

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) recognized that a strategic plan is needed to coordinate statewide conservation efforts. Such a plan also provides a comprehensive reference source to support other land use planning efforts within the state. To this end, the strategic Conservation Planning Tool is being developed to pull together several key projects that have been underway during the past seven years.

One North Carolina Naturally Initiative: In 2002, under the direction of Secretary Bill Ross, NCDENR mapped North Carolina's first statewide conservation plan. This original mapping effort focused on special areas that had already been set aside for conservation, such as state and national parks, wildlife refuges, game lands, and other lands managed for open space. Future conservation focus areas, as identified through regional planning efforts, were displayed on a coarse scale. Many acres of forests and farms were highlighted, showing the integral part these working lands play in connecting existing nature preserves. Additionally, the One NC Naturally effort included mutually beneficial conservation buffers surrounding military bases, limiting encroachment on armed forces installations in our state. Finally, this initiative revealed the need to identify and map the remaining unprotected high quality lands, in order to create an optimally functioning statewide network of ecosystems that will sustain humans and wildlife into the future.

As part of the ongoing One NC Naturally effort, NCDENR reports annual progress toward the goal of adding one million acres to the existing system of nature preserves in North Carolina. In June 2000, the N.C. General Assembly passed the million acre goal into law (G.S. 113A-241). This law codifies the intent of the state of North Carolina to protect an additional million acres of farmland, open space and other conservation land by Dec. 31, 2009. The law directs the secretary of the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources to oversee the realization of the million acre goal.

When the Million Acre Initiative began in January 1999, approximately 2.8 million acres (9 percent of the state) were permanently protected in North Carolina. At least 589,685 additional acres have been permanently protected since 1999, bringing the total to approximately 10 percent of the area of the state. Upon reaching the million acre goal in 2009, North Carolina will contain at least 3.8 million acres of preserves permanently protected through the efforts of federal, state and local governments, and private, nonprofit groups. The total protected acreage will include approximately 12 percent of the state's 31 million acres of land. The Conservation Planning Tool was envisioned to streamline the process of strategically preserving these essential high quality natural resources.

Conservation Planning Tool: The Conservation Planning Tool (CPT) identifies and prioritizes, on a statewide scale, essential high quality natural resources

required to maintain healthy and sustainable ecosystems. This analysis pinpoints areas that are already protected as well as those areas in the landscape that represent “gaps” in a functional ecosystem network. The goal of this plan is to highlight areas of opportunity for collaborative conservation of significant natural resources. To this end, the overall planning process uses a series of natural resource assessments to prioritize essential areas of land and water. These individual assessments focus on data that has been grouped to represent an area of resource concern. Although individual assessments are focused on a particular aspect of the landscape, collectively they represent indicators of overall ecosystem health.

This assessment series, which is composed of GIS data layers, can be used by individual organizations, state and local agencies to inform decisions about conservation in North Carolina. Any combination of the assessment data layers can be studied to inform and add value to local conservation or land use planning goals. However, the goal of this analysis is to show those areas that meet the overall needs of the larger landscape on a statewide basis in order to conserve a larger network of healthy and sustainable ecosystems.

In 2007, the Natural Heritage Trust Fund provided funding for this planning process and statewide planning effort. This strategic planning process builds on the data and knowledge from multiple partners and creates a process that refines the level of conservation focus first developed in the One NC Naturally map. This new planning tool will identify those significant natural resources that are essential for supporting a statewide functional ecosystem. The plan also supports the goals and missions of many government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and state trust funds and facilitates collaborative planning and efficient implementation of natural resource conservation across the state.

Protection of these significant lands will help sustain biodiversity, protect water quality, develop opportunities for recreation, and preserve the natural processes that support humans and the quality of life we enjoy in North Carolina. This life sustaining network of natural systems must be strategically planned and well-maintained, in much the same way that highway and communication networks are developed and maintained. Planning for this network of natural systems must be scientifically-based, systematically and strategically planned, and informative at the state, regional and local scales, and also should encourage land-use planning and practices that are good for nature and for people. This type of approach also will provide a mechanism for diverse interests to come together to identify priority lands for protection, providing predictability and certainty for both conservationists and land planners.

The Conservation Planning Tool and associated assessment maps will be updated every six months, ensuring that the most recent available data is included. In addition, new partners and ongoing collaborative planning will

continually provide new information and data layers that will be vital for the ongoing analyses and assessments.