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GERALD THURMOND

Payson Kennedy, The Nantahala Outdoor Center, & Troubled Times in North Carolina’s Whitewater Recreation Industry


When writer and naturalist George Ellison moved to the Smokies in 1973, he heard about an unlikely little business that had started up the year before on the nearby Nantahala River. A couple of idealistic, nature-loving entrepreneurs from Atlanta had come to the North Carolina mountains with the strange notion that they could make a living by putting city people in big rubber rafts and floating them down the local rivers. Ellison and many other mountain residents wouldn’t have guessed that such an impractical enterprise could ever succeed. Now outdoor adventure and whitewater boating are among the biggest industries in the Southern mountains, and that little business, called the Nantahala Outdoor Center, or NOC, has become an $11 million-plus enterprise with outposts on five rivers, restaurants, a conference center, cabins, and retail stores. The NOC employs 80 to 90 people in the off-season and more than 500 people during the peak summer months; it is nationally famous as a guiding service, river outfitter, and especially as a school for whitewater boating. Outdoor writers have called the NOC instructional school the Harvard, or if the writer is even more enthusiastic, the Oxford, of whitewater kayaking.

Given the type of business, outdoor adventure tourism, and the time when it began in the early ’70s, it might seem that the NOC had been founded by a young, wild-eyed, back-to-the-land, counter-culture, hippie-
loner entrepreneur. That assumption couldn’t be more wrong. In fact, this essay could be subtitled “how yet another librarian helped transform the Southern mountains” because the person who most put his mark on the Nantahala Outdoor Center was a former librarian from Georgia Tech named Payson Kennedy.

The first librarian to do it was Horace Kephart, author of Our Southern Highlanders, published first in 1913, re-issued multiple times, and still arguably one of the most widely read books on the Southern mountains. Kephart, like Payson Kennedy and his NOC, played a central role in the creation of an important landmark in the area. In Kephart’s case, it was the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. There the similarity ends. Kephart, in the depths of a personal crisis, abandoned his wife and six children and tried to lose all the trappings of his old life, and civilization in general, by escaping to the Smokies. Payson Kennedy, a military veteran, Boy Scout leader, and family man, brought his ideals of community and his family to the Appalachians with him.

Payson dreamed of not only creating a new tourist attraction, but also setting up a business that followed unconventional rules. Instead of an industry that adhered to the abuse-it, use-it-up, and get-out philosophy that has governed so many of the enterprises that have come to the mountains from the outside, Payson wanted his business to be a community of friends enjoying nature and each other and exploiting neither. It’s a beautiful idea, but also a risky undertaking in today’s get-what-you-can, as-much-as-you-can, conservative, post-environmentalist, self-righteous, me-first world. In retrospect, his project was probably doomed to disappointment if not outright failure. The willingness to go against the spirit of the times is one of the things that makes the Nantahala Outdoor Center admirable.

Late in March 2003, my seven-year-old son, Ben, and I drove up in the mountains to interview the then semi-retired Payson Kennedy at his home beside the Nantahala River in North Carolina. We came through the Pisgah National Forest and spent the night in a cabin near the college town of Cullowhee, home to Western Carolina University. The next morning we went to the Nantahala to meet Payson.

The Kennedys’ house is set back from the river behind the old rock building that once served as the Nantahala Outdoor Center’s headquarters. It is an idyllic scene. The house is a beautiful, wooden two-story structure with a glass front overlooking what was once a part of the riverbed before the Nantahala was diverted in the 1940s. Inspired by the many NOC trips he led to Nepal, Kennedy built a steeply terraced garden beside the house, that, when we visited him, grew spinach and turnip greens.

At the time we talked, Payson Kennedy was almost 70 years old. He had fine features with a neatly trimmed white beard and hair. He was slight of build, but fit and muscular. His speech was slow, courteous, and deliberative, as befitted a former academic and a Southern gentleman of an earlier generation. He frequently paused in the middle of an answer, reconsidered
what he had said, and started again. This habit made transcribing his replies difficult, but it also suggested that what he said was what he truly believed.

Payson, Ben, and I sat around a wooden table in the kitchen while Payson’s wife, Aurelia, a short, white-haired woman, a blur of energy and clearly a force to be reckoned with, bustled around the house, getting the day’s activities underway. I began by asking Payson what originally brought him to the mountains.

“Paddling. I was an open boat canoeist. I used to come up to run the Nantahala River with family, often with friends, then with the Georgia Canoeing Association.”

Payson asked my son how old he was and said that at about nine years old, a little older than Ben, he had started paddling. He learned in a special session for Boy Scouts and Cub Scouts at a private camp in north Georgia in the summer of 1942 and did an overnight canoe trip with the scouts the next year. As a Boy Scout, he received a canoeing merit badge. In the summers of 1950 and 1951, he was a counselor at the YMCA camp in north Georgia, where he continued to develop his canoeing skills. He paddled Fontana Lake with the YMCA group, but they didn’t paddle the Nantahala then. In 1954 he graduated from Emory University, where he majored in philosophy and sociology. After graduating, he went into the army, but he still kept up with his canoeing:

“When I was in the army after I graduated from college, I bought a Folbot (an early canvas folding kayak) from my commanding officer out in Spokane, Washington, started paddling some of the creeks and rivers, just kept at it gradually. Then when we moved back to Atlanta, this friend my wife and I had known for a while had a day camp on the Chattahoochee River. We lived out at his camp for a while and started canoeing more and more. We’d come up to the Nantahala then and paddle it. It was one of our favorites.”

