New River Land Trust Reaches 50,000 Acre Milestone

With the recent acquisition of two new easements, the New River Land Trust (NRLT) has helped conserve more than 50,000 acres, making a significant impact on the rural landscape and heritage of the New River region. Since 2002, we’ve worked with 240 landowners and other partners to reach this milestone. These acres are forever protected and will remain rural, contributing to the quality of life for our community, now and into the future.

For many years our efforts were limited to outreach, education and facilitation of the conservation process, with the Virginia Outdoors Foundation (VOF), Virginia Department of Forestry and other organizations taking the final step of holding and monitoring the easement. That changed in 2013 when we received accreditation from the Land Trust Alliance while at the same time expanding our staff capacity, thanks to generous support from our donors. This organizational growth gives us the bandwidth to hold easements ourselves, taking full responsibility for their stewardship. In 2014, we worked with the Bixler family to conserve the 48 acre Glade Road Farm property in Blacksburg. This year, we finalized an easement on 389 acres of the Obenshain family’s Thompson Place property in Montgomery County. We now hold or co-hold four easements in the region and are actively looking for new projects.

The NRLT will continue to work with VOF to reach our shared conservation goals. As a state agency, they hold the majority of conservation easements in Virginia. The easements we currently hold are on properties that have notable conservation values, but the landowners needed certain allowances that were not a fit for other conservation organizations. As a small, local organization, we offer flexibility, providing options for landowners and increasing the likelihood they will be able to conserve their land for future generations.

Youth Outreach Program Gets Kids Outdoors

Another area of growth has been with our Youth Outreach Program. In his landmark book, Last Child in the Woods, author Richard Louv says, “The human child in nature may well be the most important indicator species of future sustainability.” Our children are the next generation of environmental stewards; the only way to ensure they protect our beautiful region is to connect them with the farmland, forests, open spaces, and historic places that surround them.

This year, we sponsored six programs in Montgomery, Floyd, and Giles Counties, for 225 children, from toddlers to twelfth graders. Students at Floyd High School learned from forest educators about forest management and agroforestry. We hosted a field trip to Stadium Woods on the Virginia Tech campus for fourth graders from Harding Avenue Elementary, where they learned about the characteristics of an old growth forest, experimented with GPS technology, examined patterns in nature and created natural mandalas. We also organized a hiking field trip to Mill Creek Park for seventh graders at Narrows Elementary Middle School, and a series of seven “Nature Buddies” classes at Blacksburg’s Valley Interfaith Child Care Center. The toddlers explored nature with a focus on using smell and sight, while preschoolers and elementary students ventured outside to learn about leaves and pollinators. Lastly, we brought children from FUN 143, a mission project of Blacksburg United Methodist Church, to Glade Road Growing for a farm tour followed by pizza made with vegetables from the farm. We have plans to finish the year with another series of “Nature Buddies” classes for Christiansburg Head Start.
Special Events Raise Awareness of Land Conservation

Special events are an engaging and fun way to raise awareness of our land conservation efforts, and to raise the funds necessary to carry out our important mission.

In April we hosted an Earth Day Film Festival at the Alexander Black House, where we screened four films that highlighted the need for effective natural resource conservation. The festival was part of our participation in “GiveBigNRV Day,” a program sponsored by the Community Foundation of the New River Valley that encourages citizens to donate locally. Out of more than 90 participating non-profits, the NRLT raised the second highest total.

In July, our annual Farmfest event took place at the Bixler family farm property on Glade Road in Blacksburg. The event featured farm tours, an interactive kid’s station, live music, and locally produced food and refreshments. With more than 250 attendees, the event was one of our most successful programs to date.

In September we celebrated “Sustainability Week” with two events. We hosted the Land & River Revel at the historic McDonalds Mill in Catawba Valley. The day included a stream exploration program for kids and adults, fly-casting demonstrations, a bike ride to the event, live music, tours of the mill, and live and silent auctions. Later that week, we partnered with the YMCA Community Garden and Sustainable Blacksburg to show a film focused on farming organic foods.

New River Land Trust Helps Expand State Park

The NRLT is pleased to be facilitating the donation of the 241 acre Hoover Color property to the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) this year. Once the transfer is completed, the property will become part of New River Trail State Park and will add four miles of spur trails for mountain bikers and hikers.

Over three miles of new mountain biking/hiking trails have already been completed on the property. These new single and double track trails offer something different for visitors to this rails-to-trails state park: the high, colorful walls of the former pigment mine are something not usually seen on the East coast, and the high inclines and jumps on the new trails will add adventure.

A second property will be transferred to the DCR this year and become part of the park. In 2014, Bert Bahnson made a donation of land along the Trail in Hiwassee to the NRLT, when the state was unable to finalize the deal before the end of the year. The property provides access to an island in the river that is already owned by the DCR.

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