

A LONG LOOK AT LAND

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LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR. You're going to have a lot more of them in a few years.

The North Carolina State Demographics office predicts that the state's population will rise by 52.5 percent during the three decades between April 2000 and April 2030. That would mean an increase from 8 million people to almost 12.3 million. That's a lot of new neighbors to love.

And that's a lot of increased demand on natural resources, especially land and water. Major urban areas such as Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill and Charlotte-Mecklenburg will continue to expand as they absorb significant population growth, but the growth will not be limited to metropolitan areas. State demographers predict unprecedented demand across the state for important infrastructure such as hospitals, roads and schools. These burgeoning construction needs would require hundreds of thousands of acres and untold billions of dollars to build.

The N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission has begun crafting a long-range plan to protect the state's vanishing open space and better serve North Carolina's increasing population. The plan will require cooperation and help from many partners.

With more than 500 people moving to North Carolina every day, open real estate is being snapped up at a staggering pace across the state. Each year, an estimated 100,000 acres of farms, forests and wetlands are lost to development. The Tar Heel State leads the nation in the number of farms lost since 1990—14,000 totaling almost 1 million acres. Add to that already significant amount a million acres of forest land lost in the last decade, and the numbers really become alarming.

The economic effect of all this population-driven development is that real estate prices have spiked upward quickly. The cost of land purchased for conservation by the state has increased almost 300 percent in the last 10 years. This is partly due to extraordinary escalations in property prices in the highly desirable and ecologically sensitive Mountain and Coastal Plain regions, but land prices in the increasingly crowded Piedmont are surging upward as well.





in those two decades has enabled the commission to preserve more than 100,000 acres.

“The Wildlife Resources Commission has worked closely with these funds and other conservation partners to identify and preserve valuable plant and wildlife habitats,” said Fred Harris, interim executive director of the Wildlife Commission. “The ability of these funds to purchase such habitats, coupled with the ability of the commission to manage them in a way that maintains the desired natural heritage values, has greatly benefited the citizens of the state.”

The N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation is second among state agencies in land ownership, managing in excess of 188,000 acres of state parks for public access and enjoyment. The division constantly seeks out land for new parks, assisted by CWMTF, NHTF and the N.C. Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, a source dedicated to purchasing land for state parks and providing dollar-for-dollar matching grants for local park projects.

The Division of Parks and Recreation manages its land for different usage than the Wildlife Commission’s game lands. While game lands are used for hunting about three-quarters of the year, state parks are used by the public and patrolled by rangers year-round. Game lands crews frequently plant food plots for wildlife and aggressively manage some tracts with controlled burning or other forestry techniques. State parks maintenance mainly consists of keeping parks in a natural, undisturbed condition, along with regular maintenance and upkeep of trails, campsites and boating facilities. Many game lands are used year-round for fishing, and on Sundays and nonhunting seasons for outdoor recreation such as hiking and horseback riding.

Nongovernmental organizations have had a major impact in land conservation as well. The North Carolina chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC), an international group, owns 64 preserves covering 700,000 acres in the state and has transferred dozens of other tracts of land to the state for permanent protection. TNC is also a leader in establishing conservation easements, a process by which private landowners are able to designate sections of their property forever protected from development.

While The Nature Conservancy operates out of six offices across North Carolina, conservation work occurs in a few dozen more of the state’s localities and regions. The Conservation Trust for North Carolina is an umbrella organization overseeing one statewide and 23 regional land trusts, acting as both a land trust and a land trust service agency. Its cumulative impact has been to protect about 200,000 acres in more than 1,000 places. Its members serve almost every ecoregion of the entire state, from the High Country Conservancy, to the Foothills Conservancy of North Carolina, to the Triangle Land Conservancy, to the Sandhills Area Land Trust, to the North Carolina Coastal Land Trust.