* * * * *

In 1959 Payson Kennedy came back to Emory and earned an M.A. in sociology. He received a library science degree from the University of Illinois in 1961 and returned to Atlanta with his family for a job in the library at Georgia Tech.

* * * * *

I tried to get Payson Kennedy’s wife, Aurelia, to

Payson Kennedy. Photo by Gerald Thurmond
join the interview, but she begged off, saying that she had too much to do. After a while, she left the house to run errands. The place seemed unnaturally quiet and drained of energy without her.

By all accounts, Aurelia was an important part of the success of the NOC. She, like Payson, is an accomplished canoeist. She began competing in open canoe contests in 1967, paddling tandem with her husband, and she had paddled the Nantahala River a full decade before Payson himself did. She and Payson had married in the summer of 1954, after his graduation from Emory University. As a wedding present, one of their friends took Aurelia, called Relia by those who know her, to paddle the Nantahala. She was one of the first women to run the Nantahala Falls in a canoe.

*          *         *         *

The friend with the day camp where Payson and Aurelia Kennedy lived was Horace Holden. He had known Relia since they were toddlers going to the Atlanta First Presbyterian Church, and Relia had worked at his summer camp for several seasons. He was the co-founder of the Nantahala Outdoor Center with Payson and the one who made the first steps in founding the NOC. The two had met when they were teenagers. They were teammates together on the Emory University swim team. Payson said, “He was the one who really started the Georgia Canoeing Association and encouraged my interest in canoeing. I helped out a bit at his summer camp but wasn’t on the payroll.”

Payson had seen the land around the Nantahala River many times when he had brought his Boy Scout troop canoeing or backpacking in the North Carolina mountains, but it was Horace Holden who purchased the property on the Nantahala River that was to become the Nantahala Outdoor Center.

“Horace found this spot on the river which was the Tote ’n’ Tarry Hotel Restaurant and Gift Shop, asked the owner if he would consider selling it, and bought it. He wanted a place to bring the kids from his summer camp in Atlanta up to the mountains and the rivers. I had been thinking about leaving Georgia Tech to start a canoe program for the North Carolina Outward Bound School. I found that I was more interested in outdoor recreation than academics, so I was thinking about changing and he knew that, so he said, ‘I bought this property, why don’t you go up there and run it?’ So we together dreamed up the idea of calling it an outdoor center and just catering to hikers and backpackers and river runners and fisherman and climbers—but we ended up focusing primarily on whitewater paddling.”

That first season, in 1973, Payson asked for a leave of absence from his duties at the library to try out the idea. Aurelia, a much respected elementary school teacher, worked for several years in Andrews, North Carolina, and she had summers off. Some students from Tech’s Outing Club which Payson advised, several young men from his Explorer Scout Post, a local man who had worked for the previous owner, and Jim Holcombe joined them. Holcombe is still working for the NOC.

This venture was not the scheme of a footloose young man. Payson Kennedy was almost 40 years old when he and Horace Holden started the NOC.
Aurelia and he had four children, who were 10, 12, 14, and 16 at the time. It was a bold and risky move by a man with lots of responsibilities who, like Horace Kephart before him, had grown restless with his job in the library and his life.

Holden stayed in Atlanta, but after that first summer the Kennedy family moved to the mountains to live permanently. Life was difficult for them there. They had to change residences constantly. During the summers, they would live in a house on Wesser Creek that Horace had bought. In winter, the Kennedy family would move into the cramped manager’s quarters of the old Tote ‘n’ Tarry Hotel, which was closed for the season. Later they were able to rent the stone house that now serves as the offices of the NOC. In 1980 the owners of the stone house decided they were not going to move back to the area, so they sold it to the Center. Payson and family moved into a “sort of shack” nearby while the stone house was fixed up as offices for the Center. Relia then began negotiating to get a permit from the Tennessee Valley Authority to build their present house on the floodplain of the Fontana Reservoir. It took them two years, with the help of other NOC members, working whenever they could, to finish their house.

The business end of the NOC in the beginning had its difficulties too. “It was kind of touch-and-go as to whether we would make it financially.” Payson explained,

“The Center lost money the first three years of operation, so we were kind of operating on a shoestring. But there was a lot of excitement and enthusiasm and that convinced me that it would be successful eventually. It seemed like everybody who went, especially on the Chattooga, came off just exhilarated and talking about bringing their friends back. And lots of them did, so it primarily grew by word of mouth.”

Early on, Payson and Horace envisioned the NOC as something more than an ordinary business:

“From the beginning, as a former sociologist, I thought of it as a social experiment. We always had the idea of employee ownership so people wouldn’t feel like they were working for someone else’s benefit. It was a mutual thing. The basic idea of it not being just a business but a community with shared interests was there initially. So employee ownership was more a means to an end, I would say.”

