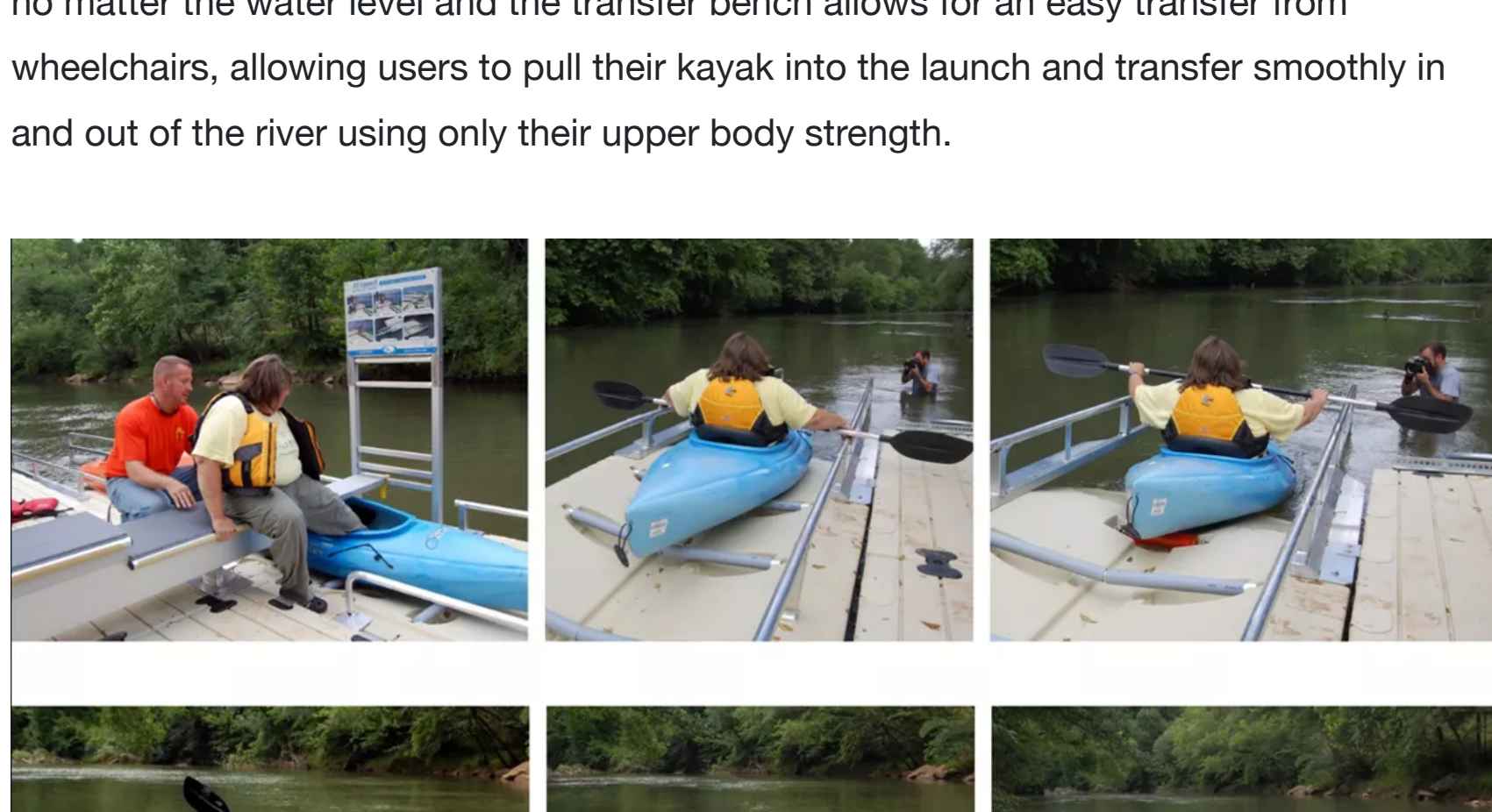
A River for Everyone: Making it Accessible

With the Saluda River to the east and Lake Hartwell and the Savannah River to the west, Anderson County is surrounded by water. "We're bounded by these beautiful natural resources which make Anderson County a stand-out," Schell said. "But there was little to no diversity in recreation development or ADA access on them." Though the lakes have consistently attracted anglers to the area, the Saluda River was largely overlooked.

