

# Linking Lands and Communities in the Land-of-Sky Region

## The Regional Conservation and Development Network

An interconnected network of our region's green infrastructure -- areas valuable for their ecological systems and services including forests, water resources, farmlands, wildlife habitat, recreation lands -- and areas best suited for future growth and development.

## Benefits of the Regional Network for our Mountain Communities

Green infrastructure is our community's life support system. This interconnected network of land and water in Western North Carolina provides food and habitat to a diverse array of plants and animals, making our region one of the most biologically diverse in all of North America. These natural systems serve our human communities in much the same way, providing clean air and water, food, timber, medicinal plants for healing, recreation opportunities, and a sense of place vital to the health, well being, and long term sustainability of our communities.



### The Regional Conservation and Development Network:

- ✓ **Provides ecosystem services** that support every aspect of our daily lives. This may be referred to as our **natural capital**. These natural services are nearly impossible to replicate, and human-derived alternatives are very costly to build and maintain over the long term. A few examples of the services our region's ecosystems provide include:
  - Clean drinking water supply
  - Drought and flood mitigation
  - Timber production
  - Air pollutant removal
  - Groundwater recharge
  - Alternative energy resources
  - Food and fiber production
  - Carbon Storage
  - Crop pollination
  - Decomposition of waste
  - Natural medicines

## Our Region's Natural Economy

### Tourism

According to a recent report, *Measurement of the Economic Vitality of The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area*, tourism in the region generated more than \$1.1 billion in 2004. A second study, *The Blue Ridge Parkway Scenic Experience Project* spearheaded Leah Greden-Matthews at UNCA found that visitors were willing to pay a total of \$870 million annually for preservation of scenic quality along the NC section of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

### Agriculture and Forestry

In a 2007 report published by ASAP, *Growing Local: Expanding the Western North Carolina Farm and Food Economy*, cash receipts for agriculture in western North Carolina in 2002 totaled \$543 million. NCSU reported that combined income for timber for the four county region was over 16 million in 2001.

- ✓ **Sustains lands for forestry and agriculture** that provide resource-based livelihoods, local food and resource production, opportunities for agri-tourism and that maintains the rural character of our region;
- ✓ **Maintains scenic views, hiking and biking trails, parks, and other recreation areas** that attract billions of tourist dollars every year, serving as a primary economic engine for our region;
- ✓ **Offers natural and restored green settings for growth and development** that provide economic benefits to landowners and local businesses;
- ✓ **Attracts new business and industry** and increases business retention.

## Special Places in the Network



Asheville Watershed



Local Farms



Pisgah National Forest



Blue Ridge Parkway



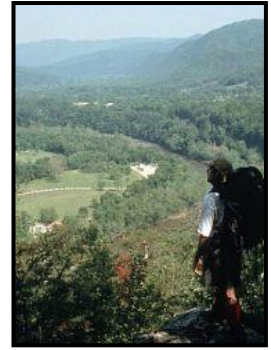
Biltmore Estate



North Carolina Arboretum

## Natural Areas Significantly Contribute to our Health & Well-Being

While the network of natural areas and green spaces supports our economies and provides resources necessary for survival, it also provides the quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors alike. Whether it's a hike on the Appalachian Trail, a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway, participation in a land stewardship project or spending a lunch hour relaxing in a county park with a view of the mountains, these experiences restore us and renew our connection to not only our human communities, but to our natural communities as well.



- ✓ **Community green spaces** provide community gathering places and accessible areas for relaxation and recreation
- ✓ **Trails, linkages and corridors** provide easy access to outdoor recreation and support activities that improve physical and mental health while helping residents and visitors re-connect with nature
- ✓ **Open lands** provide opportunities for stewardship projects such as planting trees, restoring riverbanks, planting community gardens and installing green roofs
- ✓ **Natural areas** serve educational purposes as places for educational centers, school programs, field-based learning programs, and informal study

The quality of these and other restorative experiences are dependent upon the broader context— noise levels, air quality, quality of scenic views, extent of solitude, and presence or absence of buffers between land uses, for example. In other words, to adequately protect these experiences, we must look beyond the narrow corridors of the Blue Ridge Parkway or the Appalachian Trail and consider how our development strategies impact viewsheds, adjacent forestlands, farmlands, and our networks of rivers and streams.

### The Benefits of Connectivity: Nature as a System

Nature functions as a complex, interdependent system of water and land and is made up of many features on the landscape - rivers, forests, rock formations, soils, meadows, and many others. By protecting contiguous forestlands, native natural areas, farmlands, and key linkages between them at the broader landscape (i.e., regional) scale, the complex web of nature is better able to function effectively. Maintaining these connections also supports native wildlife populations, their migration corridors, and the habitats they depend upon for survival.

### Maintaining Community Benefits: Integrating Natural Systems into Growth Strategies

Our natural system is our community's life support system. If we fragment and disregard these ecosystems, we put the future viability of our communities at risk. However, if we choose to align our plans for development with the needs of our natural environment, we can ensure that growth occurs in suitable places that don't endanger critical natural resources. The Linking Lands and Communities project will produce an ecological assessment and accompanying maps to serve as resources for local leaders to do just this. By conserving and managing our regional network of natural areas, we can continue to grow in a way that protects and sustains our communities and our sense of place that makes our region so unique.

For more information or to get involved, please contact:

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