



CONSERVATION VISION



BLUE RIDGE FOREVER COALITION PARTNERS

Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy, 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, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Conservation Trust for North Carolina

Advisors: The Conservation Fund, The Nature Conservancy - North Carolina Chapter, and The Trust for Public Land

Executive Summary

The Southern Blue Ridge is at a critical environmental, social and economic crossroads. Formed over 260 million years ago, the Blue Ridge Mountains' land and water sustain all aspects of life in these mountains and beyond. Millions of North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, Georgia and Tennessee residents get their drinking water from Southern Blue Ridge headwaters, while farming from the region generates over \$540 million to the local economy each year.

The mountains' diverse habitats – the mossy boulder-lined mountain streams, the high windy ridge tops, the rare mountain bogs – host a wide variety of species. Scientists call the forests of the Southern Blue Ridge the most ecologically rich in the temperate world; over 100,000 species are estimated to live in the Great Smoky Mountains National Park alone. The mountains are home to 400 rare plants and more than 250 endemic plants, meaning they occur nowhere else in the world.

The area's scenic views, public lands and boundless outdoor recreational opportunities drive tourism, the state's number- two economic engine. The Blue Ridge Parkway is the most visited unit of the National Park System. Each year over 20 million tourists visit the Blue Ridge Parkway in western North Carolina, generating over \$1 billion for North Carolina's local economy and creating 75,000 jobs and more than \$100 million in state and local sales tax revenue for western North Carolina.

The stakes could not be higher as the land supporting these livelihoods is developed at an unprecedented rate. As the fifth fastest developing state in the nation, North Carolina loses over 100,000 acres of natural land each year. In 2006, North Carolina surpassed New Jersey to become the 10th most populous state in the country. Wildlife corridors are increasingly fragmented (habitat destruction is the largest threat to biodiversity) and farmland supporting Appalachian family traditions is decreasing at a rapid rate. In 2005, North Carolina led the nation in loss of farms for a second year in a row.

Working Toward A Solution: Blue Ridge Forever

Land trusts are effective players to protect these diminishing cultural and ecological Southern Blue Ridge resources because they pursue *voluntary* land protection measures benefiting both cultural and natural assets and generating a wide spectrum of grassroots support. To date, land trusts in the Southern Blue Ridge have worked with local residents, government agencies, and foundations to protect over 165,000 acres with conservation easements, purchases, and land donations. The beauty and character of these lands will remain forever enjoyed by generation after generation.

Referred to as Physiographic Area 23 by the Bureau of Land Management, the Southern Blue Ridge is one of three main ecological regions of the Southern Appalachian Mountains stretching from northern Georgia to southwestern Virginia, and including all of western North Carolina. For the purposes of the Blue Ridge Forever coalition, we have limited our initial *Conservation Vision* to the North Carolina portion of the Southern Blue Ridge.



Our Conservation Vision

The Blue Ridge Forever *Conservation Vision* is the product of more than a year's collaboration among all of the land conservation organizations serving Western North Carolina and some of the region and state's leading conservation thinkers, biological experts, agricultural specialists, and cultural researchers. Our *Conservation Vision* guides us in connecting protected lands on a landscape scale – with attention to places containing 1) nationally or state significant ecological qualities, 2) important wildlife habitat, 3) high water quality, 4) cultural and economic significance and scenic value, and 5) working farms and forestlands.

Drawing on the knowledge of experts, Blue Ridge Forever's Conservation Committee matched appropriate nationally and state significant data to reflect the above unique characteristics, then overlaid them on digital maps using Geographic Information Systems (GIS). Regions in the Southern Blue Ridge with a high overlap of these unique

characteristics were selected as potential focus areas for land protection. Of these, the areas providing the most connectivity and having the best chance of successful land protection were identified, resulting in twenty-eight initial focus areas for joint land protection efforts.

Focus areas are located within the following 25 North Carolina Counties: Alexander, Alleghany, Ashe, Avery, Buncombe, Burke, Caldwell, Catawba, Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, Macon, Madison, McDowell, Mitchell, Polk, Rutherford, Swain, Transylvania, Watauga, Wilkes and Yancey.

Blue Ridge Forever's focus areas contain some of the best drinking water sources, most critical biological habitat, most breathtaking views, most visited recreational opportunities, and the most significant cultural heritage in the state and country.