Of course, traditional hunting-oriented conservation groups such as Quail Unlimited, the National Wild Turkey Federation and Ducks Unlimited are as active as ever in the state, protecting and restoring habitat for waterfowl, upland birds and many species of small game. Like governmental agencies, land trusts and other international conservation groups, these organizations and many similar to them have recognized the need for large-scale land conservation now and have taken action to facilitate it. And that action is increasingly cooperative.

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With land demand gobbling up acreage voraciously, and no letup in sight, what are conservation organizations to do? The answer is both simple and complicated: Purchase and preserve open space quickly and intelligently, before it is all consumed.

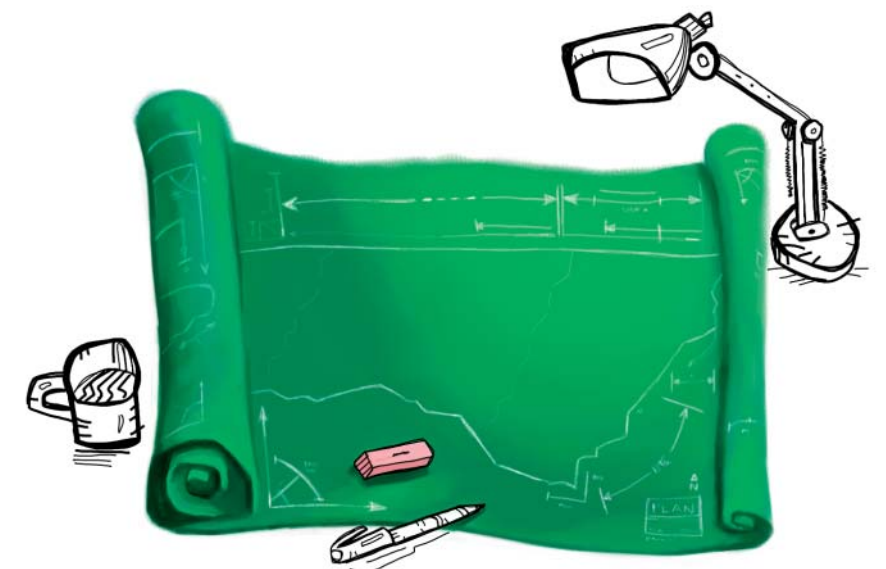
“There is nothing more important for future generations of sportsmen and our conservation constituents than for the commission to acquire as much raw land as possible,” said Wes Seegars, chairman of the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission. “It is critical for our elected officials at all levels of government to understand that if they don’t act now to help us acquire this resource, it will be lost forever.”

WORKING TOGETHER AND SEPARATELY

The Wildlife Commission manages more than 2 million acres of game lands, making it the biggest land manager among state agencies. It does not control all of that property alone—more than 1.2 million acres of game

lands are in national forests. Another 400,000 acres are owned by a variety of groups, including power companies, other state agencies, regional land trusts, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, forest products companies and even the Boy Scouts of America. The Wildlife Commission’s history of cooperation and co-management on game lands goes back more than 50 years and has been an unqualified success, satisfying landowners and public access users alike.

The commission has always pursued land for its game lands program, but the formation of the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF) and the N.C. Natural Heritage Trust Fund (NHTF) enabled that effort to become significantly more effective. Since CWMTF (“Protecting Water, Preserving Land,” June 2006) was formed 12 years ago, the Wildlife Commission has been one of its most frequent recipients of grants, using in excess of \$80 million on more than 50 projects. NHTF celebrated its 20th anniversary last year (“Building Trust,” Dec. 2007) and



Some of these diverse groups have at times been at odds with one another, but that era seems to have faded into the past as each has taken notice of the threat to open space and wildlife habitat that development represents. Many of these organizations have come together in a unique coalition known as Land for Tomorrow (LFT), which counts more than 250 members. LFT's partners include conservation groups such as the ones mentioned here, local and county governments, university programs, arts groups, businesses, the military, historic preservation groups, and many more. They are united in sharing the same goal—saving places that people love.

Land for Tomorrow aims to do two things: educate North Carolinians about the importance of land and water protection, and help secure funding to that end from the N.C. General Assembly. The coalition's goal is to

convince the state legislature to appropriate \$1 billion of dedicated conservation funds over five years. This \$200 million per year would be divvied up in the form of grants to LFT partners. Basically, Land for Tomorrow gets the money and gives it to those doing the work.

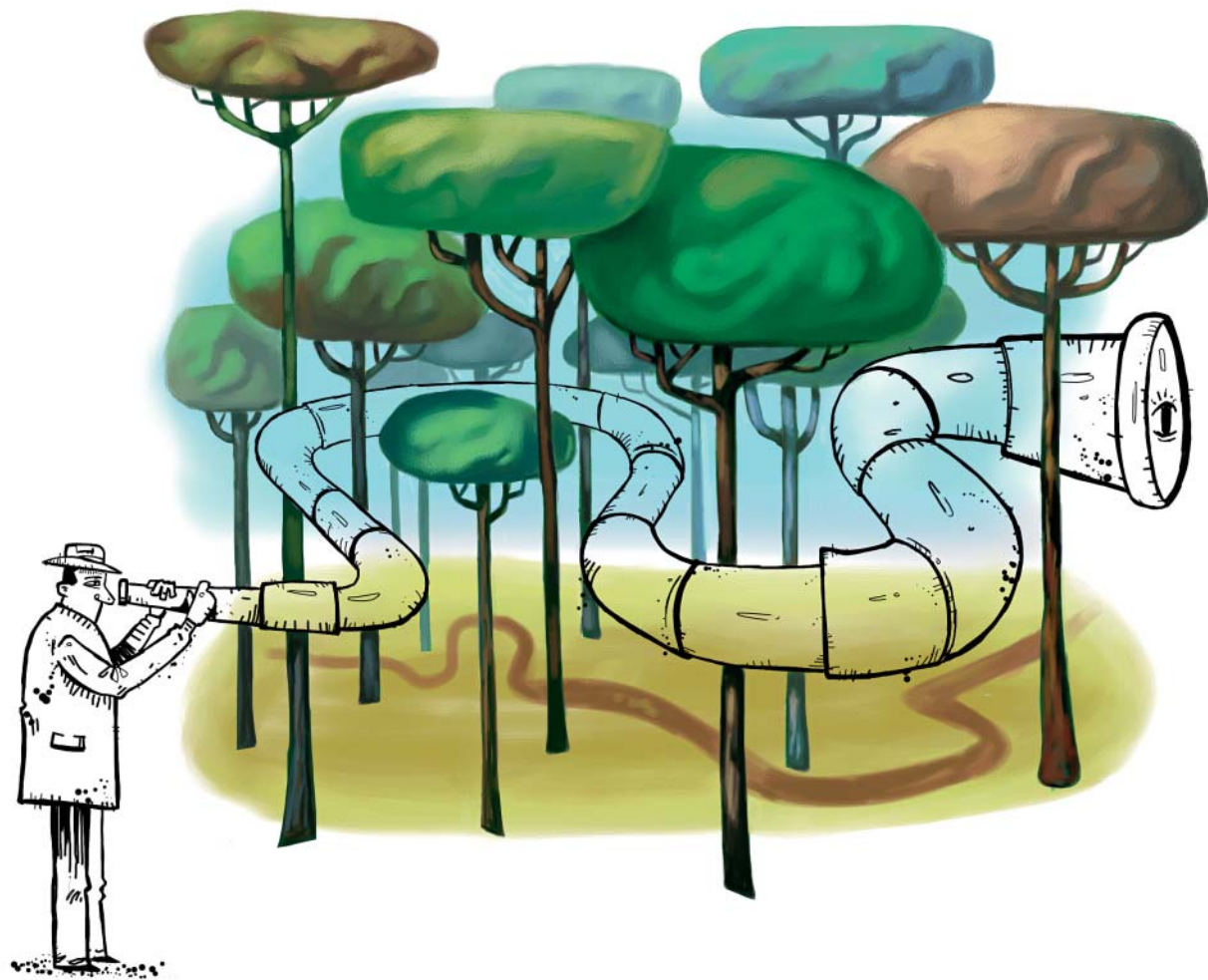
At the start of the short 2008 legislative session, the General Assembly had not yet appropriated the \$1 billion sought by LFT. A special legislative commission in 2006 recommended designating the money, but for now, the race is still on to make that goal a reality.

ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE

North Carolinians have a long history of responding to threats to their land. In 1780, shortly before the Battle of Kings Mountain, British officer Patrick Ferguson sent a message to a band of patriots in the mountains. He

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warned them to cease their rebellion or he would climb their mountains, hang their leaders and “lay the country waste with fire and sword.” Having only recently acquired their land and their freedom, the mountain men did not take kindly to Ferguson’s threat. Even after killing Ferguson at Kings Mountain, they and other Tar Heel militiamen continued to fight ferociously until the Revolutionary War was won.

Today’s conservation leaders have derived a similar (but more cooperative-minded) zeal for land protection from the predictions of state demographers, which are on track to be correct. To address the imminent demand on land and government money, the Wildlife Commission has begun crafting a long-range plan to conserve natural areas and the wildlife that lives there. The commission is taking a highly proactive approach for a couple of reasons. First, while real estate developers slowly move toward sustainable, environmentally responsible development, keeping land undeveloped is the only way to guarantee that it will continue to exist in a condition that can support wild animals and outdoor recreation. Finally, because the commission already manages more than 2 million acres of natural areas, it has the know-how to add to its collection of public land and manage it effectively.

“Most of our constituents are unaware that we operate nine equipment depots across the state,” said Wildlife Commission chairman Seegars. “We maintain hundreds of miles of roads, ditches, impoundments, fire breaks and whatever else is required to maintain the more than 3,000 square miles of land we currently manage in over 100 locations. We will develop an action plan that will continue our current maintenance program while allowing for new lands we are hoping to acquire well into the future.”

It is critical for the Wildlife Commission to work with fellow natural resource agencies and Land for Tomorrow partners to take a fresh, cooperative look at land usage. The N.C. Division of Forest Resources manages more than 50,000 acres of state forests, making it the third largest land manager in state government. The wildlife, forest and state parks agencies have begun meetings

with the N.C. Department of Commerce and the state Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services to consider future geographic and demographic needs and evaluate the best uses of all public land. These meetings were inspired in part by discussions at the Wildlife Commission’s long-range planning summit earlier this year. Leaders on the commission foresaw the need for exploring cooperative management of state land, and that subsequent meetings with other agencies could pave the way for bold decisions on land use that best benefit the citizens of North Carolina.

Other ideas are to partner with agencies and nongovernmental groups to design new types of multi-use open spaces; explore new licenses and fees for nontraditional uses of game lands such as mountain biking and canoeing; and pursue land swaps with conservation groups and private landowners to create larger contiguous tracts—and therefore, better wildlife habitat. Additionally, state agencies must follow the lead of the land trusts and redouble their efforts to find ways to encourage and help private landowners to actively conserve their open space through easements and donations.

“Nontraditional sources of revenue, solicitations of land from both game and non-game benefactors and other new and unique methods of funding will be essential in the future,” Seegars said. “If the social scientists are correct in their predictions, traditional sources of revenue will be under enormous pressure to fund more essential services. We must realize the inevitability of this and act now to develop the resources that will fulfill our responsibility of enhancing wildlife and maintaining habitat for future generations.”

The greatest advantage of these proposals is that they carry little or no risk relative to conservation. Even if the commission takes all of these actions, and social scientists’ projections are much higher than the actual population, statewide resource conservation would be much better off than before. And that’s something you could tell your new neighbor about. ♦

Greg Jenkins is editor of Wildlife in North Carolina.

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