The plan to create employee ownership and community developed over time. When Payson Kennedy and his family moved up to the mountains, they had a 50/50 partnership with Horace Holden. The second season of operation, some of the employees bought stock in the NOC, and Horace and Payson began giving four shares of stock a month to any employees who worked for them at least a year. Employee ownership developed from there. As Payson said, “It was always an idea of not somebody working for somebody else but a group of friends who enjoyed paddling and working together to introduce others to the activities.”
As Payson’s ideas about the NOC developed, he adopted some of the principles from the successful worker cooperatives inspired by the Spanish Catholic priest Jose Maria Arismendi and the Scott Bader Company, which was transformed into a cooperative by its Quaker founder. One of those principles was to set a limit for the salary difference between the highest paid person in the organization and the lowest paid employee. Several years into the existence of the NOC, a policy went into effect that prohibited the highest salary from exceeding four times the lowest one. Another principle was worker control. In 1990 the stock ownership in the NOC was reorganized. The employee stock option program trust acquired over 50 percent of the stock. Horace’s stock share went down to around 5 percent of the total shares and Payson’s down to 15 percent. Individual employees owned the rest. Eventually almost two-thirds of NOC stock was in the employee stock option program. In the last few years, this percentage has been declining because participation in the program through a 401K plan has been frozen.

The motive for founding or working for the NOC was certainly not financial gain. In the beginning, employees made only about $20 per week plus room and board, and for the first three years, Payson and Aurelia each received $150 per week.

In some sense, pay was irrelevant to the success of NOC because what attracted people to work for the Center was a lifestyle, not money. As a result, Payson has had extraordinarily able and dedicated employees:

“We get outstanding staff. It’s incredible. That’s been one of the most fascinating things to me. Over the years we’ve had at least a dozen lawyers on the staff. One guy was a partner in one of the biggest law firms in Raleigh. He came here and worked for a summer on a sabbatical and his sons and wife have both worked here. We’ve had other lawyers who’ve just worked on the staff for years. We’ve had lots and lots of nurses and several PhDs on the staff; we’ve had a couple of doctors on the staff. We’ve got one veterinarian who’s been a full-time staff member for a long time. All kinds of people who’ve had successful careers and people who’ve got good educations but just find that whatever they were trained in they weren’t enjoying or weren’t enjoying as much as backpacking, climbing, mountain biking, paddling and want to live a different lifestyle. For many of them they do it for a few years and then go back, but some of them stay permanently.”

The NOC was very much a family effort. All four of Horace Holden’s sons worked at the Center at one time or another, and all four of the Kennedy children worked as guides while they were in school. Payson and Aurelia’s oldest daughter still works for the NOC.

Not only was the organization of the NOC a daring venture, but also in the early days, just canoeing whitewater rivers was considered a novel and dangerous challenge.

“It was pretty exciting for us to run Nantahala Falls. The first guidebook to the rivers of this area was written by Randy Carter, and he described
Nantahala Falls as a Class 5. That was for canoes rather than kayaks. He talked about only experts running it and how difficult and exciting it was. Now a lot of people will run it their first time canoeing. In our courses, we don’t normally run it the first day, but if they are here for a five-day course they will be running it by the end.”

Dealing with the attitudes of some of the local people was also a challenge:

"Initially, like always, the reaction of local people was mixed. There was a good bit of resentment of folks from Atlanta coming in and they assumed making lots of money and using one of their resources that they had fished in and all but never made much money out of. We had a few incidents. Someone cut a tree down and dropped it across the river; spread tacks at the put-in and the parking area, little things like that. It was not a huge problem. The business people from the first pretty much valued it, and they saw that it was attracting tourists to the area and thought that it was a definite plus. It was more the laboring folks or the unemployed folks on welfare, folks who spent a lot of their time hunting and fishing, who resented it. Gradually we have become much more accepted in the community and a number of locals have become NOC employees.”

Part of the local dislike of the NOC people was entangled with anger over changes in the Forest Service’s management of the Chattooga River corridor. The Chattooga originates in the mountains of North Carolina and marks the boundary between South Carolina and Georgia. It is one of the Southeast’s most famous whitewater rivers. In 1974, when the federal government designated the Chattooga River corridor as “wild and scenic” and restricted use of the area, some of the local people had a strong reaction. Part of that anger spilled over onto groups like the NOC. As Payson Kennedy explained,

“Initially there was a lot of resentment of the Forest Service. They said, ‘the Forest Service is doing all this for the rich people from Atlanta who want to come up here for their recreation. We’ve used it traditionally for hunting and fishing and washing our trucks and having picnics and swimming and we’re being shut out. They make all these decisions, the city people.’ So there were all those sorts of clashes. We had incidents. I remember one where there were people down picnicking and drinking; maybe it was the 4th of July. They were pretty drunk and attacked one of our guides, and he had a concussion from it. Early in the 1970s there were a few things like that. But my impression is that this has largely blown over. There is still some resentment, but it’s not as prominent as it was at first.”

