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Preserving land for tomorrow

Why North Carolina needs a heritage savings account

by Kirk Ross

There are places on this earth with a value far beyond anything you could ever build on them.

No mosquitoes, no ticks and cool, pleasant weather. Apart from the fact that I had to crawl through a rhododendron hell for an hour and spend the day up to my ankles in muck, the trip to Sugar Mountain Bog was a welcome respite from summer in the Piedmont.

Together, Sugar Mountain Bog and Pineola Bog in Avery County make up the Mountain Bog State Natural Area – one of two new natural areas added to the state park system this summer as part of an ongoing effort to preserve North Carolina's natural heritage.

Besides a quick lesson in botanical Latin, tagging along with a state botanist and an N.C. State researcher who were studying the bog (I got to carry the soil auger) gave me a close-up view of what's meant by diversity. Because they're wet and high up, mountain bogs like Sugar Mountain and Pineola are home to some of the region's rarer plants. The recently passed legislation that put the two areas under state stewardship noted that their soggy confines are home to unique lilies and threatened species like the purple-leaf willow herb, bog rose and bog fern.

As remote as these places seem when you're there, however, it's clear that we got lucky in finding, identifying and saving them. Driving to and from the bogs, you can't help but notice the building boom as resorts and retirement communities swallow up the mountainsides.

Across the state

That's something the Mountain Bog State Natural Area shares with Sandy Run, the state's other new natural area. You might blow right by this incredibly diverse savanna in Onslow County on your way to Topsail Beach, but inside it you'll find rare sedges and orchids, along with Cooley's meadow rue and rough-leaf loosestrife. It's a site once destined for a Department of Transportation wetlands swap. (That's where the DOT agrees to convert land it's acquired into a wetland, so it can destroy an existing wetland somewhere else to build a road.) Sandy Run's unique diversity ended the DOT's plans for it, however, and the land is now protected.

These two beautiful, wild places constitute at least a little land set aside by the state for future generations – a small victory, perhaps, for people who understand that there are places on this earth with a value far beyond anything you could ever build on them.

Undoubtedly, the bogs and Sandy Run are environmental successes from the General Assembly's last session. Talking to people around the state, however, nothing seems to sting more than the Legislature's inaction on the Land for Tomorrow bond referendum. The proposal called for raising \$1 billion for a long-range plan to save some of the state's unique lands – often critical for preserving heritage farmland, rare species and water quality. The initiative seemed well on the way to approval, but it lost support late in the session, thanks mainly to Governor Easley's concern about taking on more bond debt.

A study commission chaired by Rep. Lucy Allen, D-Franklin, and Sen. Dan Clodfelter, D-Mecklenburg, is gearing up to look at the best ways to fund the protection of key lands. The study commission, which also includes members appointed

by the governor and state treasurer, is due to report to the General Assembly early in the next session.

No time like the present

According to Kate Dixon, Land for Tomorrow's executive director, timing will be crucial. There's a lot of land throughout the state that's going on the market, she says, making it even more critical for the state to have the resources to move quickly in order to avoid losing valuable parcels.

International Paper, for instance, recently announced that it will sell 600,000 acres – about 2 percent of North Carolina. Also on the market is Chimney Rock, the Morse family's privately run park in Hickory Nut Gorge. So far the negotiations with the state have not been fruitful, and we risk losing the 100-year-old destination and its signature view of the mountains to private development.

While the state gets its act together, environmentalists are stepping in.

The Nature Conservancy recently acquired about 80,000 acres of the International Paper land, mostly in key watersheds in the coastal plain. And across the state, nonprofits, counties and towns are buying smaller parcels. Recently, Environmental Defense produced *Standing Tall*, a report on the loss of forestland and the need for action. According to the nonprofit, North Carolina is losing about 100,000 acres of privately owned forestland a year to development. The report recommends expanding tax credits, reducing sprawl and taking innovative approaches to forest management.

See it now

Another recent development is the launch of the new *I Love Mountains* Web site (www.ilovemountains.org). The innovative multimedia site, put together by Appalachian Voices and a consortium of regional environmental groups, uses Google Maps to show visitors the devastation caused by mountaintop removal. It's a stunning visual explanation and well worth a visit.

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