

The scenic overlook at Caesars Head State Park provides views of much of South Carolina's Blue Ridge Escarpment. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

Conservationists face challenges to complete Blue Ridge Escarpment

By Nathaniel Cary | Staff writer | ncary@greenvillenews.com

A scenic puzzle has been pieced together since the early 1970s in the mountains north of Greenville known as the Blue Ridge Escarpment in a nearly unprecedented manner.

There's no picture on the front of a box to show the finished masterpiece but one needs only to look out from a high ridge across a nearly unbroken expanse of forested ridges and valleys to glimpse the goal of conservation groups throughout the Upstate — a completed, undeveloped land mass that stretches east to west across three Upstate counties where the Piedmont meets the Blue Ridge Mountains.

This puzzle with its interlocking pieces that jut against each other along 400,000 acres in South Carolina's mountainous region came together slowly, then gained steam as private landowners, nonprofit land trusts and government agencies each chipped in to donate, purchase or provide funding to preserve more than 100,000 acres so far of this vast landscape.

Yet that puzzle remains incomplete.

OUR NATURAL BEAUTY

Dueling conservation groups and developers eager to acquire a decreasing number of available large land tracts have created a race against time to determine the future of the Blue Ridge Escarpment.

And though there's no puzzle-box picture, there was a map first created by Greenville attorney Tommy Wyche early in the 1970s when he pioneered a conservation plan for South Carolina's mountains.

Wyche pasted topographical maps together on a large board, then color-coded various tracts, said Wyche's son, Brad.

"Once he kind of put all those properties on a map, that's when the idea of a mountain bridge came together," Wyche said.

This bridge along a wall of the escarpment in northern Greenville County has become the focus of a generation of conservationists. It's anchored by the Table Rock watershed to the west and the North Saluda watershed to the east.

Beyond the bridge, the stunning Jocassee Gorges and Devil's Fork and Keowee-Toxaway state parks in Pickens and Stumphouse Mountain and Sumter National Forest in Oconee make up the majority of protected lands, and the sheer size of the protected region is astonishing, said Brad Wyche, who now directs the Upstate Forever environmental organization.

"It is really one of the great conservation achievements in North American history, protecting that much land in an extraordinary place," Wyche said.

And it all started with a trip to Los Angeles.

The roots of the Blue Ridge

In 1972, Tommy Wyche took a business trip to Los Angeles and had an epiphany. He saw houses that dotted the hills on the outskirts of the city and wondered if something similar could

See LAND, Page 10A

LAND

Continued from Page 1A

happen to the mountain ranges he loved near Greenville.

"Until then he had just taken our mountains for granted," Brad Wyche said.

Wyche returned to Greenville with a new purpose — but one he knew little about.

"I was in grad school at the time and I remember he called me and said, 'Brad, I want you to go to the library and send me some information about what a land trust is,'" Wyche said. "So I went to the library and found a couple of articles about land trusts and conservation."

Tommy Wyche founded Naturaland Trust, the second oldest land trust in the state, and has used that trust to perform much of his conservation work through the years. He then jotted down names of landowners, knocked on doors and explained the importance of the property they owned. His goal: to convince them to donate their land, Brad Wyche said.

"That's really how he put together Jones Gap State Park," Wyche said.

Protection of the escarpment dates back to the 1920s when Sumter National Forest was established through much of northern Oconee County. Table Rock State Park was built in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps, but it wasn't until the late 1970s when the state began to acquire land in Jones Gap, opening that park with its fishing holes, trails and waterfalls in 1989.

Conservation picked up steam in the 1990s, adding the Table Rock and Greenville watersheds to the list of protected lands by 1995. By 1999, Duke Energy sold land to the Department of Natural Resources to protect the 43,500 acres of Jocassee Gorges in Pickens County.

Since then, landowners have put easements on large tracts of privately owned forested lands like the 2,000 acres in Asbury Hills Methodist Camp in Greenville's mountains while conservation groups have helped fund purchases of the Blue Wall Preserve to the far east of the escarpment and Stumphouse Mountain to the west.

"Almost 50 percent of the southern Blue Ridge Escarpment is conserved, which is a huge success rate," said Kristen Austin, southern Blue Ridge director with The Nature Conservancy. "All of the most naturally significant areas have been conserved."

Wyche's vision of a Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area is nearly complete, but its completion hinges on key properties along scenic U.S. 25 north of Greenville. That's where the Cliffs golf communities have developed in some significant sections and it's where conservation groups have turned their focus.

Completing the Bridge

There's a missing link, held in private hands, that conservation leaders hesitate to discuss. The recession and the financial distress of nearby developments may have bought



Tommy Wyche, left, has achieved numerous conservation awards, including the President's Award from the National Association of State Park Directors, presented by Parks Director Phil Gaines. KEN OSBURN/STAFF

time but no results yet.

On a map, the land sits north of the Cliffs at Mountain Park and would bridge the gap of unprotected land west of the North Saluda watershed.