Inevitably, politics mixes with policy disputes when a valuable resource is at stake. Disagreements over the access to sections of the Chattooga have continued. Under the present management plan, paddlers are barred from the upper part of the Chattooga. Many paddlers would like to be able to paddle the river at high water levels when most fishermen shun the river. Some paddlers believe their exclusion from the upper section was part of the Forest Service’s attempt to appease local people. As Payson recalled,
“This is certainly unofficial, but the rumor was, when it was made off limits, that the locals resented the river being set aside as a national, wild and scenic river, and they were setting an awful lot of fires around, and the Forest Service felt they needed to do something for the locals, so they said, ‘we’ll set aside this upper part and prohibit paddling on it, and it will be strictly for the fishermen. It was a way of saying, ‘we’re giving something to the local fishermen. We’re not here just for the benefit and the service of the paddlers and the whitewater people.’ There’s lots of conflicts over how the river will be managed between private paddlers and commercial users and then between all the paddlers and the local people who would like it for fishing and so on.”

What Payson wants is more flexibility in the Forest Service’s application of the rules for commercial boating. The management plan for the Chattooga is set up for rafts. He would like to see more commercial access to the river for inflatable kayaks, called duckies, when the river is low, access to the dangerous Section Four of the river for commercially guided kayak trips, which he views as safer than non-guided paddling (only commercial rafting trips are allowed the companies now), and the ability to hold kayak clinics on the upper section of the river at high water. He opposes the designation of the Chattooga as a federal wilderness area, which some environmentalists see as providing more protection to the river, because he believes that classifying the river corridor as wilderness doesn’t quite fit the reality of the river and because it would prohibit the active management of the river for boating.

“It is hard to think of the Chattooga as wilderness with its highway crossings and, upstream, some roads with houses along it. You know, it is fairly close to wilderness management as a wild and scenic river. It is not quite the same restriction. For example, the Forest Service can go in with a chainsaw and saw a tree out that is blocking the river and making it unsafe. And that wouldn’t be allowed in a wilderness area.”

I told Payson about an experience I had on the Chattooga in the late 1980s. I paddled around a bend in the river and was startled to see two pickup trucks parked in the middle of the rapids. As I got closer, I could see that the two men were washing their trucks there. Payson said experiences like that were more common in the past, and he believes that for the most part the management of the river as wild and scenic has been fair to everyone and beneficial to the river:

“I think that overall the management plan for the Chattooga has worked very well for all parties. No one gets everything they want. When I first started running the Chattooga, it was physically in a lot worse shape than it is now. People were camping right on the banks. There was a lot of erosion. There were a lot more areas where there was four-wheel drive access to the river. People would go down there and camp, and horses were there. The banks were a lot more littered. I would say physically the conditions have improved over the years. You get a little more sedimentation from some of the tributaries because of development. That’s the big
issue outfitters have worked on, trying to help the Forest Service to get funds from Congress and conservation groups to protect the tributaries from development.”

The controversy over the use of the 21-mile uppermost part of the Chattooga has continued. In May, 2006, the paddling advocacy group, American Whitewater, filed suit to force the National Forest Service to lift its ban on paddling this part of the river. The Chattooga Conservancy, founded in 1991, and Friends of the Chattooga (a coalition formed in response to the American Whitewater’s suit, consisting of the Chattooga Conservancy, Georgia Forest Watch, the North and South Carolina Wildlife Federations, Wilderness Watch, the Georgia Council of Trout Unlimited, the Atlanta Fly Fishing Club, and other groups) intend to fight to keep the restrictions on paddling because they see paddling as a harmful commercial intrusion into an area that should be protected.

As time passed and some of the NOC people married, had children, and sent them to the local schools and attended local churches, the divide between the NOC people and the community narrowed, but it hasn’t totally disappeared. “You know our grandchildren went to school here and graduated and were on the sports teams,” Kennedy said. “Our grandson was valedictorian, and they were pretty much a part of the community, and they were still called ‘granola heads’ and thought of as a little bit different, but they were still more-or-less accepted.”

Part of the misunderstandings between NOC people and the locals may come from cultural differences, but some historians argue that there is not and really never has been a distinctive mountain culture. I told Payson I don’t buy those historians’ arguments, and I asked him what he thought about it from his many years of living in the mountains. “It doesn’t seem right to me either,” he said. He added that

“most of the locals would say they have a distinctive mountain culture which, of course, they are very proud of. You know, they argue with the environmentalists and say that the environmentalists are from the cities and we’ve lived in the mountains and in this environment and know how to preserve it and protect it. We know all the trees by name. We can identify them when there are no leaves. And we’ve walked all the trails, and we’ve taken care of the land. I think there’s some truth on both sides, but generally they are less educated, but very proud of what their way of life is like. And it’s like, hunting season opens and school attendance drops way down. Folks expect their kids to go hunting and not to go to school, and that’s pretty much accepted, things like that. We had a friend in Cherokee who was a dentist, and he wouldn’t work on kids who had been eating ramps [a wild leek]. Some of the kids would eat ramps so they wouldn’t have to go to the dentist. But some of them would eat ramps so they would get sent home from school [he laughs]. But these traditions are part of their culture that city people don’t know. And they are conservative politically and conservative in religion. You know, we are still a dry county [local ordinance prohibits alcohol sales], and there are still a lot of things
Payson told me that a minority of mountain people still center their lives on the outdoors.

