

Task force focuses on water resources, habitat conservation

For decades, the Cumberland Plateau was Tennessee's hidden jewel. While its rough terrain and rocky soil long discouraged early settlement and large-scale farming, the Plateau's dense forests and clear streams safely harbored a rich variety of wildlife and plants found nowhere else.

Today the Cumberland Plateau is experiencing rapid population growth, driven largely by a wave of retirees relocating from out of state seeking low taxes and scenic beauty. For example, Cumberland County's population grew 12 percent between 2000 and 2006, which was double the state's growth for the same period. As of 2005, roughly 1 in 5 people living in Cumberland County were retirees who had relocated there.

Because the Cumberland Plateau is attracting so many new residents, a collision is looming between once rural communities that are rapidly growing and a scenic, biologically rich wilderness. All too often this story ends under acres of asphalt and concrete with deteriorating quality of water and wildlife habitats.

But in Crossville and Wartburg, and in Cumberland and Morgan counties, a determined group of civic leaders, scientists and conservationists is writing a new ending to the familiar story of paving paradise. This group is developing what they see as a regulatory framework that will allow planned growth, while protecting the area's scenic forests, mountains, and streams—and the plants and animals they shelter.

"We're preparing for the 78 million baby boomers who are beginning to retire and who will be looking for places like our community to relocate to," says Mayor J. H. Graham of Crossville. "Right now, we're planning for 100,000 people in our community by the year 2025. We're now at 55,000. To plan for that growth we have to provide the infrastructure that those people will need. While we're doing that planning, it just makes sense to take care of the environment and our wildlife, and all the rules and regulations that go along with taking care of those things, and wrap them all together in our planning. Let's keep our pristine area beautiful, because that's what's bringing people here and driving our economic development."

Mayor Graham is a member of a 60-person task force that's guiding the development of a Water Resources Habitat Conservation Plan (or HCP) for Crossville, Wartburg, Cumberland County and Morgan County. Mayor Brock Hill of Cumberland County, Mayor Becky Ruppe of Morgan County, and Alderman Jonathan Dagley of Wartburg are also participants, in addition to scientists from Tennessee Technological University and the University of Tennessee; local developers; state environmental and wildlife staff; and staff from The Nature Conservancy, the conservation nonprofit.

The HCP is a legal agreement between a city or county and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The agreement allows a community to develop its land while reducing the impact on wildlife and their habitats. In order to have this HCP agreement with the Fish and Wildlife Service, these communities will have to have in place certain regulations that will govern construction projects, road building, and public utility lines. For example, such a regulation might call for a protective buffer to be put in place along a riverbank before new road construction took place alongside it. Or a regulation might modify or limit development on steep slopes to reduce the erosion of damaging sediment loads into local creeks.

Why would these counties and cities choose to accept governmental regulations voluntarily? The reason, say HCP supporters, is that their areas are not only beautiful; they also are home to 21 rare animals on the Endangered Species list, animals which are protected by the federal government through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. These include fish like the spotfin chub, purple bean (a freshwater mussel) and the gray bat. If coming commercial and residential developments exterminated these creatures or obliterated their habitat, the federal government might well step in to hold local companies and individuals accountable.

"The benefit of the HCP," says Cumberland County Mayor Brock Hill, "is that it addresses up front many of the issues that are normally addressed at the end of the process, in a court of law. The HCP will minimize future disagreements. It helps us avoid court and those expenses for all the parties involved. And it's a great planning tool that gives a number of different groups a say in the planning process."

Alex Wyss with The Nature Conservancy has been one of the leaders in the HCP planning process, and he agrees on the benefits for people as well as nature. "These communities are pursuing the HCP," he says, "because it affords better predictability on what environmental regulations are going to be in future. The

HCP sets a comprehensive growth plan for a community with many different stakeholders.”

For its part, The Nature Conservancy is involved in this process because it has invested most of the past 10 years in efforts to protect the biological richness of the Cumberland Plateau. The Conservancy’s conservation successes have included protecting the Walls of Jericho, Pogue Creek, important lands along the Obed River and, most recently, 127,000 acres in Morgan, Scott, Campbell and Anderson Counties for public access and habitat protection. For the Conservancy, working with local communities on the HCP is a way to build on its successes in land protection on the Plateau. The HCP will maintain reasonable protections for endangered animals and plants on the Plateau, while balancing those protections against human needs.

The task force developing the HCP has been working since early 2005 on the project, determining which animals (and plants) are covered by the plan, what sorts of development activities are to be regulated, and what geographic areas are included. The next steps will be to create the community regulations and get final approval from the Fish and Wildlife Service, anticipated for 2010. Along the way, all of the research and development costs for the HCP have been fully funded by the Fish and Wildlife Service and will be funded through the end of the project.

The fact that this HCP development is fully funded by Washington and gives Plateau communities the opportunity to head off future legal conflicts and expenses is a key factor in why Plateau Utility District Manager Mike Monroe has been involved with the HCP development. In his discussions with local citizens about the HCP, Monroe says, “The argument I try to make is I try to appeal to people’s wallets. I tell them we’ve got experts now available to us for free. Without the HCP, those regulations may cost us all a lot of extra money.”

“From my perspective, the HCP is pro-business and it’s pro-environment,” adds Mayor Hill. “But it’s going to take some communication and public education for folks to realize that.” That public education process will be ongoing over the next two years.

More information about the Cumberland HCP may be obtained at www.cumberlandhcp.org or by calling Emily Woodle at (865) 974-1955.

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