"We are keenly interested in protecting that missing piece and we are reaching out to both the Cliffs and the landowner to try to come up with a mutually acceptable way to protect it," Wyche said.

Austin agreed on the importance of the passage, both for its biological significance and its unobstructed views of the mountain ranges.

The race slowed with the recession, a silver lining that slowed down real estate "and bought us a little more time," Austin said. "Now it also took away a lot of funding sources, so it's sort of a wash."

Conservationists have been success in protecting other lands in the escarpment. In 2007, more than 100 people donated a total of $1.42 million to protect Stumphouse Mountain with its 100-foot Issaqueena Falls and Civil War-era unfinished railroad tunnel.

And more than 400 private donors came together to raise $560,000 last year to purchase the last 70 acres of a 600-acre addition to Jones Gap State Park.

Few know the mountain bridge better than Tom Lee, state park naturalist for the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area, who looked the part as he stood atop the rocky face of Caesars Head overlook and pointed out features of the escarpment from its most visited and iconic viewpoint. A pair of binoculars hung from his neck and rich gray hair that matched his mustache peeked from beneath the traditional round ranger's hat.

The bridge creates a continuous land mass for migrating plants and animals and some undeveloped but unprotected properties lie within that band, Lee said.

"So there is definitely more land for conservation reasons that could be protected," Lee said.

'We just inhale it'

The mid-morning sun burned off the fog and opened up the view to a crumpled blanket of green below. The hillsides stretched to blue mountains in North Carolina. In the distance, an equally blue silhouette of Georgia's Currahee Mountain was visible through the valley between two ridges.

Clouds gathered overhead and created dissimilar shadows on the forests below. Across the expanse, the sheer rock face of Table Rock mountain stood out.

This is where Lee spends his days trekking through the wilderness and leading student expeditions to observe the unmatched flora and fauna that exist in the escarpment.

The escarpment is defined as the abrupt 2,000-foot change in elevation from the flat Piedmont below to the Blue Ridge above that creates a mix of northern and southern habitats, Lee said.

"It creates conditions in which you're going to have plants and animals, some of which are only found within the escarpment, nowhere else in the world," Lee said.

This biological hot spot stands out to conservationists and is one of the reasons the international nonprofit The Nature Conservancy chose to locate in the Upstate, Austin said.

"The escarpment really popped as an area where we could really get a bang for our buck," Austin said.

The enormous rainfall, up to 100 inches a year in some places, creates a temperate rainforest climate, she said, and that excess water, combined with the steep mountain drops, has developed gorges and deep narrows with their own climate and shade that've allowed even tropical plants to survive.

"You've got a level of humidity and moisture that then creates its own temperature so it keeps this constant environment so certain plant communities just thrive there which can't thrive anywhere else," she said.

Rare wildflowers like the Oconee Bells and certain hemlock tree species are only found in this region, and more than 40 salamander species call the escarpment home.

Many of the 250,000 annual visitors to Caesars Head and Jones Gap state parks come not just for the organic beauty but for the views — of waterfalls, of changing hues of fall foliage and of the annual migration of hawks that swoop down the mountains on their way to Central and South America.

George and Elzbieta Biesaga met at Caesars Head in 2007. Atop the mountain, the natives of Poland took their first pictures together and soon married.

"That was the beginning of something beautiful," George Biesaga said. "It's very romantic and you look at the mountains and we just inhale it."

Now settled in Myrtle Beach, they come back every couple of months to share lunch with friends and to recapture the views.

"It's very peaceful and it's good for your spirit, you relax," Elzbieta Biesaga said.

How much is enough?

For all the success conservationists have seen in the escarpment, the question arises: Where does it stop?

Austin acknowledged a changing scope that's developing in how The Nature Conservancy approaches the region. No geographic shift is planned but studies are already underway on a strategic shift away from land acquisition and toward how best to care for protected lands.

"We can't save it all, nor should we," Austin said. "When we look at this landscape, there's a little bit of perspective that's got to be had of recognizing how much great work has been done. We're right now going through some scientific exercises of saying how much is enough, and trying to look at things in a realistic way."

Not every tract is biologically important and many have been timbered and replanted with pine trees, she said.

So the focus will turn to determining what is needed to support a healthy forest system, she said.

"Conservation really does not stop at the land deal," Austin said. "It really takes efforts of land management and science and thinking through these forest systems to make sure they stay healthy for generations to come."

The region faces threats from invasive species like kudzu to an overabundance of wild hogs to a sugar-water sucking insect called hemlock woolly adelgid that threatens the hemlock population.

The bug has killed hemlocks throughout the southern Blue Ridge and subsists on the same sugar-water the tree needs to survive. To combat it, scientists are using study sites to introduce a predatory beetle and selectively spraying threatened trees with chemicals, Lee said.

"You have to know what you have in order to protect it," Lee said. So his goal is to identify every plant and animal that lives in the state park land and then monitor them to see how populations and communities change over time.

Since 1988, rangers have counted migrating hawks and eagles from the top of Caesars Head.