“I think that there are still a fair number of people in the mountains, I don’t know the statistics, who do kind of move from job to job and are happy to be laid off for a time or to quit for a time for hunting and fishing, and then, when they need some money, they will go work. It’s never really thought of as a career, but as a means to make ends meet to support their hunting and fishing.”

When I suggested that part of the gap between mountaineers and NOC people may lie not only in differences in mountain culture and the larger culture, but also in the fact that the NOC represents a bit of the 1970s counterculture, Payson disagreed and bridled at the idea that they represent a counterculture.

“By some of the locals, we were always regarded as hippies. You know, there were differences. It’s a more liberal group than much of the South. In a way, I thought of it as a counterculture, not in terms of the hippie communes and all, but as a type of commune, based on economic and philosophical ideals that were not part of the mainstream. I guess, in that sense, it was countercultural, although I don’t like to think of it as part of the counterculture of violence and anti-war protest. We’re a different culture, but we’re not a counterculture in the sense of not having been successful, not being capable. These are very capable, successful people in the broader society who have chosen to come here for a different lifestyle.”

Ironically, mountaineers who organize their lives around hunting and fishing are often the most suspicious and resentful of the NOC people, and yet, of all the people in the mountains, the NOC people are also the most similar to them in lifestyle. While that traditional minority of mountaineers work to support their hunting and fishing, the more committed minority of NOC people work to support their paddling and traveling. Both groups reject the focus on careers and materialism of the larger society for other values.

Payson talked about the lifestyle of what he calls “the committed heart” of 100 or so Nantahala Outdoor Center employees. They work for the NOC for seven or eight months in the warm season. When that’s over, they sell Christmas trees in Atlanta or some other big urban area in the Southeast. There, they work 12 hours a day, seven days a week, and make enough money to spend January and February traveling and paddling in Ecuador, Panamá, or Costa Rica. Then they return to North Carolina and the NOC in March or April. Of course, such a footloose existence can last only so long.

Payson described their lives this way:

“They are kind of itinerant workers like that for a number of years, and often then they want to marry or settle down, want a bit more money, and
they leave. Some of them stay on and get to be department heads. They can even make enough money that they can live, but never well economically in the sense of most of society, but you can live here pretty cheap. You get a lot of advantages working here at the Center.”

The employees’ meals are subsidized at the restaurant, and they have free use of the NOC equipment for recreation. A lot of the employees have built their own homes, some as a result of a cabin-building class the NOC ran for a while. Around 150 to 200 NOC employees have earned stock in the company through their employment, Payson says, and between one-half and two-thirds of these employee-owners have families. Those NOC men and women, who are often from affluent families and have college degrees and professional training, always have the option of rejoining middle-class society if they find that their whitewater dream has run its course. Many of the former NOC employees have returned to the area or have remained there. At least eight have taken jobs as teachers in public schools, especially in Swain County.

Payson recognizes that paddling the Nantahala has changed over the years. His customers come with different motives than those of the first paddlers on the river, and their experience of the river is not the same.

“It’s pretty variable, but for many of them now it’s a social experience. They come with groups of people, church groups or school groups, wanting something to do as a group that they don’t do regularly, and so it’s new and exciting and has a little hint of danger, a risk. It’s real different from when people used to go with one or two canoes and not see anybody else. But there is some kind of appeal; like now on a busy Saturday, it’s kind of like going to a fair, something that masses of people do, and you are part of the crowd enjoying it together.”

Under such circumstances, do people develop any appreciation for the landscape they are moving through? There are many stories about NOC rafting tourists who ask whether the raft will come back to where the bus is at the end of the trip. They think of rafting a river as a kind of amusement park ride that goes around in a circle. Or they ask how the electricity is taken out of the water in the Nantahala or if there is a risk of getting shocked by the water since it flows from a power plant. Customers ask one question that Payson finds particularly puzzling:

“People are always asking how deep the river is. And it seems like such a difficult question because there are deep spots and shallow spots, so the guides claim that the best answer is that it is chest deep on a duck [he laughs]. It just doesn’t seem there is any feasible way to say how deep it is. I just say, it is not a very deep river. It’s mostly pretty shallow, and where there are rapids it’s shallow because of the shallow rocks that create the rapids, but that there are some deep holes.”

Payson tells me that when he began the NOC he knew very little natural history. Just being on the river has taught him a lot, and when he is guiding a
rafting trip (he still guided 50 to 100 days a year when I talked to him), he passes some of the information on.

“When I go down the river I’ll try to feel people out in quiet stretches where there are not a lot of rapids. I’ll ask them, ‘does anybody know what that tree is?’ like the paulownia, which is unusual, or the service-berry, which blooms this time of year. You can tell, after a question or two, a lot of people will be fascinated and really want to hear more, and so I’ll comment on the other plants and the trees as we go. Especially older women, much more than men, are interested. We have a lot of guides who are pretty good naturalists, and my wife is, too.”