"It started with Matt talking about these 48-miles and one access point at Dolly Cooper property in Anderson County," said Bill Lane, a landscape architect for the National Park Service – Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program. "He wanted to put an ADA facility there with a dock that floats up and down... Since then it's just grown like crazy."

The growth did not come easily, however. From the river itself, which is known to fluctuate up to 19-feet in some sections, to the seven hydroelectric dams that begin, interrupt and end the river corridor, and neighboring counties that were hesitant to commit support, the project encountered its fair share of roadblocks. Despite the challenges, Schell and his team were steadfast in their mission of universal accessibility, making sure that every step they took aligned with the requirements set by the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The fluctuating water level, usually a challenge for river access, lent itself well to their plans. "We were able to establish a county-model (with a goal of statewide adoption) of the EZ Dock floating kayak launch," explained Schell. "It floats on the river similar to a dock system, but it has a transfer bench." The floating launch grants access to the river no matter the water level and the transfer bench allows for an easy transfer from wheelchairs, allowing users to pull their kayak into the launch and transfer smoothly in and out of the river using only their upper body strength.



Usually bound to her wheelchair, Sandy Hanebrink is an Anderson County resident who is quadriplegic and has limited upper body mobility. She is an ADA advocate and consultant and played a large role in the onset of access development. Photos courtesy of Glenn Brill.

Once they had the project off the ground, they needed support. Bill Lane officially joined the project in 2013 and kickstarted community engagement in Anderson County. Lane aided with mapping the river and access points, developing a paddle guide and working with local partners and power companies with investment in the river.

"Bill coming in garnered a lot of attention," Schell said. "You know, when we're spinning the same wheels for a little while, adding that extra life into [the project] in the form of just being able to say, 'recognized by the National Park Service' does do a lot of good."

Lane organized a one-day design charrette for the community members and stakeholders to develop an ADA accessible solution for getting canoes and kayaks around a dam in Piedmont. More than 15 members from the American Society of Landscape Architects in South Carolina volunteered their expertise at the charrette to help make the community's idea a reality.

With the National Park Service on-board, the project started to ramp up.

In June 2015, the project was featured on the Americans with Disabilities Act 25th Anniversary Legacy Tour. In one year, an exhibition bus made 115 stops, covering ground in 33 states across the country, to raise awareness for the 25th anniversary of the Americans with Disabilities Act. "They stopped at all these major cities that were doing notable ADA inclusion projects across the United States," Schell said. "They were in all the major cities... the only place on that roster that was not a major city was Anderson, South Carolina... the tour featured stops on the Saluda River as well as Lake Hartwell. It was a huge compliment to what we as a county were doing."