"It's one of the reasons the bald eagle is no longer a federally endangered species because of counts like this and monitoring," Lee said. "We now know that they've gotten to a level, that while they're still protected because their numbers are low, it's a success story."

While acquiring new land may slow, there are still significant sites throughout the escarpment that conservationists have their eyes on. Some may not have stunning views or resplendent waterfalls; their beauty is more subtle.

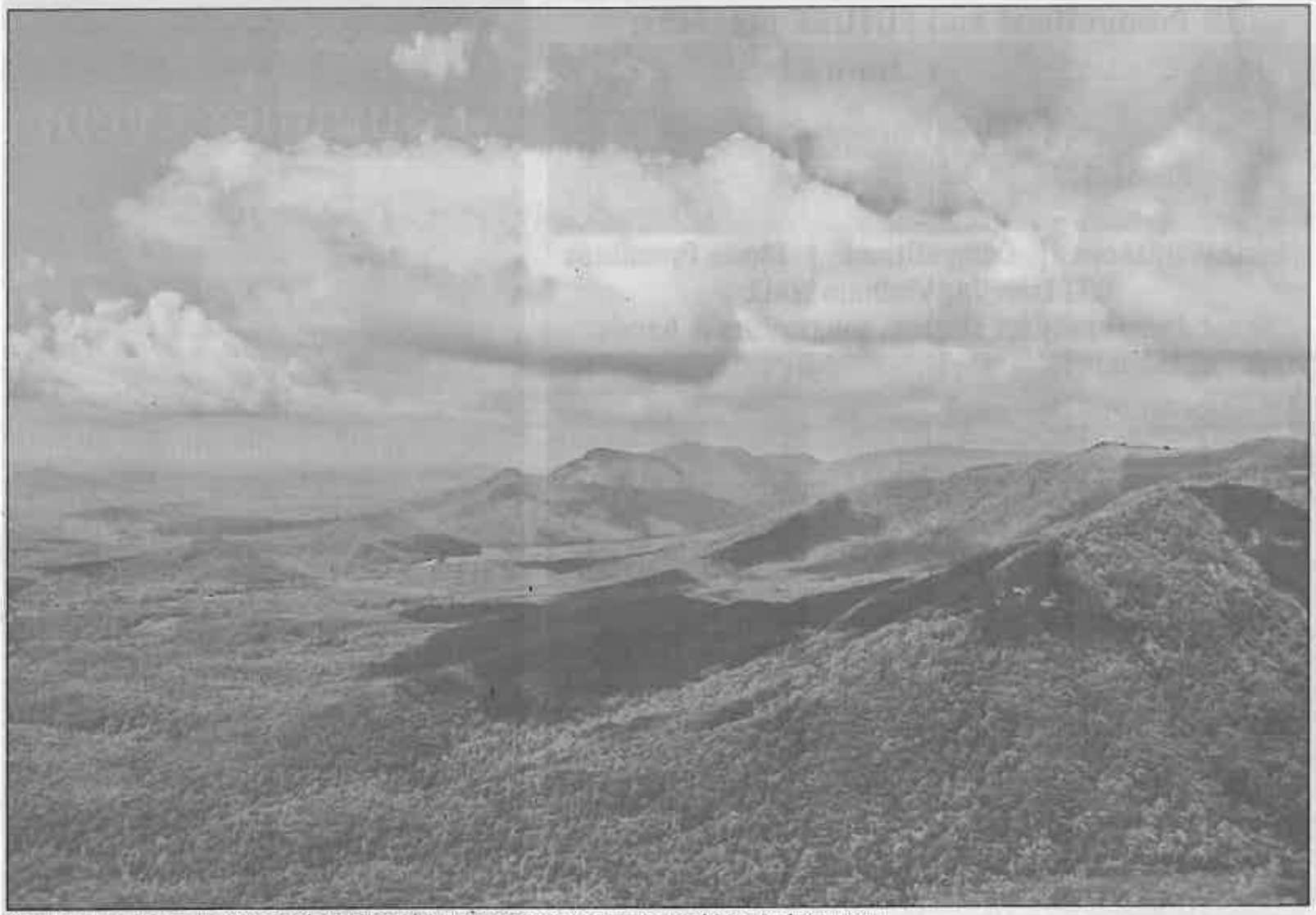
The Nine Times Preserve sits on 560 acres that The Nature Conservancy purchased in 2007. It borders another 1,700 acres that's still for sale and that the conservancy hopes to protect, Austin said.

The godfather of conservation in the escarpment, Wyche, is still passionate about the land, and though he's faced declining health recently, he still works at it constantly, Brad Wyche said.

The work is not yet finished, Wyche said.

"There are still many important tracts of land in the escarpment area that should be protected," Wyche said.

Contact reporter Nathaniel Cary at 864-616-4209 or connect on Facebook or on Twitter with @nathanielcary.



Clouds stretch above the blanket of the Blue Ridge Escarpment near Caesars Head State Park. NATHANIEL CARY/STAFF