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Stretch of river gets protection

Dale Neal

A popular stretch of Wilson Creek, one of North Carolina's four wild and scenic rivers, now belongs to state residents for fishing, kayaking and swimming.

Wilson Creek has its headwaters on the slopes of Grandfather Mountain in Avery County and flows down through Caldwell County into a gorge that's popular with kayakers and fishermen.

The Foothills Conservancy, a nonprofit land trust, closed this month on a \$7 million deal to buy 650 acres along four miles of Wilson Creek in Caldwell County, a tract that had been considered only two years ago for a 250-home subdivision.

The land trust then turned the contract over to the state for permanent protection.

"This is a tract we've been working on for two years," said Susie Hamrick Jones, executive director of the Foothills Conservancy. "We're making great strides in protecting Wilson Creek from the headwaters on Grandfather Mountain coming down toward the section where the Lutz property was. We are working with other interested landowners and have hopes to enhance that protection."

The conservancy negotiated the deal with the Lutz family on behalf of the state, using grants from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund and the Natural Heritage Trust Fund. Foothills turned the contract over to the state. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission will manage the area as part of the state game lands program.

"It's good news for paddlers, for sure, and for fishermen to help keep that river clean," said Leland Davis, an outdoors guide publisher in Swannanoa. "There are a tremendous number of people who go to swim and hang out on the banks of a cold mountain stream in summer."

Wilson Creek won designation as a national wild and scenic river in 2000. Other scenic rivers in the mountains are the Horsepasture in Transylvania County, the New River in Ashe County and the Chattooga River in Jackson County. The Lumber River on the North Carolina coast is also protected as a wild and scenic river.

The Lutz property, which is surrounded by Pisgah National Forest, also contains the ruins of a cotton mill, which later became a hosiery plant owned by O.P. Lutz. A flood destroyed the plant in the 1940s.

"Our family is forever grateful to Foothills Conservancy and the state of North Carolina for securing this pristine natural treasure for all the citizens of Caldwell County and North Carolina to enjoy," said Herbert Lutz, managing partner for the Lutz Family Partnership. "Our parents, O. P. and Mattie Lutz, never wanted this beautiful land to be ravaged and destroyed by poor stewardship. They always desired to have this treasure shared by the people who enjoyed its natural beauty."

Additional Facts

Foothills Conservancy

Since 1995, Foothills Conservancy has helped protect more than 44,000 acres by negotiating public acquisitions and private conservation agreements in the South Mountains, Chimney Rock, Lake James, Catawba Falls and Wilson Creek areas. Foothills Conservancy is one of 25 land trusts serving various regions of North Carolina and is the land trust for Alexander, Burke, Cleveland, Caldwell, Catawba, Lincoln, McDowell and Rutherford counties.
