

3. Partners and Public Involvement

Partners and Project Involvement

Land-of-Sky Regional Council worked with over forty partner organizations over the course of about two years on this project. Some of the initial partners were involved for a longer period, beginning in mid-2006. Project partners provided expertise, advice, leadership and other assistance by serving on the main project advisory committee, the Leadership Group, or on the Science Team or one of the assessment work groups. Additional organizations provided guidance on future development and other types of changes that may affect the land and landscape. Land-of-Sky is grateful for all the support and assistance provided by this wide variety of organizations.

| Project Partners | |
|--|---|
| Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project | NC Division of Forest Resources |
| Appalachian Trail Conservancy | NCSU Mountain Horticultural Crops Research & Extension Center |
| Asheville Convention and Visitors Bureau | NC Wildlife Federation |
| The Biltmore Estate | NC Wildlife Resources Commission |
| Blue Ridge Forever | Open Space Institute |
| Blue Ridge National Heritage Area | RENCI @ UNC Asheville |
| Buncombe County | RiverLink |
| Buncombe County Greenways and Trails Commission | Self Help Credit Union/ Self Help Ventures Fund |
| Buncombe County Soil & Water Conservation District | Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition |
| Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy | Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy |
| City of Asheville | Southern Environmental Law Center |
| City of Hendersonville | Sustainable Big Ivy |
| NC Farm Bureau | Sustainability Strategies, LLC |
| Friends of DuPont State Forest | Transylvania County |
| Mars Hill College | USDA Forest Service Southern Research Station |
| Mountain Council for Accountable Development | UNC Asheville |
| Natural Resources Conservation Service | US Fish & Wildlife Service |
| NC Cooperative Extension Service – County Offices | Warren Wilson College |
| NC Department of Agriculture | Western North Carolina Alliance |
| NC Department of Environment & Natural Resources | WNC Green Building Council |
| NC Division of Community Assistance | |

Project Origins

The Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (BRNHA) held a meeting in September, 2005 to define a plan of action for natural resources and recreation in the BRNHA. They invited people from various organizations who were involved in planning and protection of natural resources and recreational areas and resources. LOSRC staff and approximately 25 others participated in this meeting. In this Regional Strategy Session they asked: *“What should be done to build a compelling REGIONAL Natural Resource/Recreation Heritage Strategy from the individual local plans that have been developed?”* After extensive brainstorming and processing, five answers emerged as top priorities and one of them was to “develop an ecosystem-based, green infrastructure plan for the BRNHA (per www.greeninfrastructure.net).”¹ Next, an action plan was developed that identified who should be involved, who should lead, key resources, obstacles, and some next steps.

The group suggested convening a consortium of key players, agencies, etc. to begin a discussion of how to implement the green infrastructure plan. The Councils of Government (COGs) and the One NC Naturally program of the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) were suggested as possible project leaders. Jim Stokoe, Senior Planner at LOSRC, agreed to discuss the idea with LOSRC management and the Secretary of DENR and then follow-up with the BRNHA board by the end of 2005. DENR was beginning a statewide mapping project as part of its One NC Naturally program – to collect a large set of data on our natural resources, wildlife habitats, biodiversity and agricultural lands – and was interested in partnering with a local/regional organization in the BRNHA.

The LOSRC Board unanimously approved moving ahead and raising funds for a regional green infrastructure planning process in December 2005. In early 2006 LOSRC staff began working with a consultant from The Conservation Fund to explore training and funding and to begin to develop a planning process. The BRNHA supported Land-of-Sky taking the lead to develop a “pilot” project for the four-county region, that could eventually be replicated and spread throughout the entire 25-county Heritage Area.

Core Planning Team

Land-of-Sky Regional Council pulled together a core group of people in June 2006 who understood and supported basic green infrastructure concepts, and asked them to help with the initial planning of the project. The “core team” consisted of staff from local land trusts, NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources, NC Division of Tourism, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, the Environment and Conservation Organization of Henderson County, US Fish & Wildlife Service, Madison County Parks & Recreation, The Conservation Fund and

¹ The other four top priority suggestions were: (a) Provide assistance to help communities flesh out local plans; (b) Tell the story; develop media that focuses on the practical, aesthetic, cultural, economic issues around natural resources; (c) Be sure that we are preserving resources, not exploiting them – avoid over usage; and (d) Regional land-use planning.

LOSRC. It was hoped that core team members would become proficient in green infrastructure terminology and the planning process, share it with others and inspire others to become involved in the project over time.

The core team met six times over the following eighteen months. The team identified individuals and groups to talk with about the project and studied other, similar projects. They helped clarify the project goals and objectives, design the overall process and plan a kick-off event that would bring together a large, diverse group of “stakeholders.” Throughout this time, staff wrote grant proposals to raise additional funds to support the project. A section below outlines the funding received over the course of the project.

