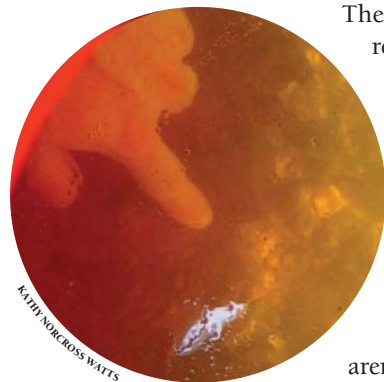


Coordinating

THE TAR RIVER LAND CONSERVANCY WORKS TO PRESERVE THE DELICATE BALANCE OF NATURE IN THE PIEDMONT BY PROTECTING THE RIVER'S UPPER BASIN.

Conservation on the Tar

I'D HAVE NEVER SEEN IT. I MIGHT HAVE STEPPED RIGHT ON IT, IF NOT FOR AN N.C. WILDLIFE RESOURCES COMMISSION BIOLOGIST AND WHAT LOOKED LIKE A BIG ORANGE MAGNIFYING GLASS.



KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

WRITTEN BY
KATHY NORCROSS WATTS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
MELISSA MCGAW

We were standing in the Tar River where it makes its way through Granville County. The biologist's magnifier (photo at left) revealed a silt-covered mussel sticking up about 2 inches, filtering the flow above its home in the sand just behind a rock. Nearby in Shelton Creek, a major tributary of the Tar, the shell of another mussel lay open, likely the victim of a battering as it tumbled beneath a bridge that forced the current into a fury.

History reports that these mussels aren't too tasty, even if you boil them for days and dunk them in butter. They're important nonetheless, according to my companion, Rob Nichols, who is the eastern aquatic nongame research coordinator for the Wildlife Commission.

These common mussels filter water from the river day in and day out, and they'd be the first victims of sediment, sewage spills and nonpoint-source pollution, he said. The fact that they thrive here, along with 23 other mussel species—14 of which are on rare and endangered state and federal species lists, including the dwarf wedge and the Tar River spiny mussels—proves just how unique this basin is.

Preserving the landscape that sustains such diversity is the purpose of the Tar River Land Conservancy (TRLC). The nonprofit works on a watershed basis at a grassroots level to preserve farmland and natural habitat that filters runoff before it reaches the river.

Staff members help farmers and other landowners maneuver through state and federal regulations and incentive programs to find ways to keep their land in its natural state. Often they find funding to do so along the way. The land trust is funded by gifts from individuals and businesses, as well as grants and contracts.

"TRLC's mission appeals to a lot of people," Executive Director Derek Halberg proudly stated. "We're responding to the conservation ethic that landowners and farmers in these communities have by helping link up those with the land with the tools and financial benefits that are there to create the long-term protection."

A CONSERVATION NEXUS

In its first seven years, TRLC has helped landowners protect 7,850 acres and 425,000 stream feet—just over 80 miles—in the Upper Tar River basin, which includes parts of Person, Granville, Vance, Warren, Franklin, Halifax, Nash and Edgecombe counties. An increased demand from area landowners for the assistance TRLC provides has led it to help with additional projects outside the basin boundaries within the counties it serves. The group has set a goal of protecting at least 15,000 acres by the year 2010.

"We help them achieve the means of keeping farms together as farms," Halberg said. "We help them find the financial benefit that we know is out there."

"What makes us different from governmental agencies," Halberg continued, "is that we have the ability to work with the landowner and look at all the incentives that are out there." Another important detail about TRLC, he said, is that "we're local."

TRLC began in 1998 with a group of concerned landowners. Their timing was fortuitous, because conservation efforts began before much of the urban growth in these rural communities. "The resources are there," Halberg said. "We know the pressure is coming." In recent years, the region has experienced unprecedented growth, particularly south of the river, and the landscape has begun to change because of the tobacco buyout, as farm families have struggled with what to do with their land.

"It's easier to protect it than it is to go back and fix it," said Travis Wilson, eastern N.C. DOT permit coordinator for the Wildlife Commission, who has seen TRLC at work. "They're very proactive; they do a good job with the landowners."