I wonder if presenting a little natural history goes far enough to offset the emphasis on nature-adventure as a thrill. Much of the appeal of the whitewater business, mountain biking, and rock climbing seems to be in the idea of virtuosity and the conquest of nature, a skateboard mentality brought to the outdoors that destroys any appreciation for the landscape. After besting the river, trail, or rock face, the challenge is gone. The places are of less interest or dismissed as primarily for beginners.

Payson has macho paddling credentials that could justify such a perspective on nature if he wanted. He was a stunt double for Ned Beatty in Deliverance, the movie that put the Chattooga River and paddling in the national consciousness. In 1974 he and his son John won the national open boat championship for the junior-senior class. Payson raced at the national level for 11 years, winning five national championships against much younger competition. In October 2005, Payson Kennedy was one of six men inducted into the Whitewater Hall of Fame, the first group to be so honored. He mentioned none of this in the interview. In fact, what he seemed to remember most fondly from his years with the NOC were the paddling trip he led to the Usamacinta River in Mexico, the adventure travel trip to Nepal, and the trips he participated in to Fiji, Chile, New Zealand, Vietnam, and India. He says,

“When I am on the foreign trips what I, as an anthropologist, am really interested in is the culture and the cultural differences, and that’s what I will often focus on. I hope we have interactions with local people and our guests get some appreciation that our values and ways of living are really not the only ways; that the others may be just as appropriate.”

When Payson talked about Nepal, he typically focused not on high adventure on wild rivers, but on a man he saw there who had a water-powered lathe that he manipulated with his hands and feet to make wooden butter dishes and bowls. His stories about Fiji were not about the skill required to kayak in the open ocean, but about how he and Relia had helped some people on one of the islands bring in a half-mile-long fish trap made of vines and palm fronds. They joined Fijians in the traditional feast afterwards, which was intended as a money-making performance for cruise ship passengers who didn’t show. Payson and Relia spent a week there rather than the couple of days they had originally planned.

* * * *
Payson Kennedy has had a rich life at the NOC, in outdoor adventure if not in material things. He came to the mountains and created a paddling and outdoor adventure industry. Most local people thought the venture foolish and impossible. He transformed the necessity of low wages into a virtue by emphasizing equality, community, and the value of outdoor experiences. He has resisted the Disneylandification of whitewater by promoting an appreciation of nature and other cultures, and he has done all of this just at the right time to catch the boom in outdoor recreation.

Inevitably, along with the river’s increased popularity have come tragic events. In 1999, a 16-year-old girl drowned in the Nantahala because her foot became entrapped while on a high school rafting trip. The family sued the school district and the Nantahala Outdoor Center. They settled out of court with the Haywood school system for $150,000, and with the NOC for $300,000. In 2003, a 15-year-old boy drowned when he fell out of his boat and his leg became caught in a crevice. Between 1983 and 2003, approximately 250,000 people paddled the river annually, and six people have drowned on the Nantahala. After some of these deaths, there has often been pressure to cement all the rock crevices in Nantahala Falls to make it safer, which would also make it more like a drainage ditch than part of a river. In each case, the National Forest Service and the Nantahala Gorge Association, of which NOC is a member, have found other ways to protect the public, such as removing debris, filling crevices with rocks, and putting up warning signs. (In one case, after a drowning that may have resulted from the victim’s foot being entrapped at the Falls, concrete was used to fill in between rocks; however, the cement and rocks washed out within a year.)

Debates about the use and care of mountain rivers have inspired fiction. Ron Rash’s fine novel *Saints at the River* (which is loosely based on the drowning of a young woman in the Chattooga and the attempts to recover her body) presents and dramatizes the conflicts among local people, developers, environmentalists, the Forest Service, the press and politicians over the rights and interests of individuals and federal laws that protect designated wild and scenic rivers. Unlike the novel, which ends as good fiction must, there was no dramatic resolution to the controversy that the young woman’s drowning on the Chattooga created.

Despite the tragic incidents, the NOC has grown rapidly. Kennedy created what I think of as Payson’s Paradise.

However, romanticism and idealistic dreams have a hard time surviving in the mountains. Payson’s Paradise was no exception. By following their philosophy of creating a community of friends rather than hiring employees, Payson and Horace had early on distributed stock to people working at the NOC and, in so doing, had given away control of the company. Eventually some of the employees, chafing at their low pay and unhappy over large expenditures on projects like the building of the restaurant, Relia’s Garden, led a rebellion to take over the board of directors. For the first time, a little emotion showed in Payson’s voice as he recounted this part of company history.
“It really started changing after 1990 when we did convert to the employ-ees owing the majority of the shares and having control. We, unfortu-nately, had a few people running for the board of directors—it reminds me so much of national politics. They said, ‘elect me and I’ll make sure your salaries increase; you’ll get lots of good benefits. You know, the Kennedys run this as a mom and pop. They don’t know anything about business. They are idealists and if we get serious and run it like a business with emphasis on profits and loss we’ll make a lot of money and everybody will get good salaries.’ And so we got several directors with this philosophy. There got to be no unified sense of direction but a lot of confusion about where we were going. Things were difficult. After a while I resigned because it wasn’t fun anymore, and Bunny Johns took over. She was much more able, much more comfortable working with a board of directors that didn’t necessarily share her philosophy or our philosophy.”

