

Background

The Ichetucknee River is a unique six mile spring run, internationally renowned for its clear water and natural beauty. It flows from the first magnitude headspring in Ichetucknee Springs State Park to the Santa Fe River. The lower Ichetucknee spring run is approximately three miles long, beginning at the southern boundary of Ichetucknee Springs State Park near the US 27 bridge. The spring run serves as the border between Suwannee and Columbia counties. A scenic rails-to-trails trail crosses over the river via a historic arched trestle, along the abandoned railbed of the Savannah & Western Railroad. Beneath the arch, still within the jurisdiction of the state park, the river runs over shallow rapids – a blind passage and potential zone of lethal collisions between high speed PWCs and kayakers and canoeists. Downstream, the riparian properties on the lower segment of the spring run are privately owned and are primarily residential in nature with the exception of a short stretch just below the US 27 bridge and railroad trestle on the Suwannee County side that is owned by Ichetucknee Springs State Park.

The Ichetucknee River provides habitat for a variety of wildlife, including the threatened West Indian Manatee, the iconic Longnose Gar (which preferentially spawns on spring run aquatic vegetation), otters, beavers, alligators, a variety of shore birds, and turtles and is believed to be a nursery for the imperiled Suwannee Cooter (Johnston). Wildlife watching and photography is a major activity engaged in by tens of thousands of tubing and paddling visitors annually. The flora and fauna of the overall spring run are threatened by unrestricted access and ecosystem degradation by motorized vessels on the lower, unprotected segment of the spring run. That vulnerable section is the shallow and narrow migratory corridor of the manatee in its daily movements up and down the spring run from within the state park down to the Santa Fe River confluence. Motorized vessels represent a significant threat to the manatee, especially high speed vessels capable of inflicting deep lacerations from props and broken ribs from high speed impacts. Motorized vessels are also the primary and predominant cause of shoreline turbidity which impacts macrophytes and benthic organisms and causes shoreline erosion.

No Wake Zone

The lower Ichetucknee is currently accessible to all motorized vessels traveling at safe speeds and is not a no wake zone, though most residents in the area believe it to be so and do maintain a minimum wake. The vessels traversing the lower Ichetucknee on plane or at higher speeds result in shoreline turbidity and erosion and pose a danger to other recreational users, including paddle craft, tubers, and swimmers. No wake zones have been determined to effectively reduce the impact of boats on aquatic plants (Asplund and Cook 1999).

Personal Watercrafts

PWC use on the lower Ichetucknee primarily consists of individuals visiting the area with many vessels launching at either Ellie Ray's or Sandy Point marinas in Branford, Florida and a small portion