

BLUE RIDGE CONSERVATION CORRIDOR



Vision

A Blue Ridge Conservation Corridor that preserves and protects a highly threatened portion of the Blue Ridge Mountains between Route 66 in Virginia and the Potomac River in West Virginia, created by a coalition of citizens and organizations working together on actions that address the threats facing our mountains.

Need

Mountains are essential to all life on this planet, providing over half of the world's fresh water supply, and occupying 20 percent of the world's land surface. Mountains are centers of biodiversity, serve as headwaters for major rivers, and are home for many culturally diverse communities across the globe. Conserving mountains is important not only to protect the diversity found within them, but also to protect downstream communities and population centers that depend on clean water and other environmental services provided by the mountains.

The Blue Ridge Mountains are among the oldest in the world. Part of the Appalachian range, the Blue Ridge traverses eight states: Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, North Carolina, and Georgia, with the longest portion slicing a wide crescent through all of western Virginia. The Mid-Atlantic range of the Blue Ridge ecosystem has a unique mixture of northern and southern temperate zone plants. With changes in altitude, precipitation, and temperature, these mountains range from several hundred to over 5,000 feet from base to summit as they pass through Virginia, and contain a stunning diversity of plants and wildlife along forested slopes. The Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia and West Virginia face serious threats, however, including, development, extractive energy, climate change, and more.

Despite numerous initiatives to protect the Blue Ridge Mountains, areas remain insufficiently protected, especially near the Washington, D.C. / Northern Virginia metro area. This section – which the Appalachian Trail Conservancy calls the most threatened stretch of the entire 2,175 mile trail -- traverses five counties – Loudoun, Fauquier, Rappahannock, Clarke, and Jefferson, Development is encroaching rapidly: infrastructure such as sewer systems and roads are being built in the area, and residential complexes are increasingly being constructed on the mountains, destabilizing steep slopes, removing forest and vegetation, and causing erosion and run-off that degrades water supplies. Most counties lack protective zoning. This varying and inconsistent regulatory framework poses a significant threat to this vulnerable area of the Blue Ridge (Northern Virginia and the eastern panhandle of West Virginia).

In addition to development, climate change poses a significant threat to mountain ecosystems. Like other mountain ranges, the Blue Ridge is a sensitive barometer of the impacts of climate change; and serious negative impacts are evident already, with invasions of warmer-climate insects, dieback of colder climate species, and threats to coldwater fish, songbirds and other creatures that depend on cooler habitats for survival.

While numerous government agencies and non-profit organizations are attempting to deal with specific issues, there currently is no mechanism to coordinate and coalesce these disparate efforts into a more coherent and effective whole.

A Coordinated Effort

In the case of the Blue Ridge Mountains, it is beneficial— and increasingly critical— for a variety of players with diverse strengths to augment each other's conservation efforts. Because of the strategies and decisions that must be made across jurisdictions and across multiple levels of government, Blue Ridge Mountain protection and conservation requires a collaborative approach. Experience tells us that the most effective coalitions include groups who can work at

varying scales and be deployed based on their individual capacities and styles to carry out specific tasks within an overall plan. This approach recognizes the reality of ecological boundaries that do not respect political boundaries, and the challenges that occur when the complexity of implementation plans exceed and/or lie outside of the capacities of any single agency or organization.

Many organizations are doing a great deal to protect this area of the Blue Ridge Mountains through land conservation, stewardship, and outreach. However, all have different missions, and none of these groups focuses solely on the area of interest. It is imperative to coordinate existing efforts and identify new actions where needed, such as a cooperative effort to change local regulations across jurisdictions. Key organizations have expressed enthusiasm for development of a Blue Ridge Conservation Corridor Coalition, and agree that Friends of the Blue Ridge Mountains (FBRM) is well positioned to play the coordination role and build that Coalition.

