



North Carolina Trails **ANNUAL REPORT** *2017-2018*



division of parks and recreation

NCTRAILS

DIVISION OF PARKS AND RECREATION
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NC DEPARTMENT
OF NATURAL AND
CULTURAL RESOURCES

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL AND CULTURAL RESOURCES
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Elk Knob State Park

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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 works to enable volunteers, nonprofit organizations, and government agencies to develop trail plans, preserve land corridors for trails, and manage trails for all trail users. Staff provides technical assistance, administers federal Recreational Trails Program grants, and develops successful partnerships with local conservation and recreation advocates.



Lake James State Park



Paddle trail at Hammocks Beach State Park



Neuse River Greenway portion of the Mountains-to-Sea State Trail

2.0 Trails Have Incredible Value



Jockey's Ridge 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 does not contribute to pollution, preserves natural resources, and increases the quality of life in a community. 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. 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. Equally important is the increase in quality of life for people who increasingly seek to spend time in a natural environment.

3.0 State Trails



Mountains-to-Sea State Trail at Jockey's Ridge State Park



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



Mountains-to-Sea State Trail at Mount Mitchell State Park

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 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 the 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, then the Division of Parks and Recreation 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 a regional trails specialist.

3.O State Trails



Fonta Flora State Trail



French Broad River State Trail



Mountains-to-Sea State Trail

Currently, there are six 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. However, there have not been any miles of this trail designated yet.
- **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. This year, they designated an additional 3 miles of trail around Lake James. In total, 18.7 miles of the planned 80-100 miles of this state trail have 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. Until this is completed, we cannot designate any sections.
- **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.

4.0 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 55 applications requesting \$4,940,390 for the 2019 grant year. Twenty-seven grant projects totaling \$2,071,523 were awarded, leveraging additional matching funds to provide economic development and recreational resources to multiple North Carolina counties.

Table 1: 2018 RTP Grant Awards

Applicant	Project	Grant Awarded
Burke County	Fonta Flora State Trail – Northwest Boardwalk	\$100,000
Burke County	Fonta Flora State Trail – Northwest Connection	\$100,000
City of Marion	Upper Catawba River Trail – Signs and Maps	\$30,000
USDA Forest Service – Cheoah Dist	Tsali Equestrian and Mountain Bike Trail	\$100,000
NC High Peaks Trail Association, Inc.	Mount Mitchell Trail Renovation Project	\$52,460
Portofino Homeowners Association	Portofino Trails	\$77,200
NC DPR – Fort Macon State Park	Atlantic Beach Connector	\$99,974
Town of Murphy	Piney Knob Trail System	\$100,000
Town of Franklinville	Deep River Rail Trail (DRRT) – Phase 2	\$95,936
USDA Forest Service – Uwharrie NF	Home Trail Extension, Reroute and Trail Maint	\$75,000
Town of Kitty Hawk	DP Pruitt, Jr. & Twiford Rd Multi-Use Paths	\$59,518
USDA Forest Service – Uwharrie NF	Badin Lake Motorized Trails Archaeology	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service – Uwharrie NF	Dickey Bell Trail and Daniel Trail Reroute	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service – Uwharrie NF	Badin Lake Motorized Trails Maintenance	\$85,000
USDA Forest Service – Uwharrie NF	Badin Lake OHV Trail Complex Access Roads	\$64,000
USDA Forest Service – Grandfather Dist	Brown Mountain OHV Maintenance	\$98,400
USDA Forest Service – Grandfather Dist	Mortimer Area Multi-use Trails	\$100,000
USDA Forest Service – Grandfather Dist	Brown Mountain OHV Vehicle	\$28,000
Davidson County	Daniel Boone Heritage Canoe Trail	\$100,000
NC Zoological Park & Society	Expanding Woodland Hiking at the NC Zoo	\$48,335
City of Wilson	Hominy Creek Greenway and Water Park	\$100,000
Tarheel Trailblazers	Col Francis Beatty Park Pump and Flow Trail	\$50,000
SORBA – Pisgah	Black Mountain Trail Relocation	\$100,000
Triangle Land Conservancy	Walnut Hill	\$100,000
McDowell County	Lower Catawba Falls Access	\$100,000
Carolina Mountain Club	Wilderness First Aid Class for Hike Leaders	\$5,000
Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail	FMST – MTDC Chainsaw Class	\$2,700
		Total: \$2,071,523

5.0 NC Trails Website



In 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 continue to be expanded and improved.

6.0 2018 Trail Needs 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

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.

Expand existing State Trails

- **State Trails Coalition:** The NC Trails Program should develop a State Trails Coalition of all State Trail section sponsors to better coordinate efforts toward planning, developing, maintaining, and marketing State Trails.
- **Strategic Planning:** The NC Trails Program should 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.

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 annual conference and other appropriate venues.
- **Technical Assistance:** 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.



Goose Creek State Park



Hike at Raven Rock State Park



Morrow Mountain State Park