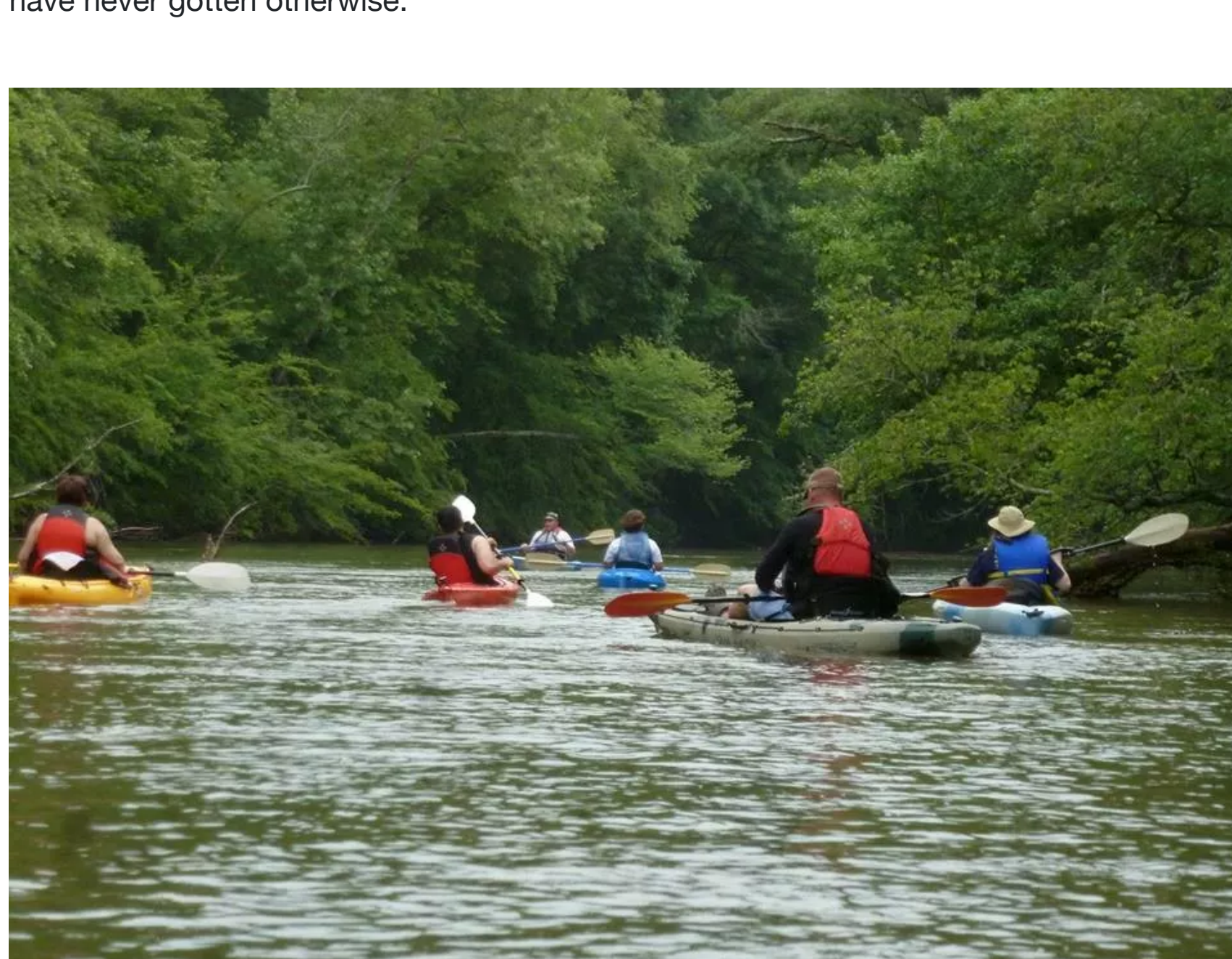
Being recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act was a breakthrough for the project, putting the river's potential for inclusive tourism and recreation on the state and national radar. "That recognition really just helped our administration and our county council... knowing that we're doing the right thing," Schell said.

Every partner and sponsor is vital to the success of the project. With the local government and community supporting the project's goals and high standards for accessibility, potential partners down the river began to take notice.

A River by Everyone: Partnering with the Community

For the past 10 years, Anderson County has partnered with local businesses to host the project's only paddling event: the Saluda River Rally. Not only does the event bring awareness to the project, but it also kicks off the summer recreation season, as it takes place on the first Saturday of June. Boats gather at the banks of the river at Dolly Cooper Park and enjoy a day filled with boating, bluegrass and barbecue. "It's like a rural miniature Woodstock going on by the river... It's a phenomenal event that just grows in size year after year," Lane said. "We get to expose people to ADA accessibility that may never have been exposed to it until they get here."

The river rally is an inclusive recreation and family event. "We also use it as a Special Olympics fundraiser so that our local athletes are often on the river with the participants," Schell elaborated. "We have seen folks age 7 to 70 with all levels of abilities on the river after traveling from as far as California, Missouri and Connecticut. This has been all about inclusive access on the river... to give some people a river experience that they would have never gotten otherwise."



River rally participants enjoy kayaking down the Saluda River. Photo courtesy of Matt Schell, Anderson County's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

The river rally has become a major tourism event for Upstate South Carolina, spanning three towns: Powdersville, Piedmont and Pelzer. Put on collectively by the entire Anderson County community, more than 30 partners and sponsors coordinate, financially support and facilitate the day-long fundraiser. In 2019, more than 350 people from across the country registered to participate. All participants paddle the first nine miles from Dolly Cooper Park in Powdersville to the downtown Piedmont Dam.

