

RESTORATION

Expanding Awareness and Collaboration for River Cane Restoration and Tribal Culture



River cane grows in large patches called canebrakes/EBCI Cooperative Extension

INTRODUCTION

River cane (*Arundinaria gigantea*) is a native bamboo in the southeastern United States, and it holds significant cultural and ecological value. Tribal artisans from the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) use river cane to make baskets, mats, and other materials. River cane also prevents soil erosion and storm damage, preserves water quality, and provides habitats to animals. However, river cane is often cleared for agriculture, construction, or aesthetic purposes. This limits Tribal members' abilities to harvest river cane resources and disrupts environmental benefits these plants provide. Tribal artisans, researchers, and conservation or governmental groups find ongoing opportunities to collaborate for the preservation and restoration of river cane.

KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED

River cane grows in thick patches called canebrakes, but only two percent of historic groves remain today. Many people are unaware of river cane's cultural significance and the ecosystem services it provides. Researchers and cultural organizations such as the Revitalization of Traditional Cherokee Artisan Resources (RTCAR) seek out opportunities to protect existing cane and initiate restoration efforts. These projects require cooperation with different land managers, since municipal land, private property, Tribal lands, and protected areas are all potential locations for growing and harvesting river cane. Additionally, river cane projects require creative cultivation techniques and long-term commitment. River cane is not readily available in nurseries, it can be difficult to transport, and it can take up to five years for transplanted cane to produce new growth.

PROJECT GOALS

- Expand awareness of river cane through education and cultural projects.
- Increase Tribal access to river cane resources.
- Find and share successful river cane restoration techniques.



PROJECT HIGHLIGHTS

Artisans, Cultural Groups, and Researchers Increase Awareness for River Cane: Artisan nonprofits such as Qualla Arts and Crafts tell stories of river cane harvests when they sell basketry, and they offer classes and harvesting lessons. RTCAR funds projects and builds partnerships to raise awareness for river cane. Researchers teach others to identify and care for river cane resources.

Partnerships Expand Access to Existing Canebrakes and Restoration Opportunities: When river cane is identified on public or private land, Tribal members can form agreements with managers to harvest and maintain the cane. Conservation organizations also work with landowners to create easements or purchase land to protect healthy cane. Collaborations with government agencies like the U.S. Forest Service also facilitate restoration.

Researchers Develop Easier Restoration Techniques: Volunteers and researchers overcome find creative ways to transport river cane with everyday supplies like trash bags or gallon buckets. As researchers learn more about river cane, new transplanting techniques using the rhizome stems found on cane root systems make plant transport easier and produce new growth within one year. As new techniques are tested, river cane restoration expands.



LESSONS LEARNED

Cultural education brings deeper connections to conservation goals. Tribal basketmakers teach the importance of sustainable harvest, taking only what they need and caring for the land so it can continue to thrive and provide. This knowledge keeps Tribal culture and tradition alive, and it helps people develop a more personal connection with conservation goals.

Common goals allow partnerships to flourish. Conservation groups and cultural organizations often have overlapping restoration goals, and land management agencies can achieve specific habitat goals through co-stewardship of land with Tribal artisans. Researchers and volunteers can learn more about river cane by aiding older artisans with physically demanding harvesting tasks. Shared goals enhance conservation and restoration work.

Like river cane, relationships must be carefully cultivated. Conservation work requires long-term efforts. Building trust is especially important for working alongside Tribes. When researchers and organizations continue to show up and stay involved over the years, they demonstrate a commitment to respect and collaboration over immediate results. This lays the foundation for successful cultural and restoration projects.

NEXT STEPS

- Explore river cane as a nature-based solution to prevent erosion and storm damage.
- Expand greenhouse growth of river cane to increase transplant availability.
- Seek continued funding for more frequent harvesting trips, classes, and travel to share cultural and restoration river cane work.

PARTNERS

- See online for full list of partners
- For more information, contact Adam Griffith: adgriff5@ncsu.edu

