



Conservation Advocate: The Altamaha Riverkeeper's Deborah Sheppard says protecting the environment can spur economic development.

conserving, and in developing other sources. The lake is full now, and my concern is that our collective attention span will go away in a heartbeat."

As a young woman, Dunlap, a native Alabamian, wanted to attend the University of Alabama, like her brothers. But a relative on the board of trustees at the Gainesville women's college got her interested in Brenau, and she's been in Gainesville ever since.

"That turned out to be the best thing that could have happened," Dunlap says. "Brenau, in its small setting, provided opportunities to succeed in every way."

She was president of the student government, and later taught physical education before launching her business career. Dunlap worked in banking and, then, for 13 years in the commercial printing industry.

Her interest in community building and economic development blossomed at Home Federal Savings and Loan, where the bank president, the late James Mathis, Sr., taught by example.

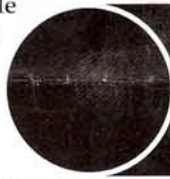
"He was a great local leader, and I learned so much about community from him," says Dunlap.

But the greatest lesson, the one that hits closest to home, came from her grandmother, Stella Long of Jasper, Alabama.

"We lost our parents at an early age and she took us in,

three teenagers," Dunlap says. "She laid the groundwork for the person I've become, through persistence and love.

"But can you imagine if you suddenly had to raise three teenagers when you're 70 years old? What would you do? I'd give 'em back." — JG



DEBORAH SHEPPARD

Darien
Executive Director
Altamaha Riverkeeper

Deborah Sheppard is out of the office. She's gone home to meet the plumber. "You cannot advocate for conservation and the environment and have a leaky faucet," says Sheppard, founding executive director of the Altamaha Riverkeeper (ARK). "I'm keenly aware of the need to practice what I preach."

Since 1999 Sheppard has guided a grassroots effort to protect, preserve and restore the biggest river in Georgia and one of the largest watersheds in the Eastern U.S. Based in Darien, where the Altamaha flows into the Atlantic Ocean, ARK (which now has 1,200 members) vigilantly monitors pollution and polluters along the river, its tributaries and the

coast, rallying public support and keeping tabs on regulatory agencies.

"I've had a number of 'A-ha!' moments over the years, and the biggest one may be when I realized that the regulatory agencies' permitting process isn't about prohibiting pollution. It's about quantifying and managing pollution," Shepard says.

"If we're lucky, government regulators are enforcing the laws they've created to manage pollution."

But we're not always lucky, and it's understandable that Sheppard might sometimes feel as if she's fighting the good fight in a losing battle.

"When you've worked in this arena as long as I have, you realize that enforcement is not very strict," she says. "You realize that businesses, industries, municipalities and individuals are allowed to violate the rules more often than not.

"Riverkeeper organizations exist to get government to stand behind its own rules and enforce the laws and regulations that exist to protect society."

Sheppard is the mother of four adopted children, all born in Japan (their birth mother, who died of breast cancer, was Sheppard's best friend). The children, 16 to 22, have been absorbed into the community and Sheppard's work as an advocate for one of the country's most scenic and endangered rivers.

"There's hardly been a mail-out, a river clean-up, a function of any kind that my kids and their friends have not been a part of," Sheppard says. "Our staff relies on them as major volunteers. And when they apply to colleges and they're asked about volunteer work, well, guess what - they've done it all."

Sheppard began her career at the northernmost tip of the watershed, at the State Botanical Gardens in Athens, on the Oconee River, a tributary of the Altamaha. She later worked with Campaign for a Prosperous Georgia, formed in the 1980s to challenge Georgia Power's attempt to persuade state lawmakers into allowing rate hikes to pay for Plant Vogtle, the nuclear power plant under construction at the time.

"Sound familiar?" says Sheppard, a cynical nod to the utility's success along

those lines last year, to help fund additional units at Vogtle.

For decades, her mantra has been conservation and efficiency, of energy, of water, for the good of the whole. And she hasn't enjoyed being sometimes cast opposite economic development.

"The environment is often pitted against the economy, and that's the

wrong-headed approach," says Sheppard, who was honored last year for a lifetime of environmental advocacy by Georgia WAND (Women's Action for New Directions). "Protecting the environment can be a major economic driver. It's evidenced by things like employing plumbers to install water saving devices."

Or to fix leaks. - JG



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