

# Conservation Working For America

Lumber mill employees in Gilchrist, OR, where we helped establish the first state forest in over 60 years. © Justin Baillie

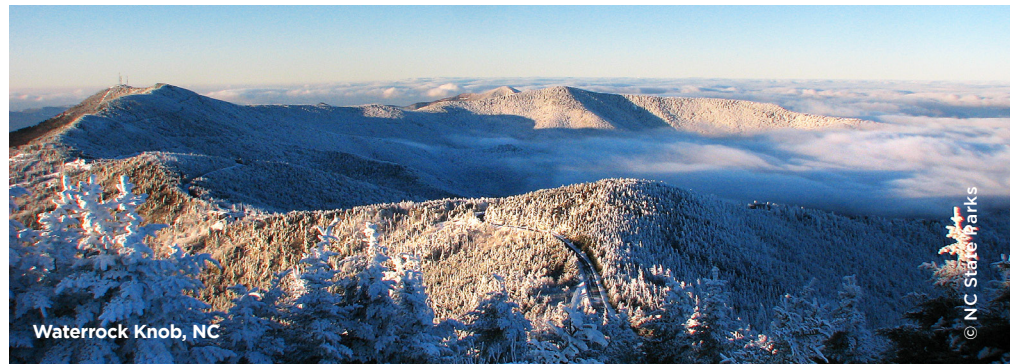
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CONNECTING PEOPLE AND NATURE

## Protecting Waterrock Knob: A Gem For The Blue Ridge Parkway

"In 2016, the National Park Service marked its Centennial Anniversary. Celebrations were held across the country including at the Blue Ridge Parkway—America's most visited unit of the National Park System. Thanks to The Conservation Fund and its partners, 5,300 acres were protected adjacent to the popular Waterrock Knob Visitors Center along the Parkway—just in time for the official anniversary in August.

For a decade of the last 100 years, I worked at Great Smoky Mountains National Park providing visitor services and educational programs. I spent a lot of time leading hikes to some of the best remaining examples of spruce-fir forest, helping visitors find their first salamander and smelling the spicy air that surrounds those magical trees. Up until starting work here on the Parkway a year ago, Waterrock Knob was the part of the Parkway where I spent most of my time, and it still holds a special place in my heart for the same reason as Clingmans Dome did at the Smokies.

Beyond the intrinsic and personal values this forest holds for me, there are more practical values as well. The headwaters of Campbell Creek sits within the newly protected land and benefits surrounding communities like Maggie Valley by helping to ensure quality drinking water. Hearing the sounds of the water and knowing its value to local citizens is yet another reason this place means so much.

I am tremendously excited that more of the landscape surrounding the Parkway is now protected from development and fragmentation. As the Park Service works to establish a management plan for the newly conserved Waterrock Knob, I can rest easy knowing that another beautiful, high-elevation forest has been protected that will provide awe-inspiring beauty for hundreds of years to come."

—Caitlin Worth, Executive Assistant/Public Affairs,  
Blue Ridge Parkway, National Park Service



Caitlin Worth at  
Waterrock Knob, NC  
© NPS

## How Did We Protect The Largest Property Along The Blue Ridge Parkway In Over 60 Years?

Ask Mike.



**Mike Leonard**  
Chairman of the Board  
The Conservation Fund

**Q** Why is the protection of Waterrock Knob so special?

**A** Back in the 1930s-1950s, the National Park Service worked with very influential North Carolinians and philanthropic families to create these large parks along the Blue Ridge Parkway. This type of large-scale conservation hasn't happened for over 60 years along the Parkway, and the protection of over 5,000 acres at Waterrock Knob is bringing this tradition back to life. These large park additions to the Parkway make it more than just a road—projects like Waterrock Knob are so crucial to the protection of the mountains of Western North Carolina.

**Q** What had to happen to make sure this project was a success?

**A** The public-private partnership was absolutely crucial to making this project happen. Very generous individuals like Fred and Alice Stanback and Brad and Shelli Stanback and others provided the necessary funding for the federal program, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, to cover the rest. This extraordinary partnership made the protection of Waterrock Knob irresistible to the National Park Service for permanent protection.

