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## **'Consummate conservationist'**

**Longtime activist uses political skills to keep issues on legislative agendas**

By SAMMY FRETWELL

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For Ann Timberlake, a recent campaign to close a nuclear waste dump in South Carolina was like preserving the Congaree Swamp three decades ago.

"It was the right thing to do," Timberlake said on a recent walk through the national park land she helped protect in the 1970s.

Timberlake, a diminutive 60-year-old with the tenacity of a pit bull, recently engineered one of the most shocking legislative victories in years for South Carolina environmentalists.

She and her five-year-old conservation group stared down a team of high-powered nuclear waste lobbyists — and soundly whipped them.

Through hours of research, e-mails and discussions with lawmakers, conservationists persuaded a legislative panel to close Barnwell County's radioactive waste dump to the nation.

On March 28, the House agriculture committee voted 16-0 to shutter the dump next year to all but three states, despite the committee's reputation of favoring business concerns over the environment.

Debate is expected to resurface before next year's closure deadline, but the committee's March decision effectively killed legislation for 2007.

Many credit Timberlake, director of the Conservation Voters of South Carolina, as the reason legislators voted that way.

She also received credit last week for helping persuade 109 state lawmakers to sign a letter asking presidential candidates to discuss climate change in South Carolina.

Feisty, charming and organized, the Georgia-born Timberlake gets high marks from conservationists and many lawmakers for her political skills.

During the landfill debate, she kept the message of various environmentalists focused and relevant, observers say.

"Ann was the glue to all this," said Carol Black, a Columbia resident who worked to close the landfill.

"Ann is friendly and smooth and polite. She doesn't get in your face. She tries very hard to get accurate information. I can't tell you the amount of time she spent researching this issue, talking to people and making sure she understands."

State Rep. Ted Vick, D-Chesterfield, said Timberlake's intense but friendly style impressed lawmakers.

"Some environmental groups have been unreasonable with their requests and demands," said Vick, a committee member. "She crystallized the environmental groups together, and the tables turned" in their favor.

Critics say Timberlake is a partisan attack dog, effective at pushing Democratic Party goals at most any cost — a charge she has long denied. She faced withering criticism from Barnwell County leaders during this year's legislative debate.

"She's a nice enough person, but I don't agree with her tactics or her organization," said Rick Quinn, a former GOP state representative who lost his seat in 2004 after Timberlake targeted him for defeat in the Republican primary. "The partisan aspects drive them, as opposed to environmental issues."

Timberlake said she's glad the Legislature saw the landfill needs closing. The Conservation Voters, the Sierra Club and an interstate atomic waste commission chairman worked hard to get the word out, she said.

"It was like harvesting the fruit of your labors," she said.

### TREES AND WHITEWATER

Timberlake, who has two grown children and a pet horse, is known by many Columbia residents as the former owner of the Purple Cow, a specialty grocery store near the USC campus that closed several years ago.

The daughter of prominent Columbia food distributorship executive Howard Timberlake, she developed an interest in the environment as a child.

During long summer days at her grandfather's Lake Murray farm, she would roam the land, ride horses or swim in the lake.

Her family eventually sold the property for the Timberlake development. It's a decision she had no input on but sometimes regrets.

Still, those days on the farm gave her an appreciation of the outdoors that blossomed during her senior year in college, she said.

Touched by the environmental movement of the late 1960s, Timberlake vowed to get involved. Not long after receiving a history degree from Tulane University, she met Sierra Club member Ted Snyder on a whitewater canoe trip down the Chattooga River. They began dating. In 1970, near the time of the first Earth Day, they married.

Snyder and Timberlake worked for years to protect the Chattooga River in Oconee County and the Congaree Swamp, a thickly forested floodplain targeted for logging.

"It was an exciting time," she said.

She remembers hiking amongst the towering old-growth forests of lower Richland County, wondering how the Congaree Swamp could be saved.

At one point during their quest to preserve the land, Timberlake and Snyder flew to Chicago to talk with the Beidler family, which owned the property and was wrestling with whether to log it. Family members weren't particularly impressed by the trip in the early 1970s, Timberlake recalls. But the land eventually was protected.

The Congaree Swamp National Monument, established in 1976, became Congaree National Park in 2003. Today, the property is more than 20,000 acres of flood plains, swamps and towering trees that some scientists think is prime habitat for the rare ivory-billed woodpecker.

Snyder, a retired lawyer who lives in Walhalla, said Timberlake was instrumental in saving the Congaree Swamp.

"She was fired up about it," he said. "She knew a lot of people around Columbia who could help."

Despite their success protecting land and rivers, Timberlake's marriage to Snyder broke up in 1979. But her interest in conservation continued through work with the Sierra Club.

In 1981, she married Ben Gregg, a conservationist who worked as an aide to Democratic Gov. Dick Riley. Gregg is a former S.C. Department of Natural Resources board member.

Today, he is director of the S.C. Wildlife Federation, making the Columbia couple one of the most visible husband-wife teams involved in South Carolina conservation issues. They live near the USC campus in Columbia.

## ECO LOBBY GROWING

Timberlake has run the Conservation Voters since 2003, soon after its inception. She manages the group's budget and coordinates efforts to help candidates.

The group's mission is to influence legislation as an umbrella organization for environmental groups. Members of the Sierra Club, the S.C. Coastal Conservation League and Upstate Forever hold seats on its board. It keeps a scorecard on how legislators vote on environmental issues and makes a point to let the public know about such votes.

In 2004, the Conservation Voters of South Carolina helped topple powerful House majority leader Quinn by lobbying voters for his opponent, a relative unknown named Nathan Ballentine. That involved mailings to voters in his district.

Through its political action committee in the past four years, the Conservation Voters directly has contributed \$42,000 to state and local political candidates and another \$74,600 on "independent expenditure campaigns." Those campaigns, which feature direct mailings to voters, try to elect candidates who support the group's conservation agenda.

Among those was a campaign to help state Rep. Robert Brown. The Charleston Democrat voted last month to stop the Barnwell landfill from remaining open to the nation.

State Rep. Nelson Hardwick, R-Horry, said Timberlake's campaign work likely had as much to do with some House committee members' support as her powers of persuasion in legislative hearings. "They are flexing their muscles pretty good out there."

Environmentalist Snyder said he's not surprised the committee saw it her way.

"She is the consummate conservationist, and she is the consummate politician," he said. "She knows how to work the halls of the Legislature."

Speaking with her sugary Southern drawl, Timberlake urged legislators not to change a law that requires the 36-year-old site

to close to all but three states in 2008 — rather than bowing to the wishes of a Utah corporation that runs the dump.

Through its Barnwell division, Energy Solutions had hired 10 of the state's best lobbyists, including former aides to governors and ex-state representatives.

State Sierra Club director Dell Isham said the committee's turnaround was hard to believe, given the Legislature's past history of allowing the dump to remain open.

"I've been around legislatures for 30 years, and I've never seen anything like this," Isham said of the 16-0 vote.

Of Timberlake, Isham said, "She was essential."

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ANN TIMBERLAKE

Director of the Conservation Voters of South Carolina

**Age:** 60

**Family:** Married to S.C. Wildlife Federation director Ben Gregg; two grown children; daughter of Thomas and Howard food distributorship executive Howard Timberlake

**Birthplace:** Thomasville, Ga.

**Education:** Dreher High School, 1964; Tulane University, 1968

**Hobbies:** Weekly rides on her horse in Aiken

**Of note:** Once owned the Purple Cow, a specialty grocery store on Pickens Street in Columbia

**Favorite place:** Her family's mountain cabin near Caesar's Head