Bunny Johns, who had worked for the NOC since 1974, had a very difficult time according to Kennedy. The division and conflict became so great that the majority of the board voted to ask her to resign. She left the NOC in 2000 saying that the president serves at the pleasure of the board, and when it is no longer a pleasure, it is time to quit.

“When Bunny was in charge, we were in that turmoil period, where there was no clear sense of direction. You get a different view from other people, but that was my view. She struggled constantly trying to appease the board and satisfy them when they weren’t sure what they wanted themselves. She had a near impossible situation. After she left, we continued to struggle over who would succeed her. And it was 5 to 4 votes on the board pretty constantly.”

Following Bunny, an interim president served for two years while the NOC tried to find the right person to take her place.

Part of the economic problem for the NOC was increased competition with other companies. When the NOC was organized, two other whitewater companies, Southeastern Expeditions (first in Clayton, now in Atlanta, Georgia) and Wildwater (in Long Creek, South Carolina), began at about the same time, but no other outfitters were operating in the area, and the NOC was the only whitewater company on the Nantahala. Now at least 13 other whitewater companies are operating on the Nantahala, and many other competing companies are on other rivers. Even more companies would be operating on the Nantahala without the intervention of the National Forest Service. In 1983 the Forest Service began limiting permits to businesses that were operating at the time. Since 1983 no new outfitters have been allowed access to the river.

Other factors that affected the NOC’s profits included “allotments.” On the busiest days, the Forest Service has allotments for outfitters, which limit the number of people the NOC and others can take on the river. An outfitter operating on Forest Service Land must pay 3% of the company’s gross income for the privilege.

Also, the retail trade for kayaks and equipment, like the market for rafting,
became much more competitive with the advent of internet sites specializing in whitewater gear.

The increased competition caused the NOC to go through major internal changes. The NOC outfitter store in Asheville was shut down. The number of NOC vice presidents, full-time and part-time employees were all cut. The peak total of all employees in the summer decreased from about 600 to 500, and the number of employees working in January and February was reduced from between 110 and 120 to between 80 and 90. The adventure travel program, the source of so many of Payson’s fondest memories, was de-emphasized and merged into the instructional program. Because of declining profits, the employee stock option plan, where NOC members all received stock in the company, had ceased to function in 1990. The new plan that mixed stock options with a 401K had to be frozen about 10 years later.

While the new leadership claimed that the NOC had not changed its overall philosophy, it is hard to imagine Payson Kennedy describing the NOC in the language that a NOC vice president used to discuss the future of the company in a 2001 interview: “We’ll be doing the same things we’ve always done, but where we are headed is to try to shape products and services in outdoor recreation that fit into a contemporary business corridor. What we are forced to do now is evolve at the rate of business.”

Payson easily switches from the disappointed founder of an idealistic organization to a social scientist calmly and objectively analyzing what went wrong. “It was a combination of factors. The size makes it much more difficult. Some of my reading would suggest that size is an impossible barrier to overcome. You get too big and people don’t all know each other. You don’t have the mutual trust and encouragement.”

There were general economic factors as well. “In recent years there has been a flattening out of the growth rate in rafting nationwide,” Payson explained. “That was an economic factor ... that made it much more difficult.” And the NOC members’ view of the world had changed some too:

“A little bit of the excitement and enthusiasm of this new sport had changed. A lot of people who had started out had gotten older and wanted families and homes and a more stable, normal economic life. That idea of higher income, well, that’s just a characteristic of life of the whole society. And the people who initially, when they were younger, had been carried by enthusiasm for this ideal, were ripe for the appeal of something that would give them a higher income level and enable them to build a home and enjoy a lot of the things they saw that everybody else had. I felt I was constantly trying to put out a different message from what they saw on the TV and in magazines and in many people coming here, guests, who lived the very abundant material life.

“The NOC people had an abundance of experiences. A lot of them were able to travel to foreign countries and go on exotic trips, and they lived a life that a lot of people making more money envied.

“But yet they saw what they were missing, and when this group said by being good businessmen we could increase the profits substantially so that
the staff could be paid what they are worth, that was a very appealing message.

“So we had this divisiveness. It wasn’t clear anymore what the primary goals and ideals were, whether we were a primarily a business here to make money, or whether we were primarily a group of friends here to have an enjoyable life together and to introduce other people to things that we liked.”

When I asked Payson what he would have done differently in starting the NOC, he said that the organization of the NOC was flawed because he had been too idealistic.

“I would have kept control myself instead of turning it over to the employees. Or if I had turned it over, it would have been a slower process. Rather than converting to the one person/one vote, they would have had to have been here awhile and acquired some stock, acquired more of the traditions and values before they got to assume the vote. I would have run it, not so democratically. I would have kept a little more authority for myself so that rather than discussing things forever and having this lack of direction, we would have had a clear purpose. And I would say, ‘this is our purpose; this is what we want to do. These are our values, and if you like them, then this is a good place. If not, then you know there are certainly lots of other options and places.’”

