



North Carolina Trails **ANNUAL REPORT** *2018-2019*



division of parks and recreation

NCTRAILS



NC DEPARTMENT
OF NATURAL AND
CULTURAL RESOURCES

DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION
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Fort Fisher State Recreation Area

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The North Carolina Trails Program originated in 1973 with the North Carolina Trails System Act and is dedicated to helping citizens, organizations, and agencies plan, develop, and manage all types of trails ranging from greenways and trails for hiking, biking, and horseback riding to paddle trails and off-road vehicle trails.

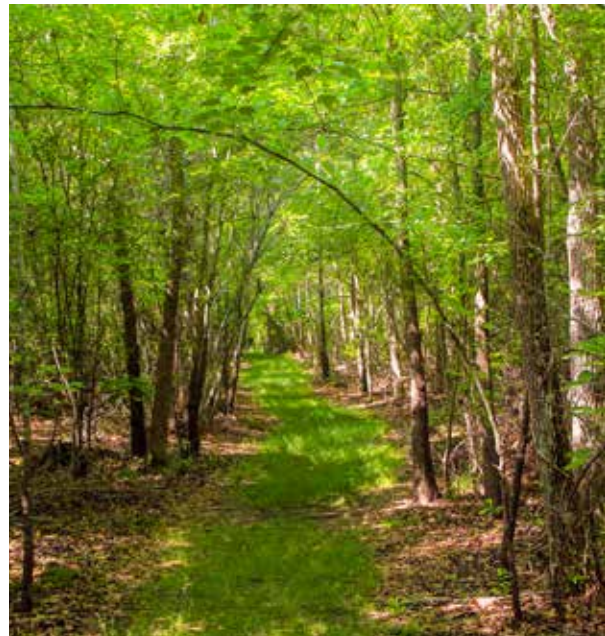
The staff of the Trails Program in the Division of Parks and Recreation works to enable volunteers, non-profit organizations, and government agencies to develop trail plans, preserve land corridors for trails, and manage trails for all users. Staff provides technical assistance, administers federal Recreational Trails Program grants, and develops successful partnerships with local conservation and recreation advocates.



Fort Macon State Park



Hanging Rock State Park



Medoc Mountain State Park

2.0 Trails Have Incredible Value



Elk Knob State Park

■ Trails Boost Local Economies

In North Carolina, regional and statewide trails directly contribute tens of millions of dollars to local businesses, hotels, and restaurants as well as provide jobs for local residents. Recent research from the Institute for Transportation Research and Education (ITRE, 2018) has shown that the American Tobacco Trail (a 22-mile trail in the Triangle area) contributes \$5.7M to the local economy annually, supports 78 jobs, and generates \$2.2M annually in labor income.

The conservation and recreation-based tourism industry preserves natural resources, increases the quality of life in a community, and does not contribute to pollution. As its local textile industry floundered, Elkin, NC reinvented itself as a trail town—hosting both the Mountains-to-Sea and Yadkin River state trails. New trails-related businesses have rejuvenated their economy and Elkin now hosts NC Trail Days—providing a boost to tourism.

Regional trails have been shown to increase property values for homes located near the trail. According to the National Association of Home Builders, trails are the most desired community amenity that homeowners seek when buying a home.

■ Trails Preserve North Carolina's Rural Landscape

In 1990, the population of North Carolina was 6.6 million; by 2020 that number is expected to be nearly 10.6 million. Every new person that enters our state needs land for their home, school and workplace. Unfortunately, our open space and farmland are suffering as we continue to lose cropland and forest land to accommodate our increasing population. At the same time, more and more people are living and working in our cities and rarely experience the natural beauty of our state. Even urban trails serve to preserve open space and are available to people from all walks of life.

■ Trails Protect the Environment

Surface runoff from our roads and lawns is one of the leading causes of pollution in our drinking water. The rapid development of land exacerbates this problem by making the land unable to trap and filter pollutants. Protected natural corridors for regional trails and greenways can filter pollutants from runoff. Protecting land, especially near our rivers and streams, is a voluntary, cost-effective way to make our drinking water sources cleaner and reduce the cost of water treatment.

Protected corridors also serve as “highways” and habitat for many wildlife species. This is increasingly essential as our landscape is fragmented through development. Those trails that are planned to function as alternative transportation corridors also serve to reduce vehicle emissions and decrease traffic congestion.

■ Trails Promote Healthy Living

Hiking, biking, and walking are available to people from all economic levels and have been shown to combat diabetes, heart disease, hypertension, and obesity. Further, hiking and walking are consistently ranked as a top recreational activity nationally. If trails are available, people will use them. One study has shown that for every dollar spent in trail development, \$3 are saved in health care costs. Also important is the increase in quality of life for people who increasingly seek to spend time in a natural environment.

3.0 2018 Trail Survey

With our partnerships at the local, state and federal levels, the North Carolina Trails Program is well-situated to evaluate and make recommendations to improve trails and greenways throughout North Carolina. To assist in this evaluation, the NC Trails program conducted a survey in 2018 about the obstacles to trail development in North Carolina. Local and county governments, trails organizations, land conservancies, rural planning organizations (RPOs), local greenway committees, and interested citizens were all included in the survey.

We found that 78% of the respondents had a master plan for trails and greenways. This shows that our communities are well-aware of the economic, recreational, health and connectivity benefits of trails and greenways. They are eager to provide these amenities for their citizens. Further survey questions examined the obstacles to trail and greenway construction.

Not surprisingly, funding was noted as the primary obstacle for developing trail and greenway systems. Funding for actual construction was the most commonly cited need. Funding is also needed for land acquisition and to meet the federal match, particularly for statewide and regional trails/greenways.

One of the major obstacles to greenway development, especially in smaller communities, is the recent restriction on using state transportation funds as a match for federal funds for greenway projects. Essentially, this restriction has halted greenway construction in all but North Carolina's wealthiest cities.

The need for education about the benefits of trails and greenways, particularly for local elected officials, was another recurring theme in the survey results. This could be especially effective if paired with a campaign to promote North Carolina as the Great Trails State.

Below are a few sample questions and results:

› **Does your community currently have a greenway/ trail plan?**

78% said yes

› **What is your biggest planning obstacle?**

35% said lack of technical guidance

29% said lack of detailed corridor study

25% said lack of regional cooperation

› **What is your biggest funding obstacle?**

55% said funding for construction

22% said funding for land acquisition

› **What is your biggest technical assistance need?**

31% said greenway engineering expertise

25% said maintenance challenges

22% said sustainable trail design

› **What is your other biggest obstacle?**

37% said state funding match

26% said lack of support from elected officials

21% said unhelpful railbanking legislation

4.0 State Trails



Mountains-to-Sea State Trail at Falls Lake State Recreation Area



Deep River State Trail



Fonta Flora State Trail

State trails are part of North Carolina's state parks system. State trails are comprised of multiple, connected sections and each section of the trail is sponsored by a state or federal agency, local government, or private landowner. These section sponsors build, maintain, and manage their section of trail. Section sponsors also maintain authority on lands under their jurisdiction. They are encouraged to showcase places of natural, scenic, historic and cultural significance; to feature the diversity of natural communities and landscapes; to consider the needs of both long and short distance hikers; and to use recognized standards of sustainable trail design and construction. Often and ideally, section sponsors are supported by dedicated volunteers. Indeed, the vast majority of the state trail miles have been constructed by volunteers. State trails are distinguished from other trails as they are intended to provide public access to some of North Carolina's most significant and scenic landscapes, encourage regional connectivity, and must be authorized as components of North Carolina's state parks system by the General Assembly.

Overall state trail corridor planning and coordination are the responsibility of the Division of Parks and Recreation. The Division provides guidance, coordination, and assistance for the multiple section sponsors whose individual and diverse sections link together to form the state trail.

When a new State Trail is proposed, the Division of Parks and Recreation may develop a feasibility study for the proposed trail. This study identifies the planning area; identifies potential partners, stakeholders and section sponsors; determines whether the proposal meets the criteria for a State Trail; and evaluates the likelihood of implementing the proposed trail.

Three minimum criteria are used for the initial evaluation of proposed State Trails:

1. Statewide significance of natural, cultural, scenic and recreation value
2. Sufficient potential length and beauty to attract varied and significant use from regions outside the local area
3. Minimal and surmountable incompatible features such as roads, intrusive development or large water bodies

If a potential state trail meets these basic requirements, then the feasibility of inclusion as a state trail is based on:

1. Local public support for the general concept of a public trail and the availability of trail volunteers
2. Presence of viable section sponsors committed to the design, construction, maintenance and management of the trail
3. Environmental and economic sustainability of the trail route

Once a proposed trail is authorized as a state trail, the Division of Parks and Recreation (DPR) will conduct a more in-depth planning process to produce a master plan for the state trail. DPR will partner with the various section sponsors along the corridor identified in the master plan to encourage trail construction. Once the trail is constructed, it officially becomes a state trail when designated by the Secretary of Natural and Cultural Resources.

Section sponsors must apply for designation once the trail is completely constructed. Criteria for designation include public access, an emergency management plan, listing amenities provided to the public, and an inspection by the Division.

4.O State Trails



Fonta Flora State Trail



Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail



Yadkin River State Trail

Currently, there are nine state trails in North Carolina:

- **Deep River State Trail:** This “hybrid” (both paddle and hiking) trail will extend from Jamestown to Moncure when completed. There has been planning for some of the sections and there is an active committee of local government representatives in Randolph County working on that end of the trail. Their efforts resulted in three municipalities designating segments of the Deep River State Trail—Randleman, Ramseur, and Franklinville. The committee has applied for grant funding to construct the first blueway segments of the trail next year. State Parks planning staff will be working to develop plans for the rest of the blueway through Chatham and Moore Counties this year.
- **Fonta Flora State Trail:** This hiking/biking trail will circle Lake James in Burke and McDowell Counties and will extend from Morganton to Asheville when completed. Burke County has been instrumental in promoting trail construction. They have managed the construction of the trail around Lake James and gathered a coalition of local governments for the rest of the planned length of the trail. In total, 18.7 miles of the planned 80-100 miles of this state trail has been designated.
- **French Broad River State Trail** is a paddle trail in Transylvania, Henderson, Buncombe, and Madison Counties. Paddle trails require safe and legal river accesses at appropriate distances (every 5-10 miles) along the length of the paddle trail. Unless there is a catastrophic weather event that causes the river to become clogged with debris, there is usually no maintenance on the actual trail. However, access sites do need regular maintenance. The French Broad River State Trail is complete at 117 miles.
- **Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail** in Henderson, Rutherford, and Buncombe Counties was authorized as a state trail in 2017. Several committed partners are working on proposed sections of this trail. However, the Division of Parks and Recreation still needs to complete feasibility planning for this trail. Planning for this trail is scheduled for this year.
- **Mountains-to-Sea State Trail:** The MST stretches from Clingman’s Dome to Jockey’s Ridge State Park and recently celebrated its 40th anniversary as our first state trail. In 2017, the Coastal Crescent Route through southeastern North Carolina was added as a component to the MST. This addition brings the total planned length of the trail to 1400 miles. Currently, 668 miles are designated. In 2018, the last segment of the MST between Clingman’s Dome and Stone Mountain State Park was completed, designated and dedicated creating 300 unbroken miles of trail. Most of the remaining trail corridor will need to be established through land purchase or easements. The MST has a very supportive friends organization that organizes most of the maintenance and trail construction along the planned route. It has been recognized nationally as a superior long trail.
- **Yadkin River State Trail** is a paddle trail in Wilkes, Surry, Yadkin, Forsyth, Davidson, Rowan, and Davie Counties. Although this trail would benefit from a few additional access sites, it is essentially complete at 130 miles.