Focus areas help us to concentrate our limited resources and to garner critical local support for voluntary measures leading to the protection of at least 50,000 new acres of land by 2010. In order to save these prime ecological and cultural lands, Blue Ridge Forever partners are working together and with elected officials, public representatives, and local residents and others from outside the region who simply love and revere this national treasure.

Blue Ridge Forever partners are also engaged in collaborative efforts to develop additional data and better conservation planning for the future.

Blue Ridge Forever Focus Areas

Note: Many focus areas include significant farming communities (**F**), the Appalachian Trail (**A**), and the Blue Ridge Parkway (**P**).

FOCUS AREA	COUNTIES	ORGANIZATIONS <i>Lead organizations for focus areas are in bold</i>
1. New River Headwaters F	Ashe, Alleghany, Watauga	NCNR, BRRLT, CTNC, HCC, TPL, TNC
2. Stone Mountain Area P	Alleghany, Wilkes	BRRLT, CTNC
3. Highlands of Roan to Yellow Mountain A	Mitchell, Avery	SAHC, TNC, HCC, TPL
4. North Toe River Headwaters	Avery	HCC, BRRLT, SAHC, TPL
5. Valle Crucis F	Watauga, Avery	HCC, BRRLT, TNC
6. Brushy Mountains F	Wilkes, Alexander	BRRLT, CTNC, HCC, FCNC
7. North Fork Catawba River & Upper Linville River Gorge F P	Burke, McDowell	FCNC, CTNC, HCC
8. Spring Creek Farming Community FA	Madison	SAHC
9. Black and Craggy Mountains P	Yancey, McDowell, Buncombe	SAHC, CTNC, FCNC
10. Sandy Mush Farming Community F	Buncombe, Madison, Haywood	SAHC
11. Smoky Mountains A P	Haywood	SAHC
12. Great Balsams and Plott Balsam Mountains P	Haywood, Jackson	CTNC, SAHC, LTLT, TNC, TCF, HCI
13. Pisgah Ridge and Bethel Farming Community F P	Haywood, Transylvania, Buncombe, Jackson	SAHC, CTNC
14. Hickory Nut Gorge	Henderson, Buncombe, Rutherford, Polk	FCNC, CMLC, TCF, TNC
15. Hickory Nut Mountain	McDowell, Rutherford	FCNC, TCF
16. South Mountains to Dysartsville	McDowell, Rutherford, Burke	FCNC
17. White Oak Mountain to Tryon Peak	Polk	PAC, TPL
18. Dupont State Forest	Henderson, Transylvania	CMLC, TNC
19. Upper Tuckasegee Gorge	Jackson	HCLT, SAHC
20. Chattooga Headwaters and Whiteside Mountain Area	Jackson, Macon	HCLT, CMLC, TNC, TPL
21. Little Tennessee River Valley F	Macon, Swain	LTLT, HCLT
22. Hiwassee Valley, Unicoi Mountains and Snowbird Mountains F	Cherokee, Graham, Clay	LTLT
23. Appalachian Trail A	Avery, Mitchell, Yancey, Madison, Haywood, Swain, Graham, Macon	SAHC BRRLT, LTLT, HCC
24. Blue Ridge Parkway P	Alleghany, Ashe, Wilkes, Watauga, Avery, Mitchell, McDowell, Yancey, Buncombe, Henderson, Haywood, Transylvania, Jackson, Swain	CTNC, BRRLT, FCNC, HCC, LTLT, SAHC
25. Upper French Broad River Watershed F	Henderson, Transylvania	CMLC
26. Grandfather Mountain and Wilson Creek P	Avery, Caldwell, Watauga	FCNC, HCC, TNC
27. Pond Mountain A	Ashe	BRRLT, NCNR, HCC
28. Fairview Farmland F	Buncombe	SAHC