Conservation Leadership Workshops

Two events were held in April and May, 2008 to inform a large number of people about the project and the green infrastructure approach and to recruit a diverse group of community leaders to participate in the project. 268 people in 27 interest categories were invited to participate in these “Conservation Leadership Workshops.” Seventy-eight people attended the first workshop and 25 attended the second one. Approximately 60 people indicated interest in being involved in the project and serving on the Leadership Group.

Leadership Group

The Linking Lands and Communities Leadership Group was formed after the Conservation Leadership Workshops and has been the overall advisory committee for the project. It is a broad-based group of leaders representing interests in natural resource protection, growth management, economic development, recreation and tourism, and more in Buncombe, Madison, Henderson, and Transylvania Counties. The group began meeting in June 2008 and met almost every month through May 2010.

The Leadership Group provided an ongoing forum for members to share areas of expertise and information about other related conservation and planning initiatives; discuss priority natural and cultural features in the region; provide guidance on the planning process; and identify opportunities for funding and partnerships. The group also played a critical role in outreach – in assisting with the design of materials and formats and in conducting outreach – and garnering support for the green infrastructure network design and final set of maps.

Science Team

A Science Team, comprised of natural resource specialists from federal, state, and local agencies and institutions, was formed initially in the fall of 2007 and began meeting regularly in May 2008. The Science Team was charged with developing a science-based ecological framework to be used by the Leadership Group to create the regional green infrastructure network design. Land-of-Sky and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service staff provided support to the Science Team. Specific responsibilities of the Science Team included:

- Gathering appropriate data (and metadata) at regional and county scales;
- Conducting research on science-based issues identified by science team or the Leadership Group;
- Creating base maps for use in the green infrastructure network design process;
- Creating and giving presentations to the Leadership Group about the region’s ecological features;
- Assisting in the development of criteria by which to prioritize natural features based on ecological function and services; and
- Providing science-based recommendations about priority ecological features to the Leadership Group.

A few members of the Science Team volunteered to also serve as members of the Leadership Group throughout the entire planning process, to represent the Science Team and provide continuity between the two groups.

The Science Team chose to begin developing an assessment of Water Resources which included Water Quality, Water Quantity and Water Consumption. The assessment process is described in more detail in the “Development of the Regional Network” chapter. One thing staff and partners learned during this process was that having a broad-based Science Team was not the most efficient or valid way to perform specialized resource assessments. As the water resources assessment was wrapping up, staff decided to form more specialized work groups to work on the other assessments.

Work Groups

Work groups were formed around the main resources that the Leadership Group identified as the most important resources in the region (note that water was handled by the Science Team). Staff encouraged individuals with expertise in the resource areas to participate in the work groups.

- **Agriculture** – The primary goal of this work group was to identify lands most valuable for agricultural uses in the region – namely farming and forestry. The work group included staff from the Land-of-sky Regional Council; NC Division of Forest Resources; Buncombe County Soil, Water and Conservation District; Buncombe, Henderson and Madison County Extension Offices; Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy; NCSU Mountain Horticultural Crops Research & Extension Center; USDA Forest Service Southern Research Station; Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Project; UNCA and Warren Wilson Economics Departments; RENCI at UNC Asheville; Mountain Valleys Resource Conservation and Development Council; The Biltmore Company; and agricultural land preservation consultants.
- **Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity** – The primary goal of this work group was to identify lands that: provide large blocks of natural habitat; support high levels of biodiversity;

support priority ecological systems (as identified by the NC Wildlife Action Plan); and provide associated ecosystem services functions to local communities. The work group included staff and volunteers from A Carroll GIS, Land-of-Sky Regional Council, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, NCDENR Natural Heritage Program and One NC Naturally, WNC Alliance, Open Space Institute, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, Mars Hill College, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, NC Wildlife Federation, Blue Ridge Forever, Friends of DuPont State Forest, and USDA Forest Service.

- **Recreation and Conservation** – The goal of this work group was to identify recreation lands, conservation lands, and cultural resources that contribute to the region’s green infrastructure. The work group included staff from Land-of-Sky Regional Council, NC DENR’s One NC Naturally, State Trails and State Parks programs, Open Space Institute and The Biltmore Estate.
- **Cultural Resources** – The goal of this work group was to develop a list of sites that have cultural/historical significance and consider the ecological and human services that they provide. The work group included staff from the Land-of-Sky Regional Council, Blue Ridge National Heritage Area, Buncombe County, Madison County and The Biltmore Estate.

Two additional focus groups were formed over the course of the project:

- **Future Development** - As work was wrapping up on the resource assessments described above, staff and Leadership Group members explored different scenarios for looking at “development” and evaluated doing a development “assessment.” Currently developed lands are included on all the project maps, but they were not evaluated as to their suitability or desirability for development. This type of assessment was deemed outside of the scope of the current project and committed funding, but may be undertaken as a future project. Staff met with state and local transportation officials, local planning directors and developers and decided to form a Future Development work group that would look at potential future development scenarios and their potential impacts on the regional conservation network.

