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The Blue Ridge Parkway fosters a significant diversity of plants and animals due to the large north-south geographic range, variability in climate, and diverse geologic substrates. The Parkway and surrounding communities provide a protected migration corridor for various types of wildlife. Five major rivers and the headwaters of many local and regional watersheds are within the Parkway boundaries. Protecting these natural resources is vital for the preservation and conservation of the region. These same natural resources, wildlife, and scenic beauty help attract the Parkway's high levels of visitation. The two initiatives that had designated action teams to further develop strategies are Voluntary Viewshed Protection and Dark Skies. The action teams included experts in land protection and dark sky initiatives, as well as community leaders committed to prioritizing natural resource protection.

RESOURCE PROTECTION RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 VOLUNTARY VIEWSHED PROTECTION

Partner with land trusts and public agencies to protect and manage viewsheds, natural resources, and other natural assets that enhance the Blue Ridge Parkway and the Blue Ridge Parkway experience.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Identify all land trusts and public agencies working within the Blue Ridge Rising region to protect and manage natural resources. Work with these agencies and organizations to improve collaboration and identify priorities for voluntary protection of viewsheds and other natural resources.

KEY STEPS:

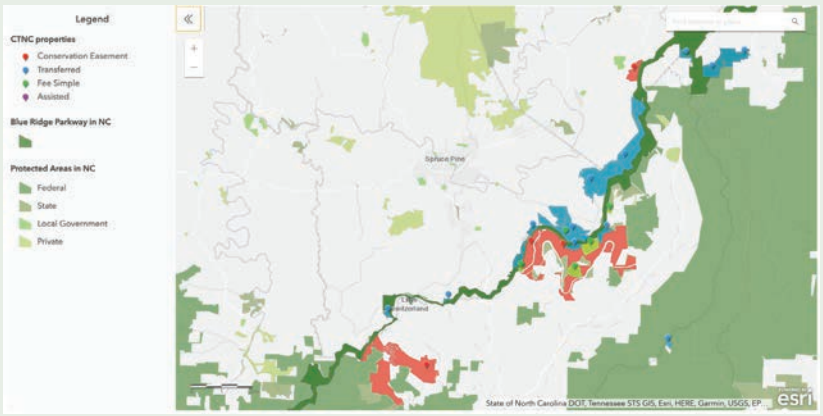
- Identify all land trusts and related public agencies working within the region.
- Convene these land conservation groups to develop criteria to rank viewsheds and other natural resources for voluntary land conservation activity.
- Complete a comprehensive analysis of viewsheds and other key tracts based on identified key criteria.
- Reach out to owners of priority tracts to promote voluntary options for conservation.
- Continue discussions with regional land conservation groups to address related needs and opportunities.

Examples of Land Trusts and Voluntary Land Protection:

- New River Land Trust (Virginia): www.newriverlandtrust.org/
- Conservation Trust for North Carolina (North Carolina): www.ctnc.org/
- Family Forest Carbon Program (Washington, DC): https://familyforestcarbon.org/

CONSERVATION TRUST FOR NORTH CAROLINA

In 1996, the Governor's Year for the Mountains Commission designated Conservation Trust for North Carolina (CTNC) to coordinate land protection along the Blue Ridge Parkway in North Carolina. CTNC has successfully collaborated with local land trusts, the National Park Service and other public agencies, and private landowners to conserve more than 34,000 acres in the region.



Partial map of Conservation Trust for North Carolina (CTNC) protected areas, alongside other protected areas across North Carolina.

4.2 DARK SKIES

Identify, support, and expand Dark Sky Place designations across the region to support both wildlife resources and night-sky tourism. Nearly half of all species on earth are nocturnal, and lights from human sources are negatively impacting them in many ways. These light sources are also dimming our views of the night skies, which hold significant cultural and scientific interest and are part of a growing trend in night-sky tourism. With its high elevations and many rural areas, the Blue Ridge Parkway corridor provides some of the best dark sky resources in the southeastern United States for both wild species and people.

12-MONTH GOAL:

Identify three to five possible sites within the Blue Ridge Rising region that qualify as International Dark Sky Places and apply for certification.

Examples of Dark Sky Initiatives:

- Mayland Community College, Earth to Sky Park (North Carolina): www.mayland.edu/foundation/foundation-projects/earth-to-sky-park/
- Natural Bridge State Park (Virginia): www.darksky.org/places/natural-bridge-state-park-dark-sky-park/
- Pisgah Astronomical Research Institute (North Carolina): www.pari.edu/

KEY STEPS:

- Identify locations along the Parkway and within Parkway communities that may qualify for Dark Sky Place designation, and pursue designations if local leaders are supportive.
- Develop relationships with DarkSky International and the Society for Scientific Exploration.
- Seek out astronomy clubs and associations for participation and promotion.
- Incorporate dark sky places into other strategies, including curated travel itineraries and viewshed protection.
- Create group tours, including identifying current astronomy tour groups and operators to understand their standards for tour selection.

Bare Observatory

EARTH TO SKY PARK

The Earth to Sky Park at Mayland Community College in North Carolina is an environmental educational park for those interested in learning about the natural world we live in, from the earth to the sky.

4.3 SECOND TIER

INVASIVE SPECIES REMOVAL

Support removal of non-native and invasive flora and fauna within the Blue Ridge Rising region. A non-native is any species that occurs outside its native range as a result of deliberate or accidental introduction by humans. In some areas of the Parkway and within Parkway communities, invasive species such as *Pueraria montana* (kudzu), *Elaeagnus umbellata* (autumn olive), and *Adelges tsugae* (hemlock woolly adelgid) are causing significant disturbances to the ecosystem and negatively impacting views and the visitor experience.

REDUCE NATURAL HAZARD RISKS

Support e□orts within communities and through partner organizations to reduce risks related to wildfire, landslides, and climate change within the Blue Ridge Rising region. Studies indicate that the region is climatically resilient compared to other areas of the country, but the threat of a changing climate, wildfires, and landslides needs to be studied and addressed to preserve the region's natural resources and mitigate impacts to recreation and tourism-related assets.

4.4 ADDITIONAL CALLS TO ACTION

WATER QUALITY

Identify and partner with government agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to improve water quality and river and stream health through regional collaboration, increased resources, and identifying funding sources. Water quality is important for the health of the regional ecosystem, the well-being of residents in the Parkway communities and beyond, and the preservation of the natural environment, all of which impact the visitor experience.

RESEARCH

Advance relevant research through partnerships with universities, community colleges, and K-12 systems. The region's unique diversity of plants and animals, north-south geographic range, variability in climate, and varied geologic substrates support the opportunity and importance of scientific research and regional collaboration. Supporting innovative research helps to protect and preserve the unique ecosystem for future generations of residents and visitors. Social science research will also play an important role in analyzing certain issues and developing e□ective solutions, such as visitor behavior, spending patterns, and marketing strategies.

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