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Report: State falls short of land preservation goal

North Carolina has failed to realize former Gov. Jim Hunt's goal of preserving 1 million acres of land by 2010, according to a report released Thursday by Environment North Carolina.

The state has permanently protected more than 640,000 acres of parks, forests and farmlands over the past decade, preserving areas like Grandfather Mountain and Chimney Rock, but has fallen short of the 1 million acre goal set by state legislators in 1999.

Over the same time period, North Carolina lost more than 1 million acres of natural lands, more than any other state in the U.S.

"North Carolina has made progress in conserving our forests and farmlands, but we have a long way to go to preserve our natural heritage," said Elizabeth Ouzts, state director of the environmental advocacy group. "The Million Acre Initiative fell short not for lack of opportunities, but rather because of insufficient funding throughout the life of the initiative, even in good economic times."

Conservation advocates argue that preserving land helps to protect the state's water supplies while also supporting the state's \$17 billion tourism industry.

"So much of the economy of Western North Carolina depends on the strong tourist industry and that tourist industry depends to a large extent on the beauty of this area and the recreational opportunities that exist," said Kieran Roe, executive director of the Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy.