forever a forest



PHOTOS BY MIKE STONE | SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Frank Holleman, a Seneca native and president of the Naturaland Trust, enjoys the view from Big Rock Mountain.

Upstate conservation groups agree to preserve Nine Times Forest

BY NORMAN CANNADA
THE JOURNAL

PICKENS — As someone who lived near the Nine Times Forest in Pickens County and walked and hunted on the property before it was leased out for private use, Wes Cooler knows the value of the 1,648 acres of largely untouched land that will now be preserved forever.

"I think in reality it's probably the fact that it's a large, unfragmented piece of habitat that will provide for nature to flourish -- everything from bears to squirrels to some pretty nice rare plants — for us to have a place we can just leave alone," Cooler said. "I think almost as much as anything else, it is important for what will not happen there as much as what will happen there. This is not another piece of our mountains, our natural resources, that gets swallowed up with more houses. It's just kind of stuck out there in the upper region in Pickens County."

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> President, Naturaland Trust

Cooler is among a group of conservationists who have been working for more than a decade to preserve the Nine Times Forest and keep it from getting developed into a residential or commercial area. Naturaland Trust and Upstate Forever announced last week that they had completed a $3.5 million purchase of the property through the help of private donations and grants.

Mac Stone, executive director for Naturaland Trust, said officials are working on a management plan and working with the S.C. Department of Natural Resources to get the plan in place before opening it to the public. He said he hopes the property will be available to the public to visit for hunting and recreation purposes beginning this summer.



Nine Times Forest near Pickens will now be protected through a $3.5 million purchase made possible by four different benefactors.

Even though the public cannot yet walk out on the property or hike to the top of three mountaintops, Cooler said just driving past the property on S.C. Highway 11 will be exciting for those who enjoy the beauty of an undeveloped mountain area.

"As far as I know, it is the last stretch of public road in Pickens County that doesn't have a power line running beside it," Cooler said. "It's about four miles of a refreshing drive through nature as you go through there. It's not unlikely that over the course of a few dozen drives that you will see a coyote or a bear or wild turkey cross the road in front of you. It's still a pretty doggone special place."

Seneca native Frank Holleman, who has been president of Naturaland Trust for five years, said the property offers "tremendous" views, but also the accessibility of being so close to Highway 11.

"If you see those views from those mountaintops, it's hard not to fall in love with it," Holleman said. "But on the other hand, you can walk maybe 30 feet or 50 feet off the road there and see an absolutely gorgeous mountain stream, Nine Times Creek. I think what is so special is just how accessible it is. It is just probably 60 seconds off Highway 11."

Holleman said the goals of the purchase and setting aside the land include allowing the public to enjoy the natu-

SEE **FOREST**, PAGE **B6**

FOREST: 'You know you're in Upstate South Carolina wilderness'

FROM PAGE B1

ral beauty of the area, protecting and restoring the natural environment of the area and protecting water quality in the area.

Stone said the property had been up for sale by Crescent Communities, and it could have been purchased for a residential development. Naturaland and Upstate Forever negotiated the purchase of the property about a year ago and began raising funds that included a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, donations from North Carolina conservationists Fred and Alice Stanback, a grant from the South Carolina Conservation Bank and more than $1 million from Duke Energy which came out of discussions of the relicensing agreement for the Keowee-Toxaway Hydroelectric Project.

"There are just so few big tracts left in the Upstate of this character," Stone said.

"Besides the ecological value of this property, it has significant meaning for the fact that this was up for sale for development to be forever changed. The fact that Naturaland Trust, Oconee Forever and its partners were able to come together to protect this is a huge win for the natural corridors of this Jocassee Gorge Wilderness area."

"The views are spectacular but the knowledge that when you walk in you're not going to see a single person, you're not going to see a house, you're not going to see a building ... you know you're in Upstate South Carolina wilderness. That is so rare. I think the most impressive thing about this is the accessibility and the opportunity for people to get outside and see a transition between the Piedmont and the southern Blue Ridge that has both ecotones in it. That's what's really impressive."

Brad Wyche, executive director of Upstate Forever, called the purchase of the property, "a spectacular achievement for conservation in South Carolina."

"An amazing team of public and private partners made it happen," Wyche said. "We were honored to be on the team."

For more information, or to keep up with when the land will be open to the public, visit naturalandtrust.org.

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MAC STONE | SPECIAL TO THE JOURNAL

Views from three mountaintops — Big Rock Mountain, Pink Mountain and Odie Mountain — provide unique views of the Upstate.



Officials hope the 1,648 acres of Nine Times Forest will be available to the public this summer.