

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Opinion

Real Life with Nedra Rhone

RHONE: For Atlanta's forgotten river, connection is protection



Credit: Flux Projects

Artists Rachel Parish and Sarah Cameron Sunde embarked on a 450-mile journey down the South River to the Atlantic Ocean. They will share their experiences in several art installations around the city. Courtesy of Flux Projects

By [Nedra Rhone](#)

July 31, 2024

The South River has been called “Atlanta’s Forgotten River.”

This is not a nickname you would expect for a river that connects to the source of drinking water for millions of people here and in Middle Georgia. But, in the 1880s, headwater streams of the South River were piped to carry sewage away from wealthy Atlanta neighborhoods. Eventually, the river was overcome by pollution.

That would continue for decades, with the river hidden in an urban landscape. Through the years, agreements have been reached to clean up the waterway, with varying degrees of compliance. Though water quality has improved, the river continues to be fouled by sewer systems and spills, according to the South River Water Alliance (SRWA), which has worked for two decades to bring awareness to this plight and to hold local and state agencies accountable for the many ways in which they have failed the river and the people who live along the watershed.

“There is a culture of avoidance,” said Margaret Spalding, executive director of the SRWA. “It goes hand in hand with pollution. Hide it so you can pollute it, and pollute it so you hide it.”

I first learned about the South River almost 10 years ago when I discovered a tributary of Intrenchment Creek about half a mile from my home. Each time I happened upon another portion of Intrenchment Creek, which is a tributary of the South River, I wondered why I didn’t know more about the river and its significance in Atlanta.

Back in my days as an environmental reporter, I met Heather Hansman, a fellow journalist who had a similar obsession with the Green River. It’s a tributary of the Colorado River. Hansman, who has been rafting since she was a teen, set off to navigate part of the river to learn more about it.

She shared her observations about how the river impacts those who live nearby in the book “Down River,” which I found inspirational. I wanted to travel the length of the South River in a similar manner. But my lack of time, money and skill got in the way of my ambitions.

I was admittedly jealous when I learned that artists Rachel Parish and Sarah Cameron Sunde had embarked on a river trip that they dubbed “Atlanta to the Atlantic,” which took them on a 450-mile kayak paddle from a shallow point of the South River at Browns Mill Golf Course all the way to the Atlantic Ocean at Sapelo Island. It was part of Flux Projects’ multiyear series that examines Atlanta’s relationships to water.

The trip ended in late June, and I caught up with Parish when she was back at home. She was feeding her kids on a Saturday afternoon when she regaled me with stories about the first day in the water — a 5-mile trip during which they had to get in and out of the kayaks about 60 times because the water levels varied and the course was filled with obstacles. Even with the challenges, Parish saw early in their journey the potential for reconnecting people to the river.

“We talk about water in Atlanta as if it is a problem, but people aren’t very far away from being in relationship with it, and that is something I got to see throughout the whole trip, particularly in Atlanta, where people were excited to learn about this river they knew nothing about,” Parish said.

City design has physically turned us away from the South River, sending it into hidden spaces where we often only discover it by surprise. As artists, Parish and Sunde felt they could bring a different type of attention to the water and invite people to view it in new and interesting ways.

Using their learnings and experiences from the trip, they will create several art installations to debut this fall. This isn't just an opportunity for education. It is, in many ways, a call to action — a reminder to the people that the river can only thrive when they foster a connection to it. Recreational engagement with the South River is what will bring it out of the shadows and force local and state agencies to ensure it is healthy and protected.

The South River originates in East Point and runs 60 miles southeast through Atlanta before emptying into Jackson Lake. It is a headwater of the largest freshwater system in the state of Georgia, flowing to the Ocmulgee, which becomes the Altamaha.

People's engagement with the South River changes as it flows. In the urban areas, the relationship is often clouded by pollution and secrecy. Downstream from Atlanta, more people interact with the water. But, even in rural areas, there isn't a lot of public access, said Spalding, who spent five days on the trip with Parish and Sunde.

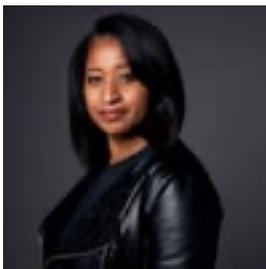
The SRWA has an ongoing project to create a system of trailheads with parking and access ramps at different points along the South River. About 13 miles of the South River have already been upgraded to recreational status, which raises the standard for protection. SRWA plans to extend the system to the entire 40 miles of the South River that are navigable. Doing that will take time, money and a coalition of partners, as well as projects like "Atlanta to the Atlantic," which encourage public support.

Parish says the art installations — to be placed in Kirkwood Urban Forest, Arthur Langford Jr. Park and Perkerson Park — will offer spaces where people can have a proximal relationship with water. The artists will use natural and found materials in a strong and inviting color palette to create spaces for people to reflect on and listen to the water.

When more people connect or reconnect to the water, it will improve the quality and care of the river. And that will eventually ensure the South River is no longer forgotten.

Read more on the Real Life blog (www.ajc.com/opinion/real-life-blog/) and find Nedra on Facebook (www.facebook.com/AJCRealLifeColumn) and Twitter ([@nrhoneajc](https://twitter.com/nrhoneajc)) or email her at nedra.rhone@ajc.com.

About the Author



Nedra Rhone is a lifestyle columnist for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution where she has been a reporter since 2006. A graduate of Columbia University School of Journalism, she enjoys writing about the people, places and events that define metro Atlanta.