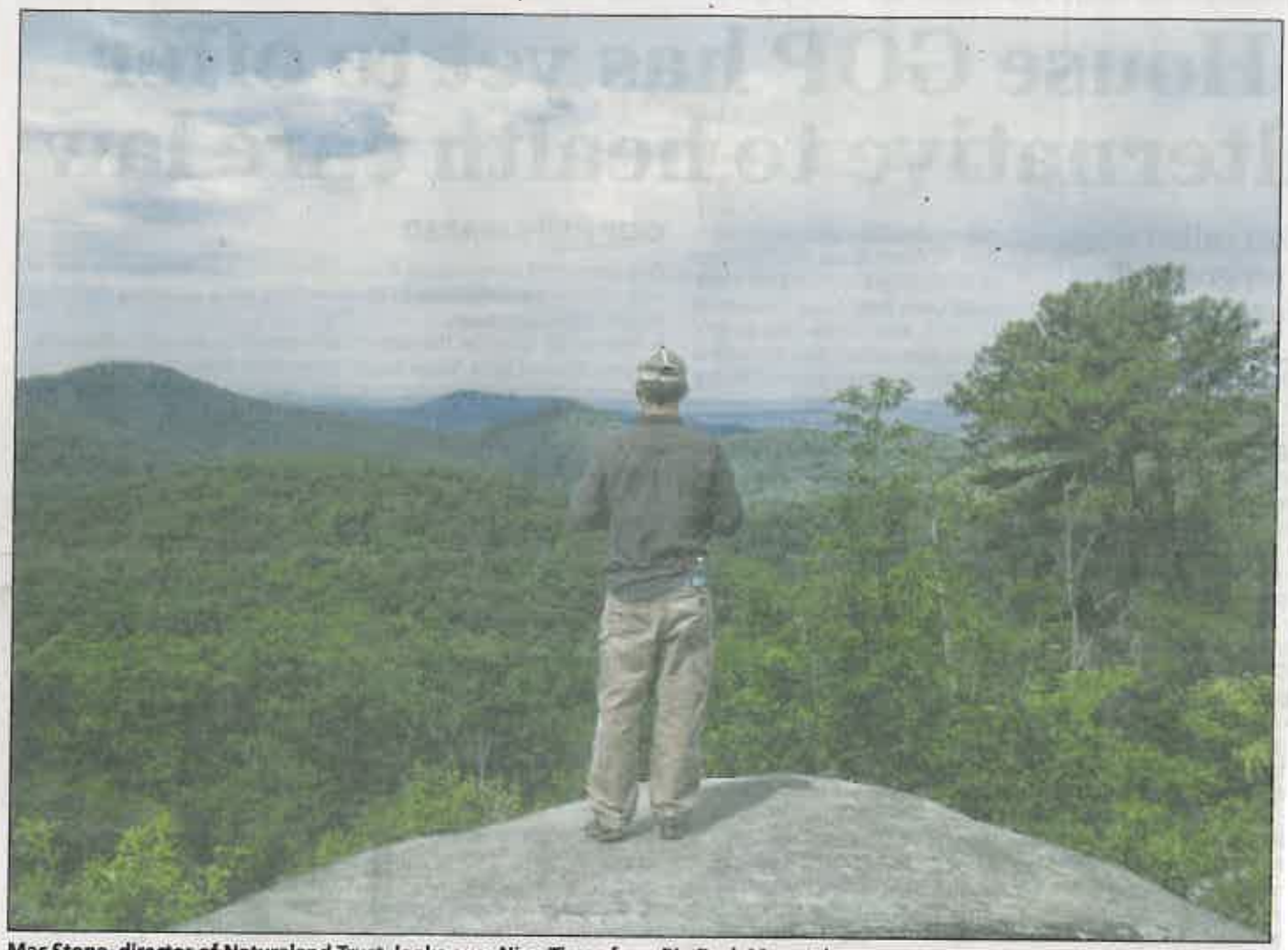
Critical habitat to be managed by DNR



Mac Stone, director of Naturaland Trust, looks over Nine Times from Big Rock Mountain. /CHARLES SOWELL

NINE TIMES PRESERVATION OPENS NEW VISTAS

By Charlie Sowell
Special to The Greenville News

Nine Times got its name because Northern timber barons had to throw nine bridges across a small creek to get their railroad line in to access the land.

