

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The North Carolina Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) recognizes 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 North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool (CPT) has been developed to pull together several key projects that have been underway during the past nine 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 conservation and 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 North Carolina 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 December 31, 2009. The law directed the secretary of the NC Department of Environment and Natural Resources (NCDENR) to oversee the realization of the million acre goal. North Carolina did not meet its goal to permanently protect an additional million acres by the end of 2009, but continues to work toward that goal.

When the Million Acre Initiative began in January 1999, approximately 2.8 million acres (9% of the state) were permanently protected in North Carolina. At least 683,460 additional acres have been permanently protected since 1999 through the efforts of federal, state and local governments, and private, nonprofit groups. Over the course of the Million Acre Initiative, the average annual rate of land protection was 62,070 acres. This rate of land protection does not match the rate at which natural and agricultural lands are being lost to development in North Carolina, which currently amounts to about 100,000 acres per year. The North Carolina Conservation Planning Tool was envisioned to

streamline the process of preserving these essential high quality natural resources.

North Carolina 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 planning tool 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, and federal, 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 planning tool identifies those significant natural resources that are essential for supporting a statewide functional ecosystem. The planning tool 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 process 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 natural systems and for people. This type of approach also provides 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 are intended to be updated every six months, ensuring that the most recent available data is included. In addition, new partners and on-going collaborative planning will continually provide new information and data layers that will be vital for the ongoing analyses and assessments.