

The Need for a Statewide Plan of Land and Water Conservation

The Issue: North Carolina is home to a wealth of biodiversity and ecosystems from the coastal plains to the Piedmont to the Appalachian Mountains. As the state grows and develops, our responsibility to balance this growth and the preservation of our natural resources becomes increasingly important. The next decade will be crucial in deciding the future of our remaining natural lands. *A coordinated statewide conservation plan is essential in order to preserve the natural heritage that draws so many to visit and live in North Carolina.*

Background: There are 58 federally listed threatened and endangered species found within North Carolina, and our state is ranked fourth in the nation in overall biodiversity. These species inhabit natural areas that provide North Carolinians with a healthy environment and contribute to a higher quality of life. Yet only 9% (~2.9 million acres) of the state is under protection, and we lose approximately 430 acres to development each day. Between 1982 and 1992 alone, the area of developed land increased 36 percent. Intact forests, wetlands, and grasslands provide invaluable “ecosystem services,” helping to keep our air and water clean, acting as buffers against disease, etc.

For example, wetlands purify water, control erosion, and reduce flooding during major storms, and they refill groundwater during droughts and dry weather. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, however, estimates that half of the original wetlands in North Carolina have been drained and converted to other uses. When we lose these natural services, they must be replaced by engineered systems, such as water purification plants, that draw away valuable economic resources; and failure to protect important bodies of land and water from the outset can lead to costly reclamation projects.

Conservation also has an important part to play in the growth and development of our state. Forestry, fisheries, and other resource-based industries are supported and stimulated through effective conservation, which keeps the extraction of resources at sustainable levels so these industries don't collapse (as happened to the once vibrant oyster industry). At the same time, conservation preserves and enhances the scenic beauty—fall colors in the mountains, pristine beaches—that attracts much-needed tourist revenue each year. Tourism is the 2nd highest revenue source for the state, bringing in \$10 billion per year and directly supporting nearly 200,000 jobs. Land and water conservation is needed to protect the abundance, health, and beauty of North Carolina's natural landscapes, and to responsibly manage our natural resources.

So why a “coordinated” plan, and why now?

North Carolina ranks 4th in the nation in speed of growth and 6th in the level of air pollution. Decisions that will determine the future of our natural landscapes are being made every day. These decisions involve government organizations, conservation groups, developers, municipalities, and individual landowners with similar goals: to preserve and improve the quality of life in North Carolina. Their efforts, however, are too piecemeal to ensure the protection of our most important natural assets. The likely outcome of many small and independent conservation efforts is that our landscape will become fragmented into pockets of conservation and development, none of which are large enough to support our land and water resources, and all of which are in constant conflict with pressures for development. A coordinated conservation effort, based on principles from the science of ecology, would

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lead to a different world: one in which connected tracts of land and water are conserved in a way that preserves our resources and quality of life, while recognizing that development could proceed in less critical areas that don't provide these natural services.

The mandate for conservation in North Carolina already is widely recognized, and a number of planning efforts are in motion. The Nature Conservancy's *Ecoregional Planning* and Environmental Defense's *Horizon 2100 Program* are two examples from the nonprofit sector. Extensive research has been and is being conducted by the *North Carolina Natural Heritage Program* and the state's universities to document valuable natural assets and identify conservation needs. More than 25 land trusts throughout the state are working to acquire and protect natural areas and to help maintain viable agricultural land. These conservation efforts receive vital support from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund, the Farmland Preservation Trust Fund, the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, and the Natural Heritage Trust Fund.

North Carolina's Constitution calls on the State to preserve, conserve, and protect our natural heritage. The North Carolina State Legislature has affirmed this by passing the Million Acre Initiative (Session Law 2000-23, NC General Statutes 113A-241), aimed at permanently protecting an additional million acres by 2010. To reach this goal, approximately 100,000 acres must be protected each year. Currently, less than 60,000 acres are being protected each year. Moreover, the acres being added reflect the independent agendas of the various parties involved. This has resulted in the Department of Environment and Natural Resources' *One North Carolina Naturally* initiative, bringing together conservation groups to develop a coordinated conservation plan in collaboration with experts in ecology at the state's universities.

What can be done? To begin, conservation in North Carolina should be shaped by scientific consensus on the most important bodies of land and water. Emphasis should be placed on protection of endangered, threatened, and rare species that are imperiled and irreplaceable; on wetlands that provide natural services; on land that buffers our watersheds from erosion and pollutant run-off; and on areas where tourism requires an unobstructed "viewscape" across areas of natural beauty. *Crucial questions need to be answered: How large do the habitat areas for a given species need to be? How many habitat areas are needed? How should natural areas be distributed over the landscape? Which natural services are being provided by our landscapes, and what is needed to protect them while allowing reasonable development?*

While statewide conservation planning is new for North Carolina, other states such as Washington serve as examples of effective partnerships. Policy tools to bring about these changes are in place: conservation easements, mitigation banking, transfer of development rights between landowners, sustainable forestry practices, and so on. North Carolina's Conservation Tax Credit Program is the nation's first tax credit to encourage private donation of land for conservation purposes (codified in North Carolina General Statutes §105-130.34, 105-151.12). And North Carolina's public and private sectors already spend millions of dollars each year in support of conservation planning. The scientific, policy, and resource tools needed to effectively balance conservation and development are in place. *All that is needed is a statewide effort, such as One North Carolina Naturally, to apply these tools with a collective goal: creating a mosaic of land that conserves our natural heritage, protects the most important natural services of our ecosystems, and leaves room for development that will continue to attract people to live in a state so rich in natural beauty.*

Credits

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