

1. Introduction

About Land-of-Sky Regional Council

Land-of-Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) is a multi-county, local government planning and development organization. It is one of 17 such organizations in North Carolina and serves Region B, which includes the counties of Buncombe, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania. Land-of-Sky Regional Council is made up of chief elected officials - mayors and county commission chairpersons and alternates - from its 19 member governments, one private representative of economic development interests in each county and two at-large members. Members meet monthly to plan programs and set policies and goals to benefit the entire region.

Land-of-Sky Regional Council's mission is to work with local governments, the Region's leadership and state and federal agencies to foster desirable social, economic, cultural and ecological conditions in Buncombe, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania Counties. More information about the Council and its programs can be found at www.landofsky.org.

The Council conducts conservation, land use, working lands, transportation and other planning in urban and rural areas and for the region as a whole. The region's chief planning issues include fragmentation of working lands (farms and private forests) due to urban sprawl; overdevelopment of sensitive mountain ridges and steep slopes; and protection of key natural and cultural assets for ecological health and economic development purposes.

Every five years LOSRC completes a regional strategic plan, with input from the board, local governments, a large group of diverse stakeholders and regional resources and citizens. This type of project was identified in LOSRC's previous regional strategic plan, *Regional Vision 2010*, as a way to integrate ecological health and economic development. The over-arching theme of the current strategic plan (*Comprehensive Economic Development Strategy, 2007-2012*) is regional coordination. This project supports the number one priority expressed by leaders across our region – to provide assistance and help facilitate regional coordination on growth management planning. One of the action items under this initiative was to develop a regional conservation plan.

Project Description and Purpose

Land-of-Sky Regional Council (LOSRC) has been working with a multi-disciplinary group of leaders, representing over 40 organizations, from across our four-county region to develop a regional framework for conservation and development using a green infrastructure planning approach. The project brings together data from public, private, and non-profit sources, resulting in a series of maps, datasets, information and other tools that can be used to help guide land use decisions across the landscape.

The project has three major goals:

1. Identify our area's green infrastructure – a network of valuable hubs and corridors comprised of forests, farmlands, water resources, and other natural communities;
2. Bring together a diverse group of local governments, non-profit organizations, and private businesses from around the region to explore the values of our natural heritage and identify opportunities to work together to protect and maintain these important resources; and
3. Develop a valuable set of resources that can help local governments, land trusts, developers, and landowners make sound land use and development decisions and be more able to identify, maintain and restore a network of healthy (and intact) natural systems at the regional scale.

The project has taken a big-picture look at the regional landscape to better understand where our most valuable natural resources are; what condition they are in; and to identify how we can be more proactive about maintaining a network of these natural systems to maintain the valuable services nature provides to our communities. This interconnected network of natural systems is often referred to as our region's "green infrastructure."

One of the primary premises of this project is that nature provides valuable services to our human communities. Natural systems support the tourism, outdoor recreation, farming, and forestry sectors of our economy – and help to attract new businesses and residents to our region. Nature also provides many "invisible" services to us, including clean water, drought and flood mitigation, groundwater recharge, carbon storage, natural medicines, other natural products, and so on. Thus it is beneficial to protect natural systems as the region develops.

The Linking Lands Project emphasizes the importance of looking at our ecosystems as systems – which require connectivity with other natural communities to maintain their unique functions across the entire four-county region. While many groups and local governments focus their land use-related efforts on smaller subsets of the region, natural systems do not adhere to municipal or county boundaries, or the edges of a land trusts focus area. For this reason, the Linking Lands Project uses a landscape perspective to understand the region as a whole. Natural systems are assessed at a large regional scale and an emphasis is placed on maintaining or restoring connections between important natural resource areas. This regional approach also provides a broader context that can help to knit together these disparate efforts and provide opportunities for leveraging and partnerships to implement conservation and growth management priorities.

Some of the products of the project include:

1. Science-based maps and data identifying the locations and conditions of our natural systems and agricultural lands at the regional scale;
2. A science-based green infrastructure network that is based on the wildlife habitat and biodiversity assessment and includes lands that were deemed valuable for farming, forestry, water quality and lands that provide wildlife habitat and support biodiversity;

3. Documentation that explains the data, maps and methodology that were developed and used in the project;
4. Implementation strategies and resources for conservation, development, and land management that can be carried out by local governments, developers, land owners and land trusts in the region.
5. A project website (www.linkinglands.org) that contains information about the project, outreach materials and maps.

The project and products are designed to complement current city and county planning efforts and provide resources to decision-makers and developers. The network will be linked to similar efforts across the Southern Appalachian region and the state and the process can be replicated in other regions in Western North Carolina and other places around the country.