Not only did the NOC cease being the kind of organization Payson had imagined, but the mountains also had changed. The area around the Nantahala was no longer the relatively isolated and undeveloped place he and his family first knew. The changes were in part due to the very success of businesses like the NOC. He said,

“The main thing you see is development. You know, just more and more businesses. A new road will be opened, and it will be really beautiful for a while, and then over the years it just builds up so there are businesses everywhere, and then you see more and more housing developments. I’d say this county is becoming more prosperous. A couple of the big influences have been the rafting industry. We’re one of the biggest industries in the county, maybe the biggest. The railroad tourists (there is a train running from Bryson City to the Nantahala and back) have been another big factor. So it’s primarily a tourist economy. But there are beginning to be housing developments around here and, of course, a lot of our employees and my wife resent and hate seeing that development, and I do too in a way. It’s just a problem of overpopulation. As long as the population is growing the way it is, we are going to see more and more businesses and homes and highways.”

In March 2005, the threat of this new development came to the Nantahala River in a direct way. An entrepreneur named Ami Shinitsky bought a former campground for $4.8 million and planned two high-density developments he named Mystic Village and Mystic River. Mystic River would occupy a narrow strip along about 20 percent of the paddling course of the Nantahala.
Outfitters, including the NOC, and residents strongly opposed the development, but it went forward anyway. The 15 lots on the Mystic River site and the 17 lots of the Mystic Village (lots which average about one-third of an acre) sold for between $225,000 and $375,000 each.

Those opposing the developments argued that they would mar the appearance of the river, destroy people’s paddling experiences, and create a social divide between the rich people living in the developments and the rest of the gorge’s residents. Shinitsky countered that development in the gorge was inevitable, that some of the privately owned sections of the river looked like slums, and that his developments would have far less impact on the river than the whitewater industry has had. He promised that the buildings would be regulated by strict architectural covenants that would produce cabin-like, Adirondack-style homes. The problem for the developments is that septic tanks will not work on the property. For the Mystic River development, Shinitsky has approval for a high-maintenance, drip-irrigation waste system (which will have to be managed by the home owners), but Mystic Village doesn’t have sufficient land for this system and may have to get the NOC to agree to allow some of its land to be used for this purpose. If that happens, it would put the cash-strapped NOC in a difficult ethical position. Allowing its land to be used by Mystic Village would provide much needed cash for the financially struggling NOC, but it would also make possible a development that the NOC officially opposes and that its members would deeply regret. So far, the issue remains unresolved.

The plans of the NOC’s new business-oriented board didn’t work out. Because of their policies or business conditions or a combination of the two, the NOC went from growth to decline. Finally, the board members who had tried to alter the character of the NOC either left or chose no longer to serve. “The profitability declined every year for a period,” Payson explained:

“and so the new board members seemed to give up, and we had a reuni-fied board. It’s not like the present board members don’t want to be good business people; they do. But they think that business is a means to some other ideals and goals rather than being the end in itself. We have a strong CEO, and it feels like a unified group again.”

The NOC had two CEOs after Bunny Johns resigned. Larry Pitt, the man Payson referred to as a “strong CEO” in my interview with him in 2003, quit in 2004, after 18 months on the job. In a newspaper article, Payson offered an explanation for Pitt’s departure: “It just wasn’t a culture fit. It would be hard for anybody coming from the normal business world to duplicate the philosophy and culture I started at the NOC.” And who was the new CEO of the Center? Seventy-one-year-old Payson Kennedy. He has one last chance to go against the odds and the spirit of the times and restore paradise.

After two hours, the interview had fallen into repetition and meandering. I was pushing the patience of even such a good man as Payson Kennedy, and I knew it, but I was still selfishly searching for that one quotation or story that
would summarize Payson and the mountains. Finally Aurelia returned, and her energetic purposefulness put a merciful end to my stalling. I thanked Payson for being so kind, and Ben and I left.

* * * *

Postscript: Payson read this interview/essay in the summer of 2005, when my title for it was “Paradise Lost.” Along with making a few corrections, he wrote in response:

“In returning to a leadership role at the NOC, I have found that I have not changed my style nearly as much as was suggested by my answer to you about how I might do things differently. I do hope that after my period as a more detached observer I have become a little wiser and more skillful as a leader.

“I can’t help but add a general comment from my perspective two and a half years after our initial conversation. I have now been back at work for almost two years. I believe that we have succeeded in reviving much of the culture that made the NOC successful. I think profitability can serve as a symptom of the underlying psychological health of a company just as body temperature serves as a symptom of the physical health of an individual. After a loss the year before I came back, we made a small profit last year and seem to be headed for a better profit this year. Our leaders have studied and are attempting to implement ideas from the book Good to Great. In an image from that book, the flywheel is gathering momentum again. The critical task at present is to find the right person to lead the NOC. I think that to be successful they must have some knowledge about business but more importantly they must understand the NOC culture and that here profit is an essential means to other ends but not an end in itself. If we can find that person, I think the appropriate title will be ‘Paradise Regained’ rather than ‘Paradise Lost.’”

RELEVANT SOURCES


Lane, John and Lynn Brandon. Personal communication, 7 June 2006.