About a third of the adventure-goers portage (carry their boats) around the dam after a relaxing layover at the Saluda River Grill, where food and music are provided, and continue another six miles downstream to Pelzer.

The Piedmont Dam is one of seven dams along the 48-mile project corridor. When the project first started, the hydropower companies were concerned about the potential for paddlers to sustain injuries while portaging around the dams.

"It was very serious," Schell said. "There would be alarms that would sound if they [the hydropower companies] saw somebody on their property." Even river clean-ups near the dam were supervised by the dam management groups and required signed waivers.

Today, Enel Green Power, the group that manages the dam, is the title sponsor for the event and provides a large portion of funding for the Saluda River Rally. "We [Schell and Lane] were able to... communicate how much of a recreation component was interrupted... and as a navigable waterway, they [hydropower companies] have an obligation to help people get around a dam and back on the river, or at least partner for it," Schell said. "We've actually had a 180-degree change in perception and perspective; creating the first of many great relationships on the river. We still have to sign waivers, but there's not that fear."

Now, all three hydropower companies sponsor the river rally, including Duke Energy and Northbook Carolina.

"Some of these hydropower [impoundment] sections can support small watercraft, so there are a couple with a future boat ramp in mind," Schell said. These boat ramps will be accessible and are designed to give access to emergency responders, who have been limited in their ability to assist with water rescues up to this point.

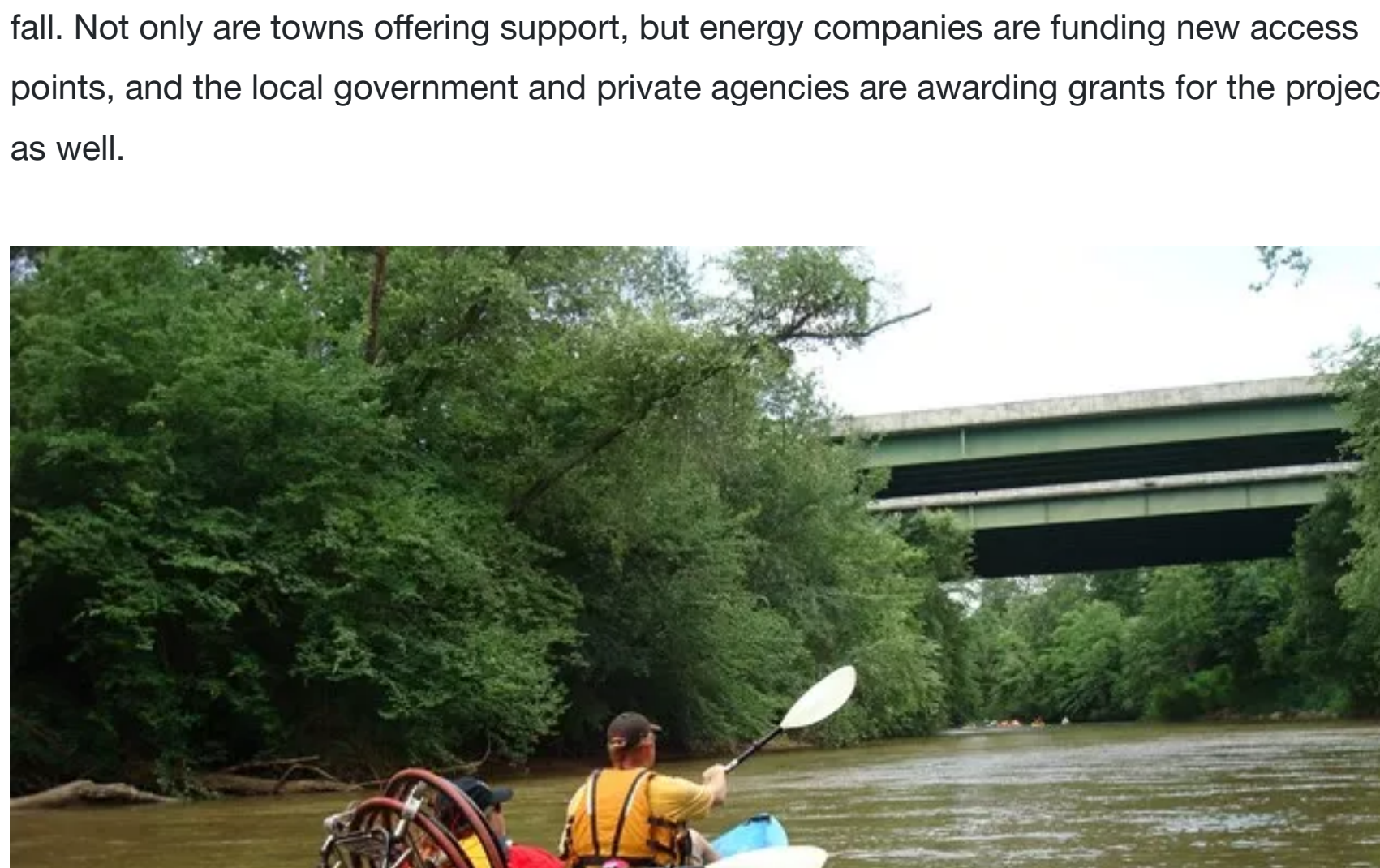
The community benefits of the project don't stop there.

