

CTNC helps safeguard historic trail and scenic backdrops for many BRP hikes

New sections of a centuries-old trail are being preserved forever thanks to an organization many hikers have never heard of. In fact, the Conservation Trust for North Carolina and 24 local land trusts across the state have protected many natural areas that hikers and other outdoor enthusiasts now enjoy.

CTNC recently announced the protection of a 1,488-acre property next to the Blue Ridge Parkway between Linville Gorge and Little Switzerland. CTNC negotiated a conservation agreement between CSX Corp., which owns the land, and the State of North Carolina that guarantees the massive property will never be developed or logged.

What makes this project special is that it includes about 1.5 miles of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail, followed by Revolutionary War militiamen on their way to the pivotal Battle of Kings Mountain.

The official trail, managed by the National Park Service, runs through Tennessee, Virginia, and North and South Carolina. It's still in development and fewer than 60 miles are open for hiking. Due to changes in terrain, road use and property ownership over the decades, much of the foot trail doesn't precisely match the historic path.

"On the CSX property, we are protecting sections of the trail that, as far as we know, follow its original route. That's a very unique opportunity," says Paul Carson, superintendent of the Overmountain Victory National Historic Trail. "Once we are able to open it to the public, people will be able to actually walk in the footsteps of the patriots who came this way in 1780."

CTNC protected another 1.5 miles of the OVT late last year with the purchase of the Rose Creek property just across the Parkway from the CSX land. Both sections will be opened for hiking once safety, access and management issues are settled.

Safeguarding hiking trails is not usually the chief goal of CTNC and other land trusts. They seek projects that will help protect natural, cultural, or historic resources such as drinking water sources; habitat for wildlife or plants; working farms or forests; or unique landscapes – maritime forests and spectacular gorges, for example.

In fact, some conserved properties may not be open to the public because they remain in private ownership or are home to sensitive resources such as threatened plants and animals. But the public still benefits through the protection of headwaters streams or land around reservoirs, rare species habitat, local farms, or spectacular views that are a major part of tourism, North Carolina's second-largest industry.

With CTNC, recreation frequently is a factor because the group does most of its direct protection work on the Blue Ridge Parkway. (The organization also is a service agency for other North Carolina land trusts, obtaining grants, emergency loans, and other funding; providing policy advocacy; managing coalition efforts; and coordinating publicity.)

To date, CTNC has protected more than 30,000 acres in 40 places along the Parkway. These properties may include trails, such as the walk from Cascades Overlook at Milepost 272 to its namesake waterfall, which crosses one of two parcels – 120 acres total – that CTNC protected and turned over to the National Park Service in 2004. Or the magnificent views from other trails may be of land safeguarded by CTNC, such as a 63-acre tract of lush forest visible from the Mountains-to-Sea Trail below Jumpin' Off Rock Overlook at Milepost 259.5.

Hiking areas elsewhere in the state are surrounded by land trust-protected acreage, such as the Swift Creek Bluffs Preserve in Cary, owned by Triangle Land Conservancy, or Satulah Mountain in Highlands, protected a century ago by Highlands-Cashiers Land Trust – North Carolina's oldest land trust.

For more information about North Carolina's land trusts and to find your local land trust, visit www.ctnc.org.