

CHAPTER 5: OPEN SPACE AND CONSERVATION LANDS ASSESSMENT

Introduction

Existing open space and conservation lands are addressed collectively in the Open Space and Conservation Lands map. This map represents the parts of the “green infrastructure network” that are currently managed for conservation and as open space.

This Open Space and Conservation Lands map is a different kind of assessment than the others in the Conservation Planning Tool. Instead of valuing and ranking the resources, existing data related to managed conservation lands and passive recreation lands was simply overlaid into a single map. This map is intended to inform the user about the location of existing conservation lands that are in “permanent conservation” and those that are actively managed for conservation by federal, state, local, and private entities.

Understanding what lands are already under some sort of protection or are otherwise actively managed for conservation provides a valuable opportunity to plan effectively to:

- Expand those areas for conservation,
- Make connections between them, and
- Fill in gaps with additional lands containing natural resources with conservation value.

Data Sources

The current Open Space and Conservation Lands map includes:

1. All known federal lands owned by
 - U.S. Department of Defense
 - U.S. Forest Service
 - U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
 - National Park Service

2. All lands managed for open space and owned by the state of North Carolina, including various state agencies:
 - Division of Parks and Recreation
 - State Parks
 - State Trails
 - State Natural Areas
 - State Recreation Areas
 - Potential expansion areas
 - Division of Coastal Management
 - Division of Forest Resources

- Division of Health and Human Services
- Division of Marine Fisheries
- Ecosystem Enhancement Program
- Wildlife Resources Commission
 - Game lands
 - Boating access points
- Plant Conservation Program
- Soil and Water Conservation
- Department of Cultural Resources (where appropriate)
- Department of Transportation
- Museum of Natural Sciences
- NC Zoo
- UNC system universities and colleges

3. County and local government lands managed for open space (when provided)

4. Private conservation lands managed for open space (when provided)

- Conservation groups (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, National Audubon Society, N.C. Herpetological Society, The Conservation Fund)
- Local land trusts
- Utility companies

Data Layer	Source	Date
Managed Areas (Lands Managed for Conservation) – Federal, State, Local and Private	NHP	2011
State Parks System (including Future Needs)	DPR	2011
New Parks for A New Century (Potential Conservation Units)	DPR	2011
Trails - Existing and Proposed	DPR	2011
State Natural and Scenic Rivers	DPR	2011
Boat Access	WRC	2011

Planning for Expansion of State Parks System

As part of the DENR initiative to accelerate land protection in North Carolina, starting with the Million Acre Open Space Goal passed by the General Assembly in 1999, the Division of Parks and Recreation developed a system to evaluate priority sites across the state as potential additions to the state parks system.

The 1987 State Parks Act says that the North Carolina State Parks System is intended to:

- Include representative examples of North Carolina’s archaeological, geological, biological, scenic and recreational resources, and

- Preserve and manage these resources as part of the heritage of the people of the state.

To fulfill the mandate to include within the parks system representative examples of North Carolina resources, these resources needed to be defined and categorized. Resource “themes” within each resource category were defined by teams of experts from within and outside the division. Themes consisted of clusters of similar or related resource types, such as Spruce-Fir Forests, Barrier Islands and Shoreline, Prehistoric Villages and Scenic Waterfalls.

The natural and cultural resources within the existing parks system were evaluated in comparison to the defined themes to identify themes that were inadequately represented in the parks system. Themes with the least representation were identified as priorities for addition to the parks system.

The Division of Parks and Recreation then developed criteria for evaluating individual sites for suitability and priority. The evaluation criteria provide a method to numerically rank potential sites, as well as a way to remove unsuitable sites from consideration. The evaluation criteria are divided into **minimum and measured criteria**.

The **minimum criteria** are used for initial evaluation of additions to the proposed state parks system. Sites which do not meet these minimum criteria are removed from consideration. The four basic criteria are:

- Statewide significance of the site’s resource themes;
- Size (sufficient acreage to protect principal resources and to provide appropriate facilities with minimal impacts to principal resources);
- Absence of incompatible features (e.g., threats from roads, intrusive development, incompatible vistas and air, water and noise pollution); and
- Public access free of limitations inhibiting management and public use.

If a site meets the minimum criteria requirements, it is then evaluated using **measured criteria**, which include:

- Number of high priority resource themes present on the site;
- Rarity of theme(s);
- Overall threat to theme(s);
- Degree of threat to individual site / urgency of acquisition;
- Presence of rare and endangered species;
- Interconnection of the site with other protected areas;
- Quality of resources on the site and presence of superlatives (one of a kind, biggest or best example);
- Regional demand for state parks system units that are staffed and open to the public; and
- Suitability for providing high quality recreation.

Each of the above criteria generates a score for an individual site and the scores are combined to develop an overall score for each site. Using these criteria, the Division of Parks and Recreation evaluated dozens of sites around the state. Sites were nominated by division staff, other agencies, local governments and the general public. Many of the sites were previously identified in biological inventories conducted by the Natural Heritage Program. Sites that met the minimum criteria and scored well on the measured criteria were included on a list of potential new state park unit acquisitions. The sites were located in all regions of the state and included a wide variety of natural resources and recreational opportunities.

The list of potential new park units is called “New Parks for a New Century.” Some of the sites have already been authorized by the General Assembly and acquired for inclusion within the State Parks System. As additional sites are discovered or nominated, each new proposal will be evaluated according to the criteria above. Sites considered part of the “New Parks for a New Century” are indicated on the Open Space and Conservation Lands map as “Potential New Conservation Units.”

Other Future Open Space Needs

To assess the future open space needs in the state’s natural network, opportunities can be evaluated on the basis of what is currently prioritized in the focused assessments that comprise the Conservation Planning Tool. As lands become available within the identified priority areas, conservation efforts should be considered to conserve priority core areas and to fill the “gaps” to complete vital connections.

This evaluation of priority areas for conservation is limited to what is currently known to be significant. Specific amounts of land and natural resources required to complete a sustainable network of functioning ecosystems cannot be determined without further focused field study and research. A comprehensive understanding of the overall future needs of the network as a whole, as scientifically-based projections, will be addressed as more information is gathered from the appropriate agencies.