**Q** What is one of your favorite memories of the Blue Ridge Parkway?

**A** My friend David Alexander used to complain about how the woods and fields where we had hiked and camped as kids were being bulldozed away. He would often say, "Civilization strikes again." Like the last line on the last page of Huckleberry Finn. Sadly, David was killed in a car crash at 16, just two weeks after he and I hiked up Waterrock Knob on the Parkway in October 1969. I often think of Huck Finn's experiences and love of nature—similar to those that David and I shared for hours on Saturdays—swinging on vines along muddy southern creeks. And though I haven't talked about this much, after many of the conservation projects I've been involved in, and especially after the project at Waterrock Knob, I have thought, "well, civilization did not get this place after all—score one for David."

## Reclaiming The Coharie River

The Coharie River has long served as the lifeblood of the Coharie tribal community and its ancestors. The river has provided sustenance, transportation and connections to the cultural and spiritual traditions of this state-recognized American Indian tribe in southeastern North Carolina. Tribal elders tell stories about immersing themselves in the river's healing waters for days at a time, restoring their connections to both the land and the water. But after the area was hit with back-to-back hurricanes in the 1990s, the Coharie River became clogged with downed trees, debris and beaver dams. As a result, the waters spread over the river banks, causing a loss of productive farmlands, forests and other natural assets. For years, the Coharies and the surrounding community were unable to access the river that was such an important part of their culture. So Coharie leaders decided to take back the river, launching an initiative that is engaging both tribal elders and young adults.

Our Resourceful Communities program partnered with the University of North Carolina's American Indian Center, a public service center that supports tribal nations, to connect Coharie leaders with a state agency partner that provided funding for the stream restoration project. We provided a grant to equip young tribal members with environmental job skills and helped remove beaver dams and debris—reopening the river for fishing, traditional ceremonies, kayaking and more. The Coharies, young and old, cleaned up over 5,000 miles of the river, making it possible for the next generation to experience what Phillip Bell of the Coharie Tribe has described as "the spirits awakening on the river" and bringing the community together.

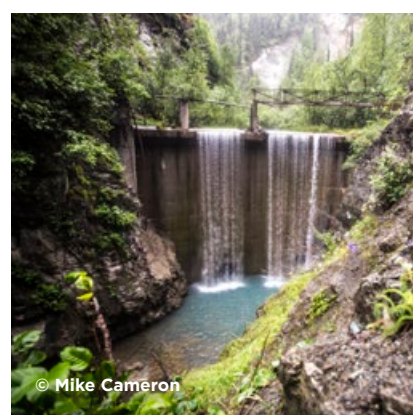
"We appreciate the support that The Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities program and the American Indian Center have provided to our efforts," said Tribal Administrator Greg Jacobs. "The Great Coharie River Initiative has excited and aroused the passion of the Coharie tribe. Our elders and youth understand more every day the healing medicine that our river holds, and we now have reclaimed a part of us that was lost." River restoration efforts will continue in the coming year to address devastation from this fall's record-setting floods in the wake of Hurricane Matthew, which severely impacted the Coharie and other tribal communities in eastern North Carolina.

Partnerships with groups like the Coharie tribal community represent what our Resourceful Communities program is all about—unleashing the power of grassroots groups to preserve their rural landscapes, move people out of poverty and celebrate communities' unique cultures.



The Coharie River now flows free—bringing the tribal community together to recreate and connect with their heritage and one another.  
© Olivia Jackson

### ECONOMIC VITALITY



© Mike Cameron



© Jim Arnesen

## Restoring Habitat And Culture Through Dam Removal In Alaska

Just north of Anchorage, a 400-foot crane sits perched above the Eklutna River gorge. It's there to lower construction equipment and place an aluminum staircase into the river canyon so that the lower Eklutna River dam—long abandoned—can finally come down.

Built in 1929, the dam was Alaska's first hydroelectric project, generating electricity for the young city of Anchorage. It was abandoned in the 1950s and, without continued maintenance, the reservoir has since filled with sediment and blocked the passage of spawning salmon.

Most of Anchorage is on ancestral Dena'ina land; Eklutna is a Native village within the municipality of Anchorage. A highway, railroad, powerlines and granite quarries went straight through the village, and the Eklutna River was dammed and diverted, devastating the salmon that supported the culture of the Eklutna Village residents.

We are proud to partner with the Eklutna Village corporation and its construction subsidiary to change this. Taking down the dam is the essential first step in restoring the Eklutna River, bringing back the salmon and repairing the Native Dena'ina culture. Removing the current fish passage barrier will open up an 8-mile stretch of habitat to five species of salmon. In addition, demolition already has provided significant economic benefits by creating over 30 jobs in construction, research and project management.

### LAND, WATER AND WILDLIFE

## Florida

In Dixie County, the timber industry is the largest employer. Working in partnership with The Lyme Timber Co., the Fund has embarked on a significant effort to conserve 46,500 acres of sensitive forestland adjacent to the Lower Suwannee National Wildlife Refuge for the benefit of wildlife, watersheds and local economies. With funding from the Florida Forever program, we completed the first phase and protected 8,138 acres with a conservation easement. The easement protects critical wildlife habitat, as well as water quantity and quality to the Gulf of Mexico, while also helping to preserve the community's way of life by sustaining local forestry jobs.

## Idaho

In southeast Idaho, the Blackfoot River flows through rolling hills, canyons and breathtaking scenery. It is also a popular destination for fly fishermen looking for peace and quiet and some monster cutthroat trout. Together with the Bureau of Land Management, we protected 400 acres within the Blackfoot River Special Recreation Management Area that secures new public access to the Morgan Bridge Campground and approximately a mile and a half of frontage along the river. With funding from the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, one of highest quality put-in and take-out locations on this section of the river is now preserved.

## Michigan

The Greenbelt program is an innovative, voter-approved land preservation program that enhances protection for parks, natural areas and working farms throughout Ann Arbor, while curbing the growth and effects of suburban sprawl. We work with the Greenbelt partners to provide project management support, stewardship planning and outreach to local landowners. We also helped to leverage city funds with more than \$10 million in federal matching funds from the Department of Agriculture. Over the summer the program completed its 50th project and has now protected more than 4,700 acres around Ann Arbor.

## South Carolina

Five years ago, more than 3,400 acres were ready to be sold, divided and developed for only few to enjoy the natural tranquility on the shores of Lake Wateree. This summer, that land was dedicated as the Austin Sheheen Sr. Natural Resources Area at Liberty Hill Wildlife Management Area and open for all, thanks to the work of the Fund. Located across from Lake Wateree State Park—and protecting 14 miles of lake frontage—the new Natural Resources Area will be managed for wildlife habitat and water-quality preservation and will be open for public recreation, including hiking, hunting, birdwatching and fishing.

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HOW YOU CAN HELP

## Making An Impact: One Project, Community And Generation At A Time

The protection of places that matter is a true cause for celebration. We have been fortunate this year to celebrate the extraordinary: new parks, like the Sodalis Nature Preserve in Missouri, home to nearly 200,000 endangered Indiana bats; restored lands like those at Upper Ouachita National Wildlife Refuge in Louisiana; and the 100th anniversary of our National Park Service—a partnership that has enabled us to help protect land at over 200 National Park sites, adding more than 325,000 acres to the Park Service system.

But there also are amazing small moments that remind us why nature really matters. They often take place away from the crowds: a child’s first camping trip, roasting marshmallows under the stars; endangered ocelots safely traversing through scrub brush; an early morning canoe trip to a favorite fishing spot; geese, falcons, eagles and thousands of migrating waterfowl flying overhead on their way to warmer locales; farmers getting their vegetables to market; and loggers working in sustainable forests.

There is also the small act you commit that has such an outsized impact—giving a gift that helps us continue to make these moments a reality. Together we added public lands, kept communities intact and passed on a passion for conservation to the next generation. You have always trusted us to focus on results, put contributions to use wisely and succeed in finding the right conservation solution for every community. With your generous support today, we’ll continue to build a healthy tomorrow—one project, community and generation at a time.

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