Since the river rally began, Piedmont and Powdersville have experienced economic development in the that had been "on pause" since the mills went out of business. "This recreational trail is helping to revive several towns on our eastern boundary... Powdersville is our fastest growing unincorporated town in Anderson County," Schell said.

This notable development has added to the project's recent momentum. In 2019, the project saw significant progress. The growth in the local economies allowed these small towns to financially support the Saluda River Blueway, something that they were not able to offer when the project began.

"These are really small towns, very rural in nature... so for them to pull their money and all their energy into something very unique like this is awesome," Lane said.

Building on the momentum that evolved when the National Park Service began collaborating with the community, Anderson County acquired another access point in Piedmont and partnered with the City of Belton on a launch that is expected to open this fall. Not only are towns offering support, but energy companies are funding new access points, and the local government and private agencies are awarding grants for the project as well.



River Rally participants paddle with a wheelchair down the Saluda. Photo courtesy of Matt Schell, Anderson County's Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism.

These towns are committed to supporting the Saluda River Blueway not only for the development it has brought, but for its mission of giving all Americans a chance to recreate on the river. Lane came away from the project motivated to take his new understanding of accessibility to other National Park Service projects. "It got me looking at other access points that I've worked on in the past on other water trails and going back to my past partners to make all their access points ADA accessible," he said. "Kudos to Matt [Schell] for doing that and getting me inspired to not ignore that user group."

As the project continues to gain support, Schell and his team are looking beyond their 48 miles of water to the potential for spreading inclusive, accessible tourism and recreation access across the entire state of South Carolina.