HOW IT WORKS

The conservation easement is one of the primary ways that TRLC can preserve lands with conservation significance, and it also often offers financial incentives to landowners, according to Halberg. Such benefits may come from tax savings or, in some cases, cash payments, depending on the property. A conservation easement will help guide the management of the property for many generations. In addition, a 2006 change in the Pension Protection Act allowed for greater deductions for farmers who place land in conservation easements,

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NCWRC



NCWRC



Randy Guthrie and Derek Halberg discuss land conservation (top, left). The spiny mussel and the spiny crayfish (top, middle and right) are just some of the species that thrive in the Upper Tar (right).

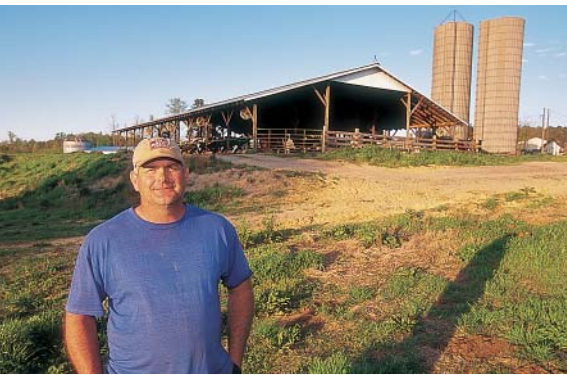


● CONSERVATION EASEMENTS ● CITIES ■ UPPER TAR BASIN

LEARN ABOUT EASEMENTS

Each spring, the Tar River Land Conservancy holds a daylong workshop to educate landowners about the financial benefits of conservation easements. Speakers include attorneys, accountants and financial advisors knowledgeable about private land conservation. There are also opportunities to talk with landowners who have set up easements with the help of the conservancy. For more information, call (919) 496-5902 or visit www.tarriver.org.

ILLUSTRATION BY JIM BROWN Source: Tar River Land Conservancy



Guthrie and Halberg (top) discuss the easements on his property. Currin (second from top) sought help from the TRLC on his dairy farm. Mary Ann Brittain is shown (third from top) in a prairie she cultivated with native grasses and wildflowers. Retired Louisburg town manager C.L. Gobble (above) worked with the TRLC to help protect the river.



BRITTAIN PRAIRIE IN BLOOM, FRANKLIN COUNTY

TRLC

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he said. The change was set to last through the end of 2007, but legislation is being considered to extend that deadline.

TRLC staff identify properties with the highest conservation value. They use advanced Geographic Information Systems analyses and tax records to focus their efforts on areas of significant habitat for plants and animals, on streams and creeks and rivers that provide drinking water, and on soils that are particularly good for farming.

Their first meetings with farmers may take place across a kitchen table or on the hood of a pickup truck, and the process ends with the signing of final documents with an attorney. “To do conservation on the scale that we’re doing it, parcel by parcel, you really have to have the local contacts to get the doors open, to be able to establish and keep the support of the landowners, and to be able to spend the time it takes to be successful,” Halberg said.

Another key to the TRLC’s success has been its ability to tailor the easements to accommodate what the landowner wants as well as what will benefit the river. For example, a farmer may still farm or harvest timber in portions of his easement. An easement does not mean that public access must be granted, but it does mean that the property will be protected indefinitely. Often, landowners agree to leave a 300-foot undisturbed buffer adjacent to the river and creeks.

THE LANDOWNERS

Trees stand so thick on Randy Guthrie’s property that he must reach out of his truck window and push a limb up over the cab to navigate his dirt road, one dotted with potholes that he has filled with old bricks from the Oak Hill Teachery in Granville County. Guthrie bought his 304-acre farm in 1993, and it holds 15,000 feet that border the Tar River and Shelton Creek, one of its major tributaries. “It’s just a resource that needs protecting,” he said.

As it flows past his land, the river holds the federally endangered dwarf wedgemussel and the Carolina heelsplitter and a little fish, the Carolina madtom, which looks like a small catfish. For several summers now, he’s seen an otter family swimming and peeking from beneath downed trees in the water.

Guthrie worked with TRLC to place part of his property in three different easements, two of which he was paid for and one of which he donated and received tax benefits. “They worked to do their best to get the best deal for the landowner,” he said.

In certain portions of the easements, Guthrie can harvest timber and farm tobacco if he wants. He has agreed to leave 300 feet in a permanent undisturbed buffer along the river and Shelton Creek. Receiving financial benefits from the easements on his land has enabled him to manage the farm more effectively for wildlife.