This focus group included representatives from the planning and development professions, including staff/representatives from: Buncombe, Henderson, Madison and Transylvania counties; NC Department of Transportation; French Broad Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO); local Boards of Realtors and Homebuilders Associations; local landscape architects ; local developers; and others. A complete list of participating organizations is included in the Appendices.

- **Future Disturbances** – A focus group was formed to look at key natural forces that may have an impact on the conservation network – e.g., invasive species; hurricanes; landslides; climate change. The purpose of the focus group was to recommend changes to the network to ensure stable ecological functioning and biodiversity of the region’s

ecosystems; and to ensure a continuous, uninterrupted and stable flow of ecosystem services to our human communities indefinitely into the future. The focus group contained representatives from Open Space Institute, Sustainable Big Ivy, WNC Alliance, NEMAC, RENCI, USFS Southern Research Station, Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition, Blue Ridge Forever, NC Division of Forest Resources and North Carolina Wildlife Federation.

Funding partners

Most of Land-of-Sky Regional Council's regional and local projects are funded by grants which come from a variety of organizations. The following organizations graciously provided funding support for this project:

- The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina (\$57,000)
- Blue Ridge National Heritage Area (\$31,683)
- Federal Highway Administration (\$104,000)
- RENCI at UNC Asheville (\$5,000)*
- Lyndhurst Foundation (\$20,000)
- Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation (\$30,000)
- Wildlife Conservation Society (\$50,000)

* RENCI provided technical support, resources and funding.

These organizations supported this project because they saw the need for it and also felt it was a model that could be replicated across the Blue Ridge Natural Heritage Area and the nation. The Community Foundation of Western North Carolina granted the initial funds to get the project started, and continued to support it through its Strategy Grant program. The Community Foundation and Z. Smith Reynolds Foundation provided support to the overall project.

The Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), through its Eco-Logical grant program, supported this project – one of 15 funded across the U.S. – because of FHWA's commitment to learning how to better integrate transportation planning with land use and conservation planning and sharing this knowledge.

RENCI (Renaissance Computing Institute) at UNC Asheville provided assistance and expertise with GIS mapping and modeling and worked closely advising staff and partners throughout the project. Lyndhurst Foundation provided funds to support the mapping and modeling performed by Andy Carroll (of A Carroll GIS) on the Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity Assessment and the green infrastructure methodology and network.

Through a new partnership, formed during the project, between the Land-of-Sky Regional Council and the NC Wildlife Resources Commission (WRC), the Wildlife Conservation Society is providing funds to support training and related activities. With these funds, Land-of-Sky will

provide training on the [Green Growth Toolbox](#) (developed by the NC WRC) as part of its training on the Linking Lands and Communities project and products.

Public Process and Outreach

Staff and partners of the Linking Lands and Communities project recognized early on that outreach and education would be a key part of the effort. This entailed education about green infrastructure planning and how such an effort could benefit the region and individual stakeholders as well as listening to different viewpoints throughout the region related to conservation and growth management.

Soon after the Leadership Group was established, a sub-group began meeting to develop an outreach strategy. First the group outlined a general set of goals:

1. Recruit more leaders to be involved as collaborators, especially in corporate, business, and development sectors.
2. Get buy-in from local governments, land trusts and economic and community development organizations so they incorporate green infrastructure planning into plans, procedures, ordinances, and investment strategies;
3. Learn about the values, needs, and concerns related to growth management and land conservation/management of different interest groups and communities; and
4. Raise public awareness through grassroots efforts.

To achieve these goals, staff and partners outlined how to provide information, tools, and inspiration to individuals and organizations across a variety of sectors, to influence them to incorporate green infrastructure principals into their decision-making. Different audiences were targeted for different phases of the project and a set of materials was developed to convey project information to the various groups. Initial outreach was targeted towards those who the Leadership Group wanted to be involved in the project (e.g., serve on the Leadership Group, Science Team or a work group).

Throughout the project, staff and partners developed general outreach materials and engaged in numerous efforts to inform the general public about the project. “Fact Sheets” were developed that described the overall project, project benefits, each resource assessment (Wildlife Habitat and Biodiversity, Water Resources and Agriculture). A few examples of outreach activities include: an article in the monthly regional magazine *New Life Journal* (Nov. 2008); presentations at the French Broad MPO and Land-of-Sky RPO meetings (Oct. 2008 and Oct. 2009); presentations at county commission, city council and Land-of-Sky Regional Council meetings; and “Open House” events, and associated media releases, held in three locations over multiple days across the region (Oct.-Nov. 2009).

The purpose of these Open House events was to introduce people in the region to the project, share the maps of natural systems that had been developed, and solicit feedback on the maps

and input on community values related to natural areas in the region. These events provided opportunities to share some insight on the kinds of products and tools that would be available once the project is complete and how they might use them. The events were also opportunities for meeting other community members and sharing values and concerns related to the region's natural and cultural resources.

Outreach materials and a list of outreach activities are included in the Appendices. Materials are also available on the project website – www.linkinglands.org.