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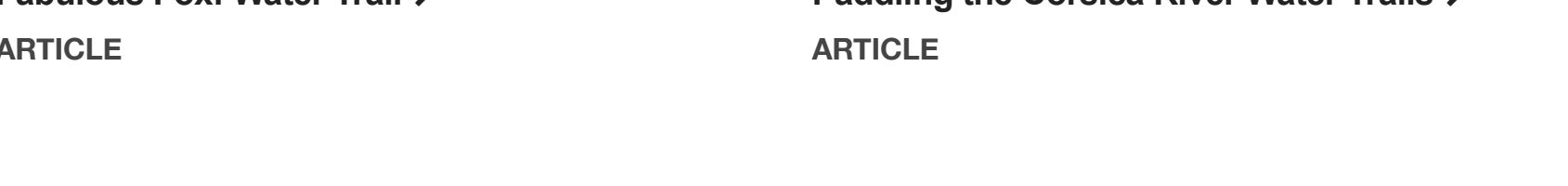
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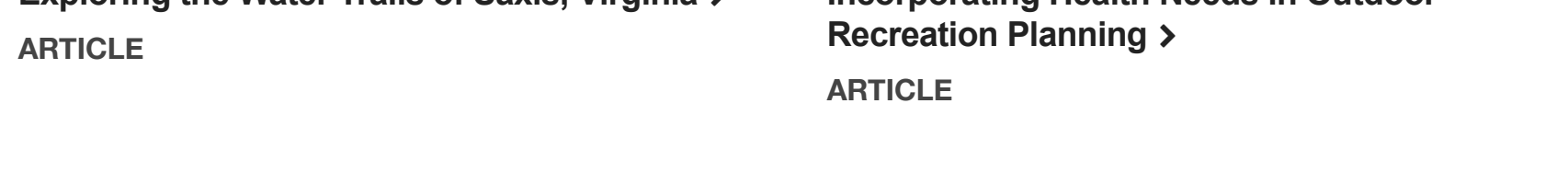
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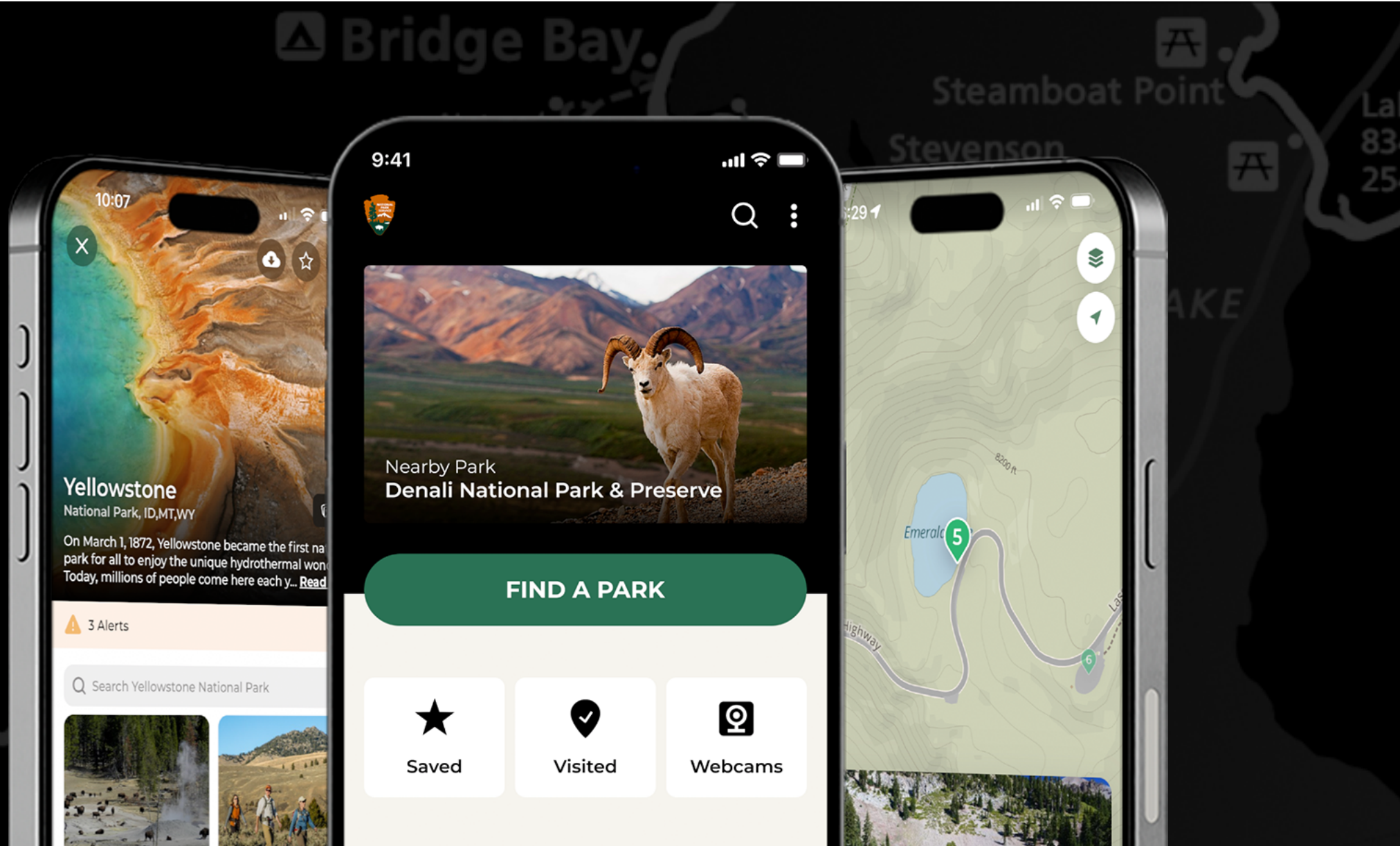
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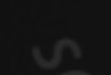
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