

Watauga Democrat
July 25, 2007

Help the N.C. Assembly save our land

Editor:

Be careful what you wish for. This sage piece of advice rings especially true now for development-hungry North Carolina.

For decades, we have seized upon every opportunity to promote economic growth and job creation, and the results have been impressive. I should know because my family business has certainly profited by targeting some of the fastest-growing urban markets across the state. The money is nice, but I know I'm not the only one realizing right now that all of this growth is putting some of our finest scenery and proudest outdoor traditions at risk. If we don't find the political will to make substantial new investments in land and water conservation today, there will come a time in the not-too-distant future when we realize we have lost more in natural heritage and quality of life than we have gained in dollars and material wealth.

We must do all we can to protect the rare, beautiful natural assets we are blessed to have in the North Carolina mountains, such as the Elk Knob game lands. No one stands to lose more from overdevelopment in this area and state than outdoor recreation enthusiasts, such as hunters, fishermen, boaters and bird-watchers – the very people I am privileged to represent as chairman of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. The reasoning is simple: wildlife conservation is all about protecting and maintaining habitat.

Biologists have known for years that many upland game species, such as black bears and bobwhite quail, need thousands of acres of contiguous habitats to maintain viable breeding populations. We also know for certain that the only way to ensure healthy fish populations is to preserve substantial amounts of high-quality forests and wetlands in the watersheds that lie upstream from our waterways. We cannot expect native animal populations to remain robust in North Carolina if we keep losing more than 100,000 acres of fish and wildlife habitat each year to development.

Nor can we expect the proud traditions of generations of sportsmen and women to survive long in the face of declining wildlife populations and disappearing habitats. Mirroring the decline of wide-open spaces is the steady drop in the numbers of hunters and fishermen plying our woods and waters. Recent statistics indicate, for example, that the number of licensed hunters in North Carolina has declined 16 percent over the last decade. With our rapid pace of development, we have less places to hunt and fish each year, so it is no surprise that fewer young people are able to take advantage of the opportunity to enjoy these rewarding outdoor activities.

How can we possibly counteract these two trends of declining wildlife populations and disappearing places to hunt and fish? Realistically speaking, the only solution is to find some way to protect large tracts of habitat from encroaching development. Luckily for wildlife, a diverse group of conservationists have joined together under the banner of the Land for Tomorrow (www.landfortomorrow.org) to ask the General Assembly to spend \$200 million annually on land and water conservation over the next five years. This money would pay for the creation of thousands of acres of new public game lands. It would also enable the permanent protection of hundreds of privately owned working farms and forests statewide.

I am proud to report that the members of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission stand unanimous in our support for Land for Tomorrow. There will be no better opportunity to enhance the future prospects of healthy fish and wildlife populations than to make this great investment in habitat conservation now.

If you care about protecting native plants and animals, if you care about preserving our state's incredible scenic beauty, and if you care about safeguarding our cherished outdoor sporting traditions, then we need your help in making sure the land and water conservation bill in the General Assembly succeeds this year.

Please take the time today to contact your state legislators (www.ncleg.net) and ask them to support the Land for Tomorrow conservation bond proposal. Tell your elected officials that you want a North

Carolina with plenty of natural habitats for both people and wildlife to enjoy today – and for years to come.

Wes Seegars

Chairman, N.C. Wildlife Commission

Goldsboro