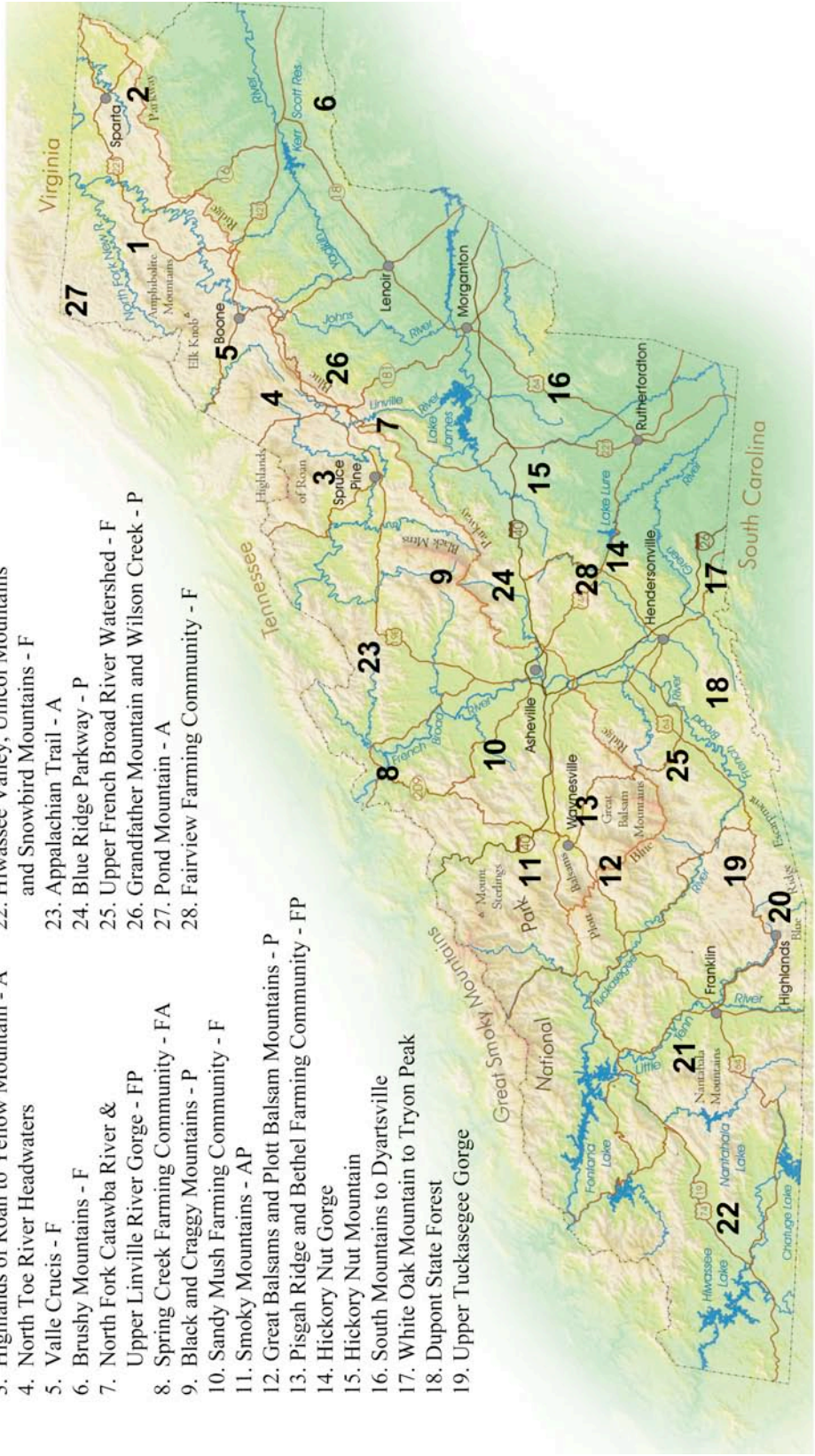
Blue Ridge Forever

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CONSERVATION VISION FOCUS AREAS

1. New River Headwaters - F
2. Stone Mountain Area - P
3. Highlands of Roan to Yellow Mountain - A
4. North Toe River Headwaters
5. Valle Crucis - F
6. Brushy Mountains - F
7. North Fork Catawba River & Upper Linville River Gorge - FP
8. Spring Creek Farming Community - FA
9. Black and Craggy Mountains - P
10. Sandy Mush Farming Community - F
11. Smoky Mountains - AP
12. Great Balsams and Plott Balsam Mountains - P
13. Pisgah Ridge and Bethel Farming Community - FP
14. Hickory Nut Gorge
15. Hickory Nut Mountain
16. South Mountains to Dyartsville
17. White Oak Mountain to Tryon Peak
18. Dupont State Forest
19. Upper Tuckasegee Gorge
20. Chattooga Headwaters and Whiteside Mountain Area
21. Little Tennessee River Valley - F
22. Hiwassee Valley, Unicoi Mountains and Snowbird Mountains - F
23. Appalachian Trail - A
24. Blue Ridge Parkway - P
25. Upper French Broad River Watershed - F
26. Grandfather Mountain and Wilson Creek - P
27. Pond Mountain - A
28. Fairview Farming Community - F

