

Linking Lands and Communities in the Land-of-Sky Region

Creating a framework for conservation and development that respects community values and natural systems

The Regional Green Infrastructure Network is

an interconnected network of lands and waters valuable for their ecological systems and services and significant contribution to regional and local economies

Benefits of the Regional Network for our Mountain Communities

Green infrastructure is our region's life support system. This interconnected network of land and water in Western North Carolina provides food and habitat to a diverse array of plants and animals, making our region one of the most biologically diverse in all of North America. These natural systems serve our human communities in much the same way, providing clean air and water, food, timber, medicinal plants for healing, recreation opportunities, and a sense of place vital to the health, well being, and long term sustainability of our communities.



The Regional Conservation and Development Network:

✓ *Provides ecosystem services* that support every aspect of our daily lives. These natural services are nearly impossible to replicate, and human-derived alternatives are very costly to build and maintain over the long term. A few examples of the services our ecosystems provide include:

- Clean drinking water supply
- Drought and flood mitigation
- Food and fiber production
- Air pollutant removal
- Groundwater recharge
- Decomposition of waste
- Timber production
- Carbon Storage
- Crop pollination
- Energy resources
- Natural medicines
- Seed dispersal

Our Region's Natural Economy

Tourism

According to a recent report, *Measurement of the Economic Vitality of The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area*, tourism in the region generated more than \$1.1 billion in 2004. A second study, *The Blue Ridge Parkway Scenic Experience Project* spearheaded by Leah Greden-Mathews at UNCA found that visitors were willing pay a total of \$870 million annually for preservation of scenic quality along the NC section of the Blue Ridge Parkway.

Agriculture and Forestry

In 2007, the market value of production for farms in Buncombe, Henderson, Madison, and Transylvania counties totaled just under 120 million dollars. In 2006, forest income for the four-county region exceeded 10 million dollars and provided over 6,000 jobs across the region. (Sources: 2007 Ag Census, NCSU Cooperative Extension Service 2006 Forest Income)

- ✓ *Sustains lands for forestry and agriculture* that provide resource-based jobs, local food and resource production, opportunities for agritourism and that maintain the rural character of our region;
- ✓ *Maintains scenic views, hiking and biking trails, parks, and other recreation and cultural areas* that attract billions of tourist dollars every year, serving as a primary economic engine for our region;
- ✓ *Offers natural and restored green settings for growth and development* that provide economic benefits to landowners and local businesses; and
- ✓ *Attracts and retains businesses and jobs* and provides entrepreneurial opportunities.

Benefits of our Green Infrastructure



Asheville Watershed



Local Farms



Biltmore Estate



Gaia Herb Farm



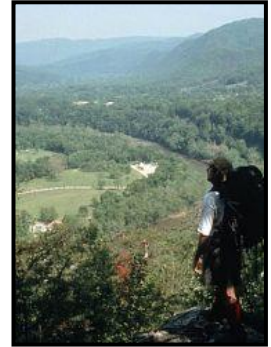
River Rafting



Sycamore Bicycle Shop

Natural Areas Significantly Contribute to our Health & Well-Being

While the network of natural areas and green spaces supports our economies and provides resources necessary for survival, it also provides a high quality of life enjoyed by residents and visitors alike. Whether it's a hike on the Appalachian Trail, a drive on the Blue Ridge Parkway, participation in a land stewardship project or spending a lunch hour relaxing in a county park with a view of the mountains, these experiences restore us and renew our connection not only to our human communities, but to our natural communities as well.



- ✓ **Community green spaces** provide community gathering places and accessible areas for relaxation and recreation
- ✓ **Trails, linkages and corridors** provide easy access to outdoor recreation and support activities that improve physical and mental health while helping residents and visitors re-connect with nature
- ✓ **Open lands** provide opportunities for stewardship projects such as planting trees, restoring riverbanks and planting community gardens
- ✓ **Natural areas** serve educational purposes as places for education centers, school programs, field-based learning programs, and informal study

The quality of these and other restorative experiences are dependent upon the broader context in which they take place. Noise levels, air quality, scenic views, extent of solitude, and surrounding land uses all affect the quality – positively or negatively. To adequately protect the power of these experiences, we must look beyond the narrow corridors of the Blue Ridge Parkway or the Appalachian Trail and consider the impacts of our development patterns on viewsheds, adjacent lands, and our networks of rivers and streams.

The Benefits of Connectivity: Nature as a System

Nature functions as a complex, interdependent system of water and land and is made up of many features on the landscape -- rivers, forests, rock formations, soils, meadows, and many others. By protecting contiguous forestlands, native natural areas, farmlands, and key linkages among them at the broader landscape (i.e., regional) scale, the complex web of nature is better able to function effectively. Maintaining these connections also supports native wildlife populations, their migration corridors, and the habitats they depend upon for survival.

Maintaining Community Benefits: Integrating Natural Systems into Development Strategies

Our regional green infrastructure network supports every aspect of our lives and of our community's sustainability. If we fragment and disregard these ecosystems, we put the future viability of our communities at risk. However, if we choose to align our plans for development with the needs of our natural environment, we can ensure that new growth occurs in suitable places so that it doesn't endanger critical natural resources. The Linking Lands and Communities project has developed a suite of natural resource assessments, maps, and tools to help local leaders to do just this. By working together to conserve and manage our regional green infrastructure network, we can continue to grow in ways that strengthen our economic vitality and quality of life, while sustaining the health of our natural ecosystems.

[For more information or to get involved, please contact:](#)

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