Today, the 1,640-acre tract of land was recently preserved as part of the agreement that will give Duke Energy Corp. the right to generate electricity with the Keowee/Jocassee hydro complex for the next half-century. It is the last large piece of undeveloped land left along the Blue Wall Escarpment, environmentalists say.

Eventually, the land will be managed by the Department of Natural Resources, said Mac Stone, director of Naturaland Trust, the land-trust preservation organization founded by Greenville conservationist and attorney Tommy Wyche.

The drive to purchase Nine Times was an all-out, full-court press, said Dana Leavitt, Land Trust special projects director for Upstate Forever.

"I remember how hard we pushed the state Conservation Land Bank on this," he said. "Upstate Forever and the conservation community tried to purchase this tract back in 2008 and we just could not come up with the money."



Big Rock Mountain's summit is covered with wildflowers. /CHARLES SOWELL

So they had to settle for the 508-acre tract across E. Preston McDaniel Highway known today as The Nature Conservancy tract.

Patrick McMillan, of Clemson University and host of SCETV's "Expeditions" nature series, once identified 134 different species of wildflowers in one small plot of the Nine Times Tract.

"This large tract of land potentially could become a major migration root for wildlife coming out of Jocassee Gorges."

PATRICK MCMILLAN
host of SCETV's "Expeditions"

"This land was last logged about 30 years ago," said Leavitt, while he led a tour of the property. "So while you won't find the diversity of plant species here, you will find great numbers of wildlife."

The tract's size and abundance of wildlife is part of the reason plans are to turn it over to DNR once the purchase has been completed, probably early next year, said Stone. "I just don't have time to run up here and check every time someone calls about trash dumping, or illegal RV usage."

DNR has the staff and expertise for that, he said. Plus the area was traditionally used for hunting during the years that it was controlled by Duke.

Today, it is a sportsman's paradise of turkey, deer and black bear. Leavitt said.

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VISTAS

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"This large tract of land potentially could become a major migration root for wildlife coming out of Jocassee Gorges," McMillan said.

Nine Times was preserved by a coalition of Upstate Forever, which obtained a federal forest service grant, the state Conservation Land Bank, a private individual who does not wish to be named, and a donation of $1 million from Duke, Leavitt said. He said there is still a bit of fundraising to do to come up with the purchase price, but that the group is essentially there.

Before the purchase agreement, Wes Cooler of the state Wildlife Federation said, "I believe the remaining acreage of the Nine Times is a 'must have' for land conservation. It is critical habitat for a number of species, including the black bear and the timber rattlesnake, and it has many of the same soil types typical of the most botanically rich and diverse tracts in the region, indicating that it may likely harbor similar biological diversity. It has the potential to be one more reason to visit Pickens County and enjoy its wealth of natural resources."

Leavitt drove to the summit of Big Rock Mountain in his four-wheel drive, pausing to take down huge oaks that had fallen across the small road that Duke has cut to the top in anticipation of the purchase.

Big Rock is a rattlesnake hotspot, Stone said as he set off to probe the cracks and crannies between the huge boulders.

"I was raised in Florida and am a great herper (herpetologist)." said Stone. "Before I took this job, I worked with the Francis Beidler Forest near Harleyville, a cypress swamp and Audubon preserve.

"I really miss the reptiles – the snakes and the gators."

Heading out after the tour, Stone went to open the gate leading to the main road and reached inside a steel pipe to unfasten the lock.

"I really wish he would be more careful when he does things like that," Leavitt said. The small openings are often home to a jellow-jacket or wasp nest.