4.O State Trails



Overmountain Victory State Trail



Wilderness Gateway State Trail

Three new state trails were created in 2019:

- **Wilderness Gateway State Trail:** The planned trail will connect Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail, South Mountains State Park, Valdese and Hickory. Part of the trail will be co-located with the Overmountain Victory State Trail. Division staff are currently creating a plan for the Wilderness Gateway Trail. The plan will be sent to the NC Legislature by December 1, 2019 for their information and use.
- **Overmountain Victory State Trail:** The Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail stretches roughly 330 miles from its southern terminus in South Carolina through North Carolina and into Tennessee and Virginia and follows the paths that the patriot militia took as they mustered to fight the Battle of Kings Mountain in 1780. This battle proved to be pivotal in the Revolutionary War. The Overmountain Victory State Trail will follow the 225 miles of the planned route of the National Historic Trail that passes through our state. NC State Parks staff will continue to coordinate with National Park Service on the development of the trail.
- **Northern Peaks State Trail:** The planning corridor for this trail is approximately 40 miles long, beginning in Boone and ending at Mount Jefferson in Ashe County. It will connect Boone, Elk Knob State Park and Mount Jefferson State Natural Area. There is a conceptual plan that was developed for the Northern Peaks Trail with cooperation and funding from stakeholders including: the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, Watauga County Tourism Development Authority, Ashe County, Ashe County Chamber of Commerce, West Jefferson Tourism Development Authority, Town of Boone, and High Country Pathways, Inc. NC State Parks staff will continue the planning effort for the Northern Peaks State Trail.

5.O NC Trails Website



In late 2018, the NC Trails Program developed a new website solely devoted to trails (<https://trails.nc.gov/>). It provides information on parks and state trails, trails design and maintenance, trails grants, and regional trail planning. In its first week of release, well over 1000 people searched for information on the site. Over 25% of those were from outside North Carolina. The website will contain alerts on the main page to call attention to upcoming trail planning public meetings, future NC Trails Summits and other trail related events.



Cliffs of the Neuse State Park



William B. Umstead State Park



Grandfather Mountain State Park

Support Trail Development

- **State Transportation Funding:** G.S. 136-189.11(d)(3)c prohibits the use of state funds for independent bicycle and pedestrian projects, even as a match for federal funds. This provision significantly hinders the development of greenways, particularly in rural and less wealthy areas. This prohibition should be evaluated to determine if it continues to be in the best interests of North Carolina.
- **Adopt-A-Trail Grant Program:** The NC Trails Program received more than twice as many applications for trail and greenway funding as the federal Recreational Trails Program grants were able to fund. Additional funding to supplement federal funding would facilitate and expedite completion of trails and greenways.

The Adopt-a-Trail Program (G.S. 143B-135.112) was previously funded to provide small trail grants to communities and non-profits, but funding was discontinued in 2014. Funding of \$1 million would enable 20 communities to receive grants of \$50,000 each to construct trails.

Southeastern NC Council of Governments (COG) Regional Trails Plan

- The NC Trails Program and State Park Planning Program is currently coordinating with a contractor to undertake a significant regional trail planning effort in southeastern North Carolina. The areas to be studied include the Lumber River, Cape Fear, Mid-Carolina, and Eastern Carolina Council of Governments (COG). The advisory group will include representatives from each of the COGs, trail organizations, relevant State agencies, and local implementation partners (such as MPOs and land trusts). The primary role of the advisory group is to provide input and feedback to the overall regional trail network and priorities for implementation. The planning effort will be funded by utilizing Recreational Trails Program (RTP) funds.

New State Trails

- Northern Peaks, Overmountain Victory and Wilderness Gateway state trails were all authorized in 2019. NC State Parks staff will begin planning and establishing partnerships for the development of the three new state trails.



