



January 5, 2010

Local economy gets natural boost with ecotourism
By Amy Hotz

Officials from several towns in Brunswick County are considering the creation of new and extensive paddling and biking trails.

Poplar Grove Plantation has donated a conservation agreement for 15 acres to the N.C. Coastal Land Trust. This will ensure that as the community near the Pender/New Hanover line grows, Poplar Grove's natural area will remain.

And the new Brunswick Nature Park off N.C. 133 is already generating a lot of interest from nature lovers, even though it's still in phase one of development. The trails haven't even been cut yet.

All this seems to indicate to me that locals, including government officials, are starting to see and appreciate the great natural (and, yes, money-making) resources around them.

Maybe we're all starting to wake up and smell the roses and the pines and maybe even a few honeysuckle.

Ecotourism is big business.

In North Carolina, a 2006 survey by the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation found that 3.4 million of the state's residents and nonresidents, 16 years and older fished, hunted or watched wildlife in North Carolina.

Of the total number of participants, 1.3 million fished, 304,000 hunted and 2.6 million participated in wildlife-watching activities, which include observing, feeding and photographing wildlife.

All that adds up to money.

That same survey also indicated that 87.5 million Americans spent more than \$122 billion in 2006 on wildlife-related recreation.

And this spending supports hundreds of thousands of jobs in industries and businesses.

Maybe people really do enjoy touring a park or wildlife refuge as much as they enjoy riding a roller coaster once in awhile.

Maybe catching a glimpse of a fox before it dashes into some bushes is just as exciting as catching a show at a theater.

To me, though, the best part of ecotourism getting a boost, if that is what's really happening here, is that generations after me will be able to enjoy a trip down Rice Creek or the Black River in the same way I do today.

You can't put a price on that.