FBRM has a highly qualified and active Board, but no staff; it works with and through partnerships with existing organizations and charges no overhead to its partners. FBRM's sole mission is to help raise funds to support the work of organizations that are best placed to undertake specific tasks, and to coordinate the efforts of all of the partners working to preserve and protect the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Project Introduction

The Blue Ridge Mountains Conservation Corridor will engage many people and groups in an effort to preserve and maintain the unique natural and cultural heritage of our mountains. FBRM has reached out to leading non-profits working on Blue Ridge Conservation issues, such as Piedmont Environmental Council, National Wildlife Federation, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, the Virginia Outdoors Foundation, Virginia Land Trust, the Chesapeake Bay Coalition, Loudoun County Preservation and Conservation Coalition, Faquier Environmental Council, individuals from the National Park Service, and civic leaders from Harpers Ferry, West Virginia.

Initial discussions with these major players indicated that organization and coordination of existing efforts and needed actions are a critical step in protecting the Blue Ridge Mountains that would be welcomed by all the groups contacted. As such, FBRM proposes to take on the role of coordinating organizations with an interest in the Blue Ridge, private citizens, and other to form the Blue Ridge Conservation Coalition. The primary goal of the Coalition will be to serve as a strong, united, and effective advocate for conserving the Blue Ridge Mountains by coordinating local policy, message, and actions. The Coalition will work to create the conservation corridor by: 1) encouraging conservation easements; 2) promoting legislative, regulatory and other policy measures that protect habitat and limit development; 3) educating land managers and the general public; 4) working together to actively monitor conditions, and 5) convening like-minded groups to take action when specific threats arise. The coordinated nature of the Coalition will increase the overall efficiency and impact of Blue Ridge Mountains conservation efforts by limiting duplicative efforts and by pooling resources across multiple jurisdictional boundaries.

The act of bringing many independent NGOs and citizens together to work towards a common vision is a complicated endeavor that will require patience and strong leadership. To ensure that

the development of the Coalition is driven by timely progress, we have established a timeline to guide our objectives over the year:

Phase I: Baseline Data Collection and Compilation (completed August 2011)

- Review of literature and existing records to collect information on flora and fauna in the designated area; air, soil, hydrologic, and geologic conditions; climate impacts; land use patterns; and historical and cultural structures and organize information into electronic files.
- Collect information on relevant state and local laws, policies, ordinances, etc.
- An annotated bibliography will be written to describe the information collected.
- Work with Piedmont Environmental Council on a GIS map of area with multiple layers (e.g., land use, land ownership, endangered species, historical structures, etc.).

Phase II: Develop various research and outreach products using data from Phase I (completed summer 2012)

- Technical Analysis
 - Use information compiled during the summer to develop a technical analysis of biological and ecological factors such as air, soil, geologic, hydrologic, and weather/ climate conditions, as well as an evaluation of terrestrial and aquatic flora and fauna with particular attention to wildlife resources and their habitats.
 - Evaluate existing land use patterns and ownership, historical and cultural properties, and infrastructure.
 - Conduct a regulatory and policy analysis.
 - Evaluate natural and man-made threats will be included, priority mitigating measures described, and recommended actions identified.
- Report and PowerPoint presentation to use with various audiences.
- Summarized information on specific topics (e.g., biology of the area, cultural resources, etc.).

Phase III: Organize and host a workshop that will serve as the launching off point for a Blue Ridge Conservation Corridor Coalition (completed October 2013)

- Organize a pre-workshop planning meeting with FBRM Board members and other key players to determine the goals and objectives of the meeting, participants, speakers, etc.
- Coordinate and conduct a Blue Ridge Summit co-sponsored with National Wildlife Federation that will bring together community members, county planners, and key non-profit groups to build support for a Blue Ridge Conservation Corridor Coalition and build capacity to implement key conservation recommendations from the work done in Phases I and II and other priority areas of focus as determined by Coalition members.

Next Steps

Based on the enthusiasm generated during the October 2013 Blue Ridge Summit, a coalition steering committee has been convened by FBRM with representatives associated with Piedmont Environmental Council, The Downstream Project, Clarke County Historical Association, Land Trust of Virginia, Appalachian Trail Conservancy, Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy, and The Mountain Institute. A Declaration of Stewardship Principles begun at the Summit has been refined, a Coalition web site designed, and appropriate next steps are being contemplated.