Lake Norman State Park



Occoneechee Mountain State Natural Area



Dismal Swamp State Park

Expand existing state trails

- **Strategic Planning:** The NC Trails Program should continue to partner with NCDOT's Division of Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation to identify priority corridors for state and regional trails in a strategic plan for a statewide network of bicycle and pedestrian accommodations that will link county seats, state parks, state trails, community colleges, and state/national forests. This plan should address criteria for including pedestrian and bicycle accommodations on all non-interstate highway bridge replacements.
- **Deep River State Trail Plan:** North Carolina State Parks will develop a plan for developing a blueway along the length of the Deep River. Planning will include reaching out to stakeholders and establishing new partnerships and strengthening existing partnerships to accomplish legal and safe access to the river at regular intervals to promote paddling on the Deep River.
- **Hickory Nut State Trail Plan:** North Carolina DPR staff will meet with stakeholders and interest groups to develop a plan for Hickory Nut Gorge State Trail. Much of the impetus for this trail has been the work of Conserving Carolinas Land Conservancy. Planning will incorporate their work and expand to include new partnerships.
- **Clayton to Carteret Greenway:** The NC Trails Program and State Park Planning Program should coordinate with NC DOT to evaluate plans for the Clayton to Carteret Greenway multi-use trail that will ultimately create an alternative travel corridor for cyclists and pedestrians as they commute and recreate between Raleigh and Carteret County. Coordination with NCDOT to incorporate design for this multimodal travel alternative during multiple widening projects currently planned will provide the lowest cost option for constructing a long-distance greenway system for the citizens of North Carolina. This greenway system, when complete, would be part of the Mountains to Sea State Trail and create an exceptional recreational destination for eastern North Carolina.

Provide trails-related education and technical assistance throughout North Carolina

- **Information for Elected Officials:** The NC Trails Program should offer to coordinate a presentation or panel on trails and greenways for the Association of County Commissioners and NC League of Municipalities annual conferences and other appropriate venues.
- **Technical Assistance and Education:** The NC Trails Summit was held in January of 2019 that included presentations on sustainable trail design, environmental permitting requirements and creative trail solutions. The audience included NC State Park staff, local municipalities and non-profit organizations. The NC Trails Program should continue to provide technical assistance for trail design, maintenance, and sustainability to local communities and state parks by conducting or sponsoring one or more workshops or webinars for trail advocates and trail builders.

7.0 Recreational Trails Program (RTP) Grants

The NC State Trails Program administers the federal Recreational Trails Program (RTP) grants. The RTP in North Carolina is enabled by the federal legislation, Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21st Century Act (MAP-21), which reauthorized the RTP Program for the 2019 fiscal year. RTP funding comes from the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) through the N.C. Department of Transportation and is administered by the NC Trails Program within the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation. Since 1993, RTP funding in North Carolina has been used to provide recreational opportunities for hikers, equestrians, bicyclists, paddlers, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) users.

From 1999 to 2018, North Carolina has received approximately \$64,471,406 in requests for funding. From those requests, the state has awarded \$34,370,302 to sustainable RTP trail projects statewide. These RTP funds, in combination with in-kind services and matching funds, total \$66,593,081 that have been applied to trail and greenway projects for the residents of North Carolina.

In 2018, the NC Trails Program received 57 applications requesting \$5,078,854 for the 2019 grant year. Sixteen grant projects totaling \$1,481,068 were awarded, leveraging additional matching funds to provide economic development and recreational resources to multiple North Carolina counties.

Table 1: 2019 RTP Grant Awards

Applicant	Project	Grant Awarded
USDA Forest Service	Badin Lake OHV Trail Complex Maintenance	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service	Middle Catawba Falls Access	\$100,000
Town of Elkin	Crooked Creek Crossing	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service	Brown Mountain OHV Stream Crossings	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service	Brown Mountain OHV Maintenance	\$100,000
Foothills Conservancy of NC	Fonta Flora Trail Phase 1, Old Hwy 70 – Old Fort to Point Lookout Trail	\$90,790
Watauga County	Middle Fork Greenway Section 4	\$100,000
Farmington Community Association, Inc.	Farmington Nature Park – Phase II	\$79,750
Carolina Climbers Coalition	Buckeye Knob Trail	\$38,464
Pisgah Area Southern Off-Road Bicycle Association (PASORBA)	Butter Gap Modernization Project	\$100,000
Alamance County Rec & Parks Department	Cane Creek Mountains Natural Area – Phase I	\$100,000
Clay Counties Communities	Jackrabbit Mountain Bike Trail Expansion Project	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service	Uwharrie National Recreation Trail and Trailhead Maintenance	\$100,000
Town of Mocksville	Rick Park Greenway Expansion Project	\$100,000
Town of Beech Mountain	Buckeye Lake Loop/Lower Pond Creek Renovation	\$72,064
USDA Forest Service	Uwharrie National Forest Access Roads Maintenance	\$100,000
		Total: \$1,481,068