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Celebrating the land

Scarlett O'Hara's father tells her in *Gone with the Wind* that land is the only thing worth fighting for because it's the only thing that lasts. But its natural beauty must be protected. Several groups in North Carolina are fighting to do just that. Now, there are two more important ways to celebrate their work -- which is integral to promoting our growing tourism industry.

The Blue Ridge Parkway is marking its 75th anniversary this year with improvement projects and symposiums, a marathon and a festival, the Journal's Lisa O'Donnell reported last week. For more information, go to blueridgeparkway75.org.

Anyone who's ever been on a stretch of the 469-mile parkway that snakes from Rockfish Gap, Va., to Cherokee has experienced its sweeping, breathtaking views.

And as with other treasured parcels, it's a constant challenge to maintain the facilities on the parkway and to encourage responsible development on adjoining land. We can help with that by supporting the Blue Ridge Parkway Foundation. The foundation, the primary fundraising arm of the parkway, is based in Winston-Salem.

A much newer preservation success is Pond Mountain in Ashe County, in the far northwestern corner of our state. In 2008, the Blue Ridge Rural Land Trust, other preservation groups, state officials and landowners hammered out a deal where the state would own and preserve much of the mountain. The top of the mountain is a 5,000-foot-high ridge that offers a 360-degree view of peaks and wilderness in North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee.

From the start, the organizers of this agreement wanted the public to be able to enjoy this land. Now they're making a major step toward that with plans for hunting and horseback riding on the mountain. The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has proposed opening the mountain for hunting, the Journal's Monte Mitchell reported, and opening a horseback-trail riding system for four months of the year.

The state is having a series of public hearings on those and other proposals. The one for Northwest North Carolina will be held at 7 p.m. Thursday in Mount Airy High School's auditorium. The Wildlife Resources Commission meets in March to decide on the proposals.

Within the next year, the state hopes to open the mountain to hiking. Although there aren't any hiking trails, there are dirt roads that would be good for walking. Sections would be designated for horseback riding.

As people visit Pond Mountain, they're also likely to lodge and eat at businesses in that corner of the state. The Blue Ridge Parkway has certainly brought business to Northwest North Carolina.

Development must be balanced with preservation to brighten that economic picture. After all, land is the only thing that lasts.