Key:
 F=Significant Farming Community
 P=Contributes to the Blue Ridge Parkway
 A=Contributes to the Appalachian Trail



Criteria for Focus Areas

The focus areas of the Blue Ridge Forever *Conservation Vision* contain three or more of the following five characteristics listed below in bold affecting 50 percent of the land in the focus area:

Criteria 1. Nationally or state significant ecological qualities, which is determined if the area contains:

- a) One or more of the following habitats associated with the State Wildlife Action Plan (SWAP): Mountain Bogs, Spruce-Fir Forests, High Elevation Northern Hardwood Forests, Caves, High-Elevation Rocky Outcrops, including granitic domes, cliffs and rocky summits; (*SWAP data unavailable, SWAP habitats represented by North Carolina Natural Heritage element occurrence of the above habitats, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- b) Nationally significant aquatic habitat (*North Carolina Natural Heritage element occurrences, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- c) A National Wild and Scenic River (*North Carolina Division of Water Quality, 8/9/2004 GIS dataset*); or
- d) A National or State-Significant Natural Heritage Area and/or Macro-site; or one or more of the following community types, as determined by Natural Heritage Program 3rd and 4th approximation classification: Low Elevation Granitic Domes, Low Elevation Rocky Summits, Carolina Hemlock Bluffs, Swamp Forest Bog Complex, Montane Alluvial Forests, Canebrakes (*North Carolina Natural Heritage State-significant, Macro-sites, Element Occurrences, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- e) Federally or State threatened and endangered species (*North Carolina Natural Heritage state rank = "threatened" and "endangered" element occurrences, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- f) A Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition's "Un-Roaded Areas" for private land. (*Unroaded areas in Southern Appalachians GIS dataset, Hugh Irwin, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, 6/28/04, unrd_gt1000*)

Criteria 2. High quality waters or is a significant water supply, as designated by North Carolina Division of Water Quality as:

- a) As a watershed that contains waterways with Outstanding Resource Waters or High Quality Waters classification(s); or
- b) As a WS-1 or WS-2 classification

Criteria 3. Connectivity within the landscape to maintain the region's wildlife corridors, scenic views and rural character, to be determined if the area contains:

- a) At least 2,500 acres of connecting unfragmented lands inside the focus area (*analysis on Unroaded areas in Southern Appalachians GIS dataset, Hugh Irwin, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, 6/28/04, unrd_gt1000*); or

- b) At least 2,500 acres of already protected lands inside or adjacent to the focus area (*analysis on North Carolina Natural Heritage protected lands, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- c) Are targeted protection projects for local, state, or federal public parks and forests.

Criteria 4. Exceptional scenic views or regionally/ nationally significant cultural heritage and/ or economic importance, especially as related to tourism, as determined if the area contains:

- a) Historic District(s) in rural areas (*layer created by working group from National Register of Historic Places "Historic Districts." Land trusts identified "rural" Historic Districts from their own knowledge*); or
- b) Federally designated natural resource tourist destination(s) or historic trail(s) (such as The Blue Ridge Parkway, Appalachian Trail, Overmountain Victory Trail) (*North Carolina Natural Heritage managed areas, 9/2006 GIS dataset*); or
- c) Viewshed of National Park Service lands or Appalachian Trail (*represented by 2.5 mile buffer*); or
- d) NC Scenic Byway(s) (*listed by North Carolina Division of Transportation, Spring 2007, layer created by Conservation Committee working group*); or
- e) Priority project(s) of the Blue Ridge National Heritage Area. (**data unavailable until fall 2007, not included in current Conservation Vision analysis*)

Criteria 5. Contains significant tracts of working lands, particularly agriculture and sustainable forestry lands. The area would contain:

- a) Sustainable farming communities, as determined by local land trusts using the following information, if available:
 - Voluntary Agriculture Districts
 - Number of farmers in area
 - Prime soils data (STATSCO, a general soil analysis)
 - Economic viability of agricultural community
 - Local knowledge and expertise; or
- b) Sizeable tracts (at least 200 acres) of forested lands suitable for sustainable forestry. (*Per land trust on the ground knowledge from service areas*)

In addition, ALL focus areas must contain the following two characteristics:

- 25 percent of the focus area is yet to be protected by state, federal or private means, i.e. there is plenty of protection work yet to be done.
- Is within the Southern Blue Ridge Mountains and in the coverage area of the 13 partnering land conservation organizations of Blue Ridge Forever.