

CHAPTER 5: OPEN SPACE AND CONSERVATION LANDS ASSESSMENT

Introduction

Existing open space and conservation lands are addressed collectively in the Open Space and Conservation Lands data layer. They represent the parts of the “green infrastructure network” that are permanently managed as open space.

This Open Space and Conservation Lands data layer is a different kind of assessment than the others in the Conservation Planning Tool. Instead of valuing and ranking the resources, existing data related to managed conservation lands and passive recreation lands was simply compiled into a single map. This data layer is intended to inform the user about the location of existing conservation lands that are in “permanent conservation” and are actively managed by a public entity.

Understanding what lands are already under some sort of protection provides a valuable opportunity to:

- Expand those areas,
- Make connections between them, and
- Fill in gaps with additional lands containing valued natural resources.

Data Sources

The current Open Space and Conservation Lands data layer includes:

1. All known federal lands owned by:
 - U.S. Department of Defense
 - U.S. Forest Service
 - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - National Park Service
2. All lands managed for open space owned by the state of North Carolina:
 - Division of Parks and Recreation
 - State Parks
 - State Trails
 - State Natural Areas
 - State Recreation Areas
 - Potential expansion areas
 - Wildlife Resources Commission
 - Game lands
 - Boating access points
 - Department of Cultural Resources (where appropriate)
 - High Speed Rail corridor
 - Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program priority watersheds

3. County and local government lands managed for open space (when provided)
4. Private conservation lands managed for open space (when provided)
 - Statewide conservation groups (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, Audubon Lands, N.C. Herpetological Society)
 - Local land trusts

Planning for Expansion of State Parks System

As part of the DENR initiative to accelerate land protection in North Carolina, starting with the Million Acre Open Space Goal passed by the General Assembly in 1999, the Division of Parks and Recreation developed a system to evaluate priority sites across the state as potential additions to the state parks system.

The 1987 State Parks Act says that the North Carolina State Parks System is intended to:

- Include representative examples of North Carolina's archaeological, geological, biological, scenic and recreational resources, and
- Preserve and manage these resources as part of the heritage of the people of the state.

To fulfill the mandate to include within the parks system representative examples of North Carolina resources, these resources needed to be defined and categorized. Resource "themes" within each resource category were defined by teams of experts from within and outside the division. Themes consisted of clusters of similar or related resource types, such as Spruce-Fir Forests, Barrier Islands and Shoreline, Prehistoric Villages and Scenic Waterfalls.

The natural and cultural resources within the existing parks system were evaluated in comparison to the defined themes to identify themes that were inadequately represented in the parks system. Themes with the least representation were identified as priorities for addition to the parks system.

The Division of Parks and Recreation then developed criteria for evaluating individual sites for suitability and priority. The evaluation criteria provide a method to numerically rank potential sites, as well as a way to remove unsuitable sites from consideration. The evaluation criteria are divided into **minimum and measured criteria**.

The **minimum criteria** are used for initial evaluation of proposed parks system additions. Sites which do not meet these minimum criteria are removed from consideration. The four basic criteria are:

- Statewide significance of the site's resource themes;
- Size (sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and to provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts to principal resources);
- Absence of incompatible features (through roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution threats); and
- Public access free of limitations inhibiting management and public use.

If a site meets the minimum criteria requirements, it is then evaluated using **measured criteria**, which include:

- Number of high priority resource themes present on the site;
- Rarity of theme(s);
- Overall threat to theme(s);
- Degree of threat to individual site / urgency of acquisition;
- Presence of rare and endangered species;
- Interconnection of the site with other protected areas;
- Quality of resources on the site and presence of superlatives (one of a kind, biggest or best example);
- Regional demand for state parks system units that are staffed and open to the public; and
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation.

Each of the above criteria generates a score for an individual site and the scores are combined to develop an overall score for each site. Using these criteria, the Division of Parks and Recreation evaluated dozens of sites around the state. Sites were nominated by division staff, other agencies, local governments and the general public. Many of the sites were previously identified in biological inventories conducted by the Natural Heritage Program. Sites that met the minimum criteria and scored well on the measured criteria were included on a list of potential new state park unit acquisitions. The sites were located in all regions of the state and included a wide variety of natural resources and recreational opportunities.

The list of potential new park units was called "New Parks for a New Century." Some of the sites have already been authorized by the General Assembly and acquired for inclusion within the State Parks System. As additional sites are discovered or nominated, each new proposal will be evaluated according to the criteria above.

Other Future Open Space Needs

To assess the future open space needs in the state's natural network, opportunities can be evaluated on the basis of what is currently prioritized in the six focused assessments that comprise the Conservation Planning Tool. As lands become available within the identified priority areas, conservation efforts

should be considered to conserve priority core areas and to fill the “gaps” to complete vital connections.

This evaluation of priority areas for conservation is limited to what is currently known to be significant. Specific amounts of land and natural resources required to complete a sustainable network of functioning ecosystems cannot be determined without further focused field study and research. For example, there is little scientific data available at this point to determine “how many trees do we need?” A comprehensive understanding of the overall future needs of the network as a whole, as scientifically-based projections, will be addressed as more information is gathered from the appropriate agencies.

Data Layer	Source	Date
Managed Areas	NHP	2008
Lands Managed for Open Space & Conservation	CGIA	2002
State Parks System including future needs	DPR	2008
Conservation Easements	SPO	2007
New Parks for a New Century	DPR	2007
Mountains-to-Sea Trail	DPR	2007
State Natural and Scenic Rivers (includes State Trails)	DPR	2007
Appalachian Trail	Unknown	2000
High Speed Rail Corridor	DOT	2008
Boat Access	WRC	2007
CREP Priority Areas	DSWC	2008