



## Local & State

### Counties:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

### Topics:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

### Columnists:

- 
- 
- 
- 
- 

---

Published: Apr 10, 2008 12:30 AM

Modified: Apr 10, 2008 05:03 AM

## Piece by piece, river saved

### Entire Alligator River now protected

**WADE RAWLINS, Staff Writer**

COLUMBIA - The swamp forest and scrub pine thickets along the Alligator River offer a shield of wilderness to protect the black bear and endangered red wolves from human encroachment.

Now the entire river and the untamed land along its shoreline are gaining a measure of protection, too.

Environmentalists and wildlife officials marked a conservation milestone Wednesday with the \$8.2 million acquisition of the last large unprotected tract along the Alligator River, which flows through Tyrrell and Dare counties into the Albemarle Sound.

"Twenty-five, 50 or 100 years from now when you look at a map of North Carolina, you'll see a much different landscape," said Tommy Hughes, supervising wildlife biologist in the coastal region for the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. "Today's subdivision is yesterday's deer lease. These areas that we are protecting today will be some of the jewels we'll look back on and be proud of."

The acquisition marks the first time in state history that an entire river has been protected, keeping the land along its 75-mile span open as wilderness for bear, wolves, deer and other animals that roam the territory. It will also protect the river's water quality -- prized as a spawning ground for species of fish such as striped bass and shad that swim into fresh water from the ocean to spawn.

"It's the most important area in North Carolina for spawning anadromous fish by far," said Fred Annand, associate director of the Nature Conservancy, based in Durham, as he toured the property Wednesday. Anadromous fish are those that go from salt water to fresh water or up rivers to spawn.

The land purchase was a partnership initiated by the Nature Conservancy and pursued for six years, Annand said. The tract was purchased from private landowners, who had been selectively logging pine trees on their holdings, and planned more logging that could have harmed the river's water quality with increased runoff, according to an application for grant money to buy the land.

The state Wildlife Resources Commission purchased 5,101 acres using \$5 million in grants from two state trust funds that were set up to foster environmental preservation -- the Natural Heritage Trust Fund and the Clean Water Management Trust Fund. The wildlife group also got a federal grant from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

For its part, the Nature Conservancy borrowed \$3 million to buy the balance of the tract -- 3,375 acres. It plans to sell its portion to the state this year so that it will remain under state control as public land.

The protection effort began in 1984 when the Nature Conservancy persuaded Prudential Insurance Co. to donate 118,000 acres to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for conservation purposes. The insurance company's agriculture division planned to develop the tract into a farm, but that venture was abandoned and the company instead capitalized on a tax writeoff for donating the land.

Valued at \$50 million, the donation was the largest conservation gift in history at the time. The land became the nucleus of the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge.

In the decades since, state and federal wildlife agencies, the Nature Conservancy and other groups have pieced together parcels to create 270,000 acres of protected land that spans the Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge and the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge.

"There are no large tracts of property around here left," Annand said.

[wade.rawlins@newsobserver.com](mailto:wade.rawlins@newsobserver.com) or (919) 829-452

© Copyright 2008, The News & Observer Publishing Company

A subsidiary of [The McClatchy Company](#)