

# Jones Gap expansion advances

380 donors contribute \$560,000 to help project move forward

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You can't plan a hike yet on the 600 acres that's being added to Jones Gap State Park.

It might be late 2012 before park-goers can begin to explore the natural treasures included in the 600 acres north and east of the existing 3,346-acres of rugged parkland.

Despite the delayed gratification, it's still a wonder that the S.C. State Park System, with the help of Naturaland Trust, The Nature Conservancy and 380 individual donors, was able to expand the park's borders given the current economic times.

"We started working on this with The Nature Conservancy three or four years ago," said Phil Gaines, director of South Carolina state parks. "We did have to stop and think where we could do this in the current economic climate."

That the land eventually was secured, through a complicated set of deals that included land purchases, land donations and conservation agreements, proves how much everyone valued the land that is laced with streams and waterfalls, includes a major mountain, and is populated with rare plants and teeming with wildlife.

"Excitement is an understatement," Gaines said about making

the deal work. "For a growing community like Greenville to have this in its back yard is amazing. But it goes to show people recognized the value of this green space."

The Nature Conservancy's Kristin Austin credits small donors for carrying the load in the team effort to raise \$560,000 to buy the last 100 acres — by a daunting June 30 deadline.

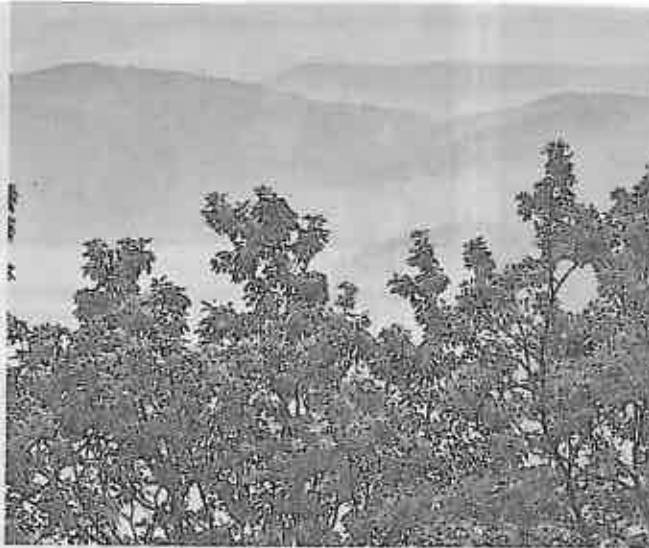
"It's pretty incredible," Austin said. "We had 380 individual donors, and some were sending in \$10 and \$20 checks. It was truly a grassroots effort."

Of course, the small checks donated in the past 11 months were greatly enhanced by one large \$150,000 check written by Fred and Alice Stanback of Salisbury, N.C. That was a matching donation used to match dollar-for-dollar during the last bit of the fundraising campaign.

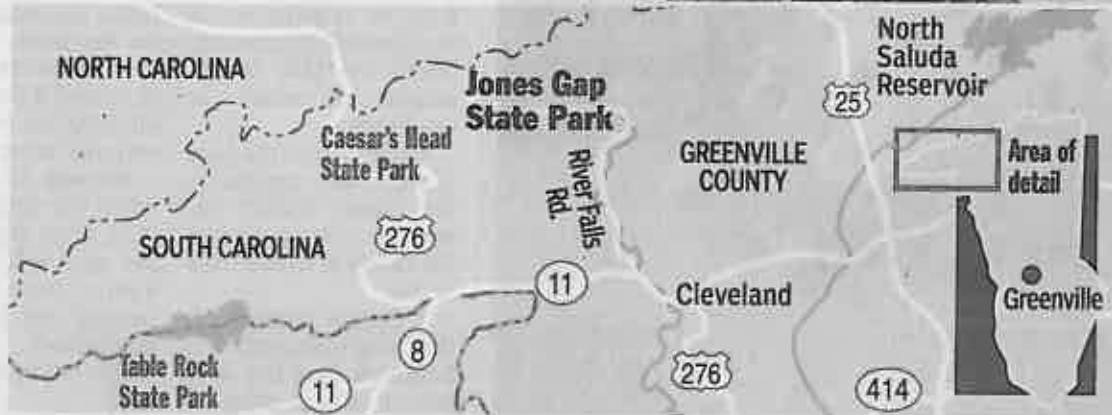
To get the entire 600 acres, Naturaland Trust, a Greenville-based land trust, donated 305 acres of property. That land adjoins land being bought by The Nature Conservancy. All told, the 600 acres will push the boundaries of Jones Gap State Park to the North Carolina state line.

Raising all the money is just the first step in a lengthy timeline. Austin said the final closing on the property should happen in September.

"The actual transfer of the land



Jones Gap State Park is part of the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area, which consists of 11,000 acres of natural woodlands and mountains along the Blue Ridge Escarpment.



won't happen until early 2012," she said. "And then we plan a dedication and grand opening in the spring."

A full-scale plan for trails, access points and any amenities such as restrooms and a visitors center will be developed in turn.

"One of the things we hope to do in the years to come," Gaines said, "is provide additional access points. Jones Gap and Caesars Head are so popular at times in the spring and fall that they're full."

With the unique features of the new property, Gaines said he anticipates a lot of interest. The land includes 3,268-foot Grassy Top

Mountain; an unnamed, multi-tiered 150-foot waterfall on Tankersley Branch; dramatic boulder fields; the headwaters to Gap Creek, which flows into the Middle Saluda River; and habitat for migratory songbirds, deer, bear and trout.

"This is not a typical piece of property," he said. "It has all the unique characteristics of the Blue Ridge Escarpment."

"Whether you ever use it or not, you can be in Greenville and look back and see it. You know it's there. What strikes me is the tremendous value for future generations. That's the exclamation point for this."

#### JONES GAP STATE PARK

■ For more information about the park, visit: [www.southcarolinaparks.com/park-finder/state-park/962.aspx](http://www.southcarolinaparks.com/park-finder/state-park/962.aspx)  
 ■ For hiking trails at Jones Gap, search: [www.sctrails.net](http://www.sctrails.net)