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NC falls short of preservation goal

By Nanci Bompey

North Carolina has failed to realize former Gov. Jim Hunt's goal of preserving 1 million acres of land by 2010, according to a report from Environment North Carolina.

The state has permanently protected more than 640,000 acres of parks, forests and farmlands over the past decade, preserving areas like Grandfather Mountain and Chimney Rock, but it has fallen short of the 1 million acre goal set by state legislators in 1999.

Over the same time period, North Carolina lost more than 1 million acres of natural lands, more than any other state in the U.S.

"North Carolina has made progress in conserving our forests and farmlands, but we have a long way to go to preserve our natural heritage," said Elizabeth Ouzts, state director of the environmental advocacy group. "The Million Acre Initiative fell short not for lack of opportunities, but rather because of insufficient funding throughout the life of the initiative, even in good economic times."

Conservation advocates argue that preserving land helps to protect the state's water supplies while also supporting the state's \$17 billion tourism industry.

"So much of the economy of Western North Carolina depends on the strong tourist industry, and that tourist industry depends to a large extent on the beauty of this area and the recreational opportunities that exist," said Kieran Roe, executive director of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy.

The state parks system had a record number of visits in 2009, a jump of 13 percent over the previous year, with 14.16 million visitors, said Charlie Peek, a spokesman for the Division of Parks and Recreation.

Mount Mitchell and Gorges state parks in WNC had some of the highest increases in attendance among the state's 38 park units. Mount Mitchell had a 77 percent increase with 322,000 visitors in 2009, while Gorges in Transylvania County saw a 306 percent increase to nearly 75,000 visitors.

Much of the jump could be attributed to long-term closures the previous year, Peek said, as well as the summit tower at Mount Mitchell – the highest point in the Eastern United States – closed for renovation for nearly two years. But he said that North Carolinians are also realizing what a great value the parks are.

"With the economy, people have opted to take their vacations close to home," Peek said. "The state parks are essentially free. You can go hiking, fishing, camping, picnicking. It's very economical."

While the increase in visitation is the goal, Peek said it has also been difficult to keep up with visitor services, since state funding for the parks is down, and the park system now has some 40-50 vacant positions, or about 10 percent of the workforce, that cannot be filled.

More land preservation planned

Despite falling short of its goal, the state did conserve some major areas, said Jamie Kritzer, a spokesman for the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources. He said the state is still committed to preserving 1 million acres of land, although it has not set another goal of when that could be accomplished.

Kritzer agreed that more funding could help the state accomplish its goal faster, but he did not know if there would be more money for land conservation in 2010.

"In these economic times and some of the past economic times, this will just have to be accomplished at a slower pace," he said. "These are unusual economic times and we just have to work with what we have."

The recession has created an unusual situation for land preservation. State funding for land conservation has been cut and conservation groups have had a more difficult time getting donations and loans.

But the economic downturn also means there is less development and cheaper land prices, allowing groups like the Hendersonville-based Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy to purchase a 1,527-acre tract north of Lake Lure. The Weed Patch Mountain property was formerly part of the Grey Rock development that filed for bankruptcy in 2008.

The conservancy bought the land at a reduced price through private donations and loans. It would like to sell the property to North Carolina for inclusion in Chimney Rock State Park but doesn't have a firm commitment from the state.

"In a way our board has taken a risk," Roe said. "We are going to borrow money without any certainty of where and how and when we are going to get repaid. ... But it was such a good opportunity we couldn't let it pass us by."

Roe is cautiously optimistic things may change soon. The N.C. Council of State this week approved new land acquisitions, a move that was routine before the recession but a step the body hasn't done in at least six months, he said.

"The fact that they were willing at this point to begin land acquisition again is a sign that there is some hope that things have turned a corner," Roe said. "It's hard to read the tea leaves in Raleigh, but it is some grounds for cautious optimism that the state is somewhat thawing on what has been an absolute freeze for most of 2009."
