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Current Issue



Connecting With Nature Issue

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CAROLINAS FEATURE: Saving the Places You Love



Valerie True shares how local land trusts are working to protect our area's natural surroundings and what you can do to help.

By 2030, the population of North Carolina is expected to have increased by 50 percent, or the equivalent of the entire population of South Carolina. In 2004, 10 local land trusts (nonprofit organizations that work to preserve significant lands through conservation agreements or acquisition) decided their best strategy to protect WNC's land and water from this rapid

development was to work together. They formed the Blue Ridge Forever Coalition and set a five-year target of protecting 50,000 acres.

"We recognized that safeguarding our landscape was too large a task for any one organization to accomplish," says Gary Wein, executive director of the Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust.

In the first three years of the campaign (2006-2008), the coalition protected nearly 35,000 acres of significant lands. The current economic crisis has made it less certain whether the land trusts can protect the remaining 15,000 acres by the end of 2010, as all of the protection projects—an average of 1.6 completed per week—need funding. Monies cover closing costs and compensation to the landowner for their property or development rights for the land.

In the United States, only two percent of philanthropic funding goes to environmental causes. This is why the state's land trusts rely heavily on state funds for many acquisition projects. The transactions for more than 60 percent of the acreage protected by Blue Ridge Forever since 2006 were made possible by grants from four state conservation trust funds. Now, in order to make up for budget deficits, nearly all of the money the state allocated to trust funds for the current fiscal year has been transferred to its general fund, and conservation funding is expected to be well below traditional levels in the 2010 budget. "In the coming year, we'll have to count on the generosity of individuals to help us reach our conservation goals," says Eric Hiegl, land protection director of the High Country Conservancy.

"The economic downturn has, however, provided timely opportunities for one area of the conservation movement," explains Sally Walker, executive director of the Pacolet Area Conservancy. "When real estate sales are slow, the benefits of conservation

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Polls

How do you connect with nature?

- By gearing-up and hiking

a local trail

- By relaxing, with my feet up, on the porch
- By volunteering with conservation groups
- By practicing yoga in the morning sun
- By getting my hands soily in the garden
- By camping and sleeping under the stars

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Conservancy. “When real estate sales are slow, the benefits of conservation agreements can become the most appealing option to landowners.”

Protecting Public Land

Public lands create invaluable outdoor experiences for millions of residents and visitors each year. In addition, they bring millions of dollars to the state’s economy.

State parks alone attract 13.4 million visitors and generate roughly \$400 million each year. The Blue Ridge Parkway—the most visited unit of the National Park Service— attracts nearly 20 million visitors and contributes more than \$2 billion to the regional economy. According to the State Division of Tourism, scenery is North Carolina’s strongest draw for tourism.

The 2007 creation of Chimney Rock State Park, one of North Carolina’s newest state parks, involved four partnering land conservation organizations: Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, The Nature Conservancy and The Conservation Fund. Acquisition of the Chimney Rock attraction took years of dedication from the land trusts and years of working with state agencies, legislators, local government and the owners to finalize the deal.

“I was grateful to be able to put my head on the pillow at night and sleep well knowing that this land would be protected forever,” says Todd Morse, former owner and president of Chimney Rock Park, regarding the transfer of the park to the state.

Acreage surrounding public land is some of the most coveted property for developers. That presents a particular threat to an area like the Blue Ridge Parkway. A recent survey of visitors found that the vast majority visited the Parkway for its exceptional views. But in many places, the Parkway’s official corridor is only 800-feet wide, and most of the breathtaking scenery that can be seen from the road is privately owned. “By working with willing landowners along the Parkway to buy their property or protect it with conservation agreements, we can save this national treasure,” says Margaret Newbold, associate director of the Conservation Trust for North Carolina.

Protecting Farmland

North Carolina’s farms provide food, open space, and a sense of cultural identity to the state’s residents. Farming has been ongoing in WNC’s mountains for more than 3,000 years. But the same mountain valleys that have nurtured the region’s rich agricultural heritage also draw developers to their flat terrain.

From 2002 to 2007, WNC lost over 125,000 acres of farmland. This 11-percent decline is five times the national average. Land trusts work with farmers to try to stem this loss with conservation agreements that allow them to continue to farm their land. These legal documents are tailored to the needs of the landowner. For example, the Wood family has farmed their land in Cherokee County for generations. They’re now working with Land Trust for the Little Tennessee to craft a conservation agreement that will keep 450 acres as farmland, while allowing the family to manage the remaining 250 acres to meet their needs for retirement.

You Can Help!

“Working together, the land trusts in the Blue Ridge Forever Coalition have set priorities for the places most in need of protection for clean drinking water, recreation, tourism and working farms,” says Walter Clark of Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust. “However, we can only be successful with strong community support. By supporting your local land trust financially and as a volunteer, you can leave a legacy that will be felt by generations to come.” Learn more about how to get involved at www.blueridgeforever.info.

Valerie True is the coalition coordinator for Blue Ridge Forever. The Blue Ridge Forever Coalition is led by Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, Conservation Trust for North Carolina, Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, High Country Conservancy, Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust, Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, National Committee for the New River, Pacolet Area

Conservancy and Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.
Valerie can be reached through www.blueridgeforever.info.

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