One of Top 50 'Destinations of a Lifetime'

BY MONICA KREBER
THE JOURNAL

Oconee County has been covered by CNN and "Southern Living" magazine – and now a part of the county can say it has been covered by "National Geographic."

"National Geographic" recently published a special edition: "50 of the World's Last Great Places: Destinations of a Lifetime." On pages 24-27 readers can find an article titled "Jocassee Gorges: an intense concentration of waterfalls," along with a picture of Whitewater Falls in autumn and two blooming Oconee bells.

The magazine featured parts of the world under five different categories: temperate, arid, coastal, equatorial and polar. Jocassee Gorges fell under "coastal" for its high number of waterfalls and indigenous Oconee bell.

Ken Sloan, president and CEO of Mountain Lakes Convention and Visitors Bureau in Oconee County, said he was surprised to find Jocassee listed inside "National Geographic," but is not surprised Jocassee would fit the criteria for the publication.

"I have had the opportunity to travel the world, and I've never seen a place more beautiful than Jocassee Gorges," he said.

Jocassee was featured in the magazine along with places like the Florida Keys, Baja California, and the Galapagos Islands. Jocassee was doted on for having the Oconee bell, which botanists come to study in the Carolinas because the nearest closest relative to the plant can only be found in Asia, Sloan said.

Sloan also said what makes Jocassee different from the other featured places is its unique ecosystem: Jocassee boasts 150 waterfalls in Oconee County alone (Jocassee covers North and South Carolinas) and it is a naturally undisturbed area.

"You have this incredible environmental resource of mountains, forests, rivers, waterfalls and man-made lakes," Sloan said. "You also see the Oconee bell, which is indigenous to this area. It's just a pretty unique ecosystem."

Sloan said he is not sure how National Geographic came to find Jocassee Gorges but has been trying to place calls to get more information. He said Jocassee is one of only two areas in the country that would adequately fit the "coastal" criteria (the other one being Badlands National Park in South Dakota).

"National Geographic is not a magazine you can buy your way into," he said. "To get four pages in there...there's no way my organization could ever afford that."

With National Geographic being a global publication, Sloan said he hopes to get a tremendous response that will help expose Oconee County.

"By and large it's a huge economic impact opportunity for Oconee County," he said.

Steve Pagano, park superintendent of North Carolina Gorges State Park, said finding Jocassee in National Geographic was "cool."

"What's surprising is we've been in articles, like in Southern Living, but they always call us," he said. "This was a total surprise. Somebody discovered us, we didn't discover them. It's kind of cool that it came out that way."

Jocassee covers over 43,500 acres, and is federally protected and state protected. The area covered in the magazine article runs from Oconee and Pickens counties east to Jones Gap State Park, all surrounding Lake Jocassee.

Most all of the land was once owned by Duke Energy and much of it still is.

Pagano said to see Jocassee listed among the other places in the magazine is a huge honor.

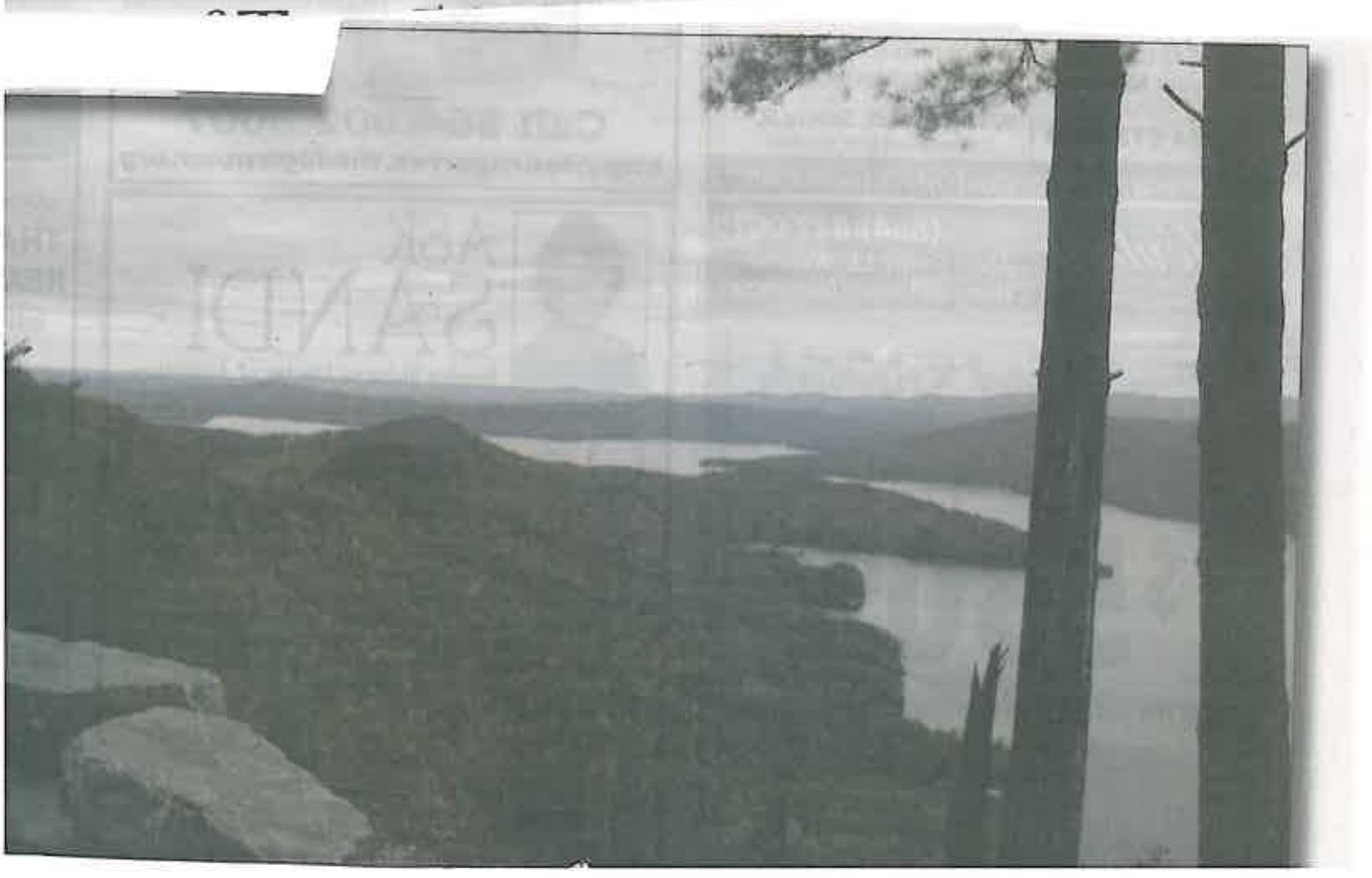
"You can't get a higher compliment," he said. "I think it's well represented in there (National Geographic) and that's a great place for it to show up."

Like Sloan, Pagano said he was surprised to find Jocassee in the magazine but was not surprised at all that Jocassee would be one of National Geographic's "last great places to visit."

"I think it fits in that Top 50 Places for sure," he said. "We're just happy."

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Jocassee featured in National Geographic





FOR THE JOURNAL

Jocasse gorges, as pictured in these scenes, has been covered by CNN and "Southern Living: magazine – and now a part of the county can say it has been covered by "National Geographic."