Having contiguous tracts of natural habitat is important, according to Mary Ann Brittain, director of the Prairie Ridge Ecosystem for Wildlife Learning for the N.C. Museum of Natural Sciences. Creating small parks, for example, results in more edges, she said. Cowbirds live along those edges, laying their eggs in warbler nests and tricking those mothers into raising the cowbirds’ young instead of their own. Larger tracts reduce those edges, she continued.

Brittain and her husband, Bill, placed 37 acres in easement along Lynch Creek in Franklin County. Their agreement protects a riparian buffer along the west side of Lynch Creek and precludes timber harvest, construction of subdivisions and roads, mining, signage, and dumping. It allows one or two homesites somewhere in the acreage, Brittain said, but they are not tied to a specific location. The couple built a house on the property in 2001, and it overlooks a prairie cultivated with native grasses and wildflowers. She often sees blue grosbeaks, summer tanagers, woodcocks, bluebirds, titmice and chickadees. Her favorite bird is the indigo bunting. She hears cuckoos and prairie warblers and finds an assortment of frogs. Eleven species of amphibians breed in her pond, Brittain said.

TRLC helped her navigate the legalese necessary to protect the property. “They did a good job holding my hand,” she said. “It is

he sought help from TRLC.

“All of us like to think that we’re going to leave something behind that others will enjoy,” Guthrie said. “All of us have a responsibility to try to make the world a better place.”

PRESERVATION PARTNERS

The N.C. chapter of The Nature Conservancy decided early on to partner with TRLC and provide seed money, said J. Merrill Lynch, assistant director for protection for The Nature Conservancy.

Freshwater ecosystems are impaired all over the country, Lynch noted, and a nationwide analysis found that the Tar River was one of the most important watersheds in the eastern United States, not only because of species diversity but also because of the potential for success.

“In the Upper Tar, we’re at a point in time where we can actually effect good conservation,” Lynch said. “In terms of a working entity, TRLC is doing the work in the Tar River basin, so we don’t have to. We have different strengths that we can bring to the table. . . . It’s so important to have people living in the community who are out there on the land every day who know the landowners.”

Louisburg town manager C. L. Gobble, who retired in March after 26 years of service, has worked with TRLC for years because the river is critical to the town. In fact, the town of Louisburg exists because of the Tar

a great feeling to know that in perpetuity this will be protected.”

Benefits extend beyond protecting the river and preserving wildlife habitat. Guthrie, a retired superintendent from the Butner Beef Cattle Field Laboratory, believes that each generation has become further and further removed from where and how food is raised. Preserving farms as farms is important, too, he said.

Granville County dairy farmer Charles Currin agreed. “It’s hard to see land you’ve been farming and working all your life just turn into a building path for a subdivision,” Currin said. Like Guthrie,

River, according to Gobble. “It was a place to mill the corn; it was a place to trade,” he said. “It’s our source of drinking water.”

TRLC did much of the legwork and research that enabled Louisburg to obtain a \$250,000 Clean Water Management Trust Fund grant that helped build a town park along the riverbank. “The bottom line,” Gobble said, “is that by forming this larger team with common goals, we’ve been able to do more than we would have been able to do on our own.”

As he’s worked with the nonprofit, he’s seen benefits that include raising awareness and educating people about the river. “It helps the whole package: flood protection, environmental improvement, recreation and water quality,” Gobble said. “There are no losers in the work that they’re doing.

“The rest of us get caught up in the workings of government,” he added. “Tar River Land Conservancy can focus on the conservation component.”

THE FUTURE

TRLC has assisted with the acquisition of 179 acres that will be added to the Shocco Creek Game Land, and each week staff make new contacts and finalize current easement projects. TRLC has helped people see the Tar River as a regional resource, Gobble said. Louisburg’s Joyner Park and River Bend Park encompass 90 acres along the river, and the town is pursuing another 40-acre project.

“Every spring when the dogwoods bloom, the redbays make a run up the river,” Gobble said. Some folks fish with fly rods, others sit on a bucket with a cane pole. The rock outcroppings resemble the mountains. “It feels very, very remote. It’s a huge resource for wildlife and conservation in North Carolina.”

Kathy Norcross Watts is a freelance writer who recently published her first book, “A Simple Life: A Story of Sid Oakley.” She lives with her husband and four children in Winston-Salem.



WETLANDS ALONG THE TAR, FRANKLIN COUNTY

TRLC