

Public Land Stewardship, Case Study: Stewarding North Carolina's Trails - Wildcat Rock and Mt. Mitchell

American Conservation Experience, Conservation Corps North Carolina, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps (North Carolina)

Public Land Stewardship National Benefit Description: Trails promote natural resource management strategies that help ensure environmental quality. Land managers use trail projects as opportunities to engage volunteers and habitat specialists in improving natural habitats. Benefits include restoring degraded stream corridors, routing trails to avoid sensitive wildlife habitat, and removing invasive plants.

Key Terms:

- ATV and OHV Trails
- Logging
- Mechanical Operations
- Multi-Use Trails
- Rock Work
- Wilderness Stewardship

Project Partners:

- **Wildcat Rocks Project Partners:** Community Foundation of Henderson County; Conserving Carolina; Conservation Trust for North Carolina; Donald Jones Foundation; Henderson County Parks and Recreation; National Scenic Byways Program; NC Natural Heritage Program; NC State Trails Program; REI; Trail Dynamics; Benchmark Trails
- **Mt. Mitchell Project Partners:** Mt. Mitchell State Park; NC High Peaks Trail Association (NCHPTA); North Carolina Recreational Trail Program; Pisgah National Forest; U.S. Forest Service

DOT Strategic Goal Alignment:

- Infrastructure

Best Practices:

This case study provides an example of utilizing Corps in conjunction with local volunteers.

Wildcat Rock Trails

Background

A 100-foot waterfall, dramatic rock outcropping, and a charming cattle-grazed meadow are what draw users to the Wildcat Rock Trail. Begun in 2013 and finished in 2017, the three-mile-long trail is the newest segment of the Upper Hickory Nut Gorge Trail, a budding 20+ mile loop that will soon link a half dozen trail segments circumnavigating the community of Gerton in northeast

Henderson County, NC. The trail loop is a component of the larger Hickory Nut Gorge Trail network: a planned 100+ mile system of hiking and biking trails that will ultimately link to Chimney Rock State Park and encircle Lake Lure.

Project Work

Conservation Corps North Carolina was awarded an RTP grant in 2012 for a funding amount of \$75,000. This grant directly leveraged an additional \$150,000 from the Donald Jones Foundation and two successive REI grants. RTP funding made each of these additional funding sources possible. The project blended an impressive assembly of public and private partners including Henderson County Parks and Recreation, NC State Trails Program, NC Natural Heritage Program, Community Foundation of Henderson County, and the National Scenic Byways Program.

Actual construction of the Wildcat Rock Trail maximized available resources and talents of a half dozen partners, including two professional trail contracting companies (Trail Dynamics and Benchmark Trails); three youth Service and Conservation Corps (Conservation Corps North Carolina, Vermont Youth Conservation Corps, and American Conservation Experience); and two community volunteer groups (Carolina Mountain Club and Conserving Carolina Rock Crushers). Machine construction, hand build, and intensive rigging rock masonry were utilized in this complex construction project. Sustainable trail design was completed by Conserving Carolina, with a particular focus on protecting the surrounding sensitive natural resources.

To accommodate for the steep and rugged slopes of the mountain, more than 250 rock stairs and 150 log stairs were implemented into the design and construction of the project. The resulting trail is not only environmentally resilient, but it is a work of art that offers an outstanding user experience that will stand the test of time.

The three different Corps that worked on the Wildcat Rock Trail completed five separate crew deployments, each over six weeks long, amassing several thousand hours of crew work. At the time of the project, the North Carolina Youth Conservation Corps (later renamed Conservation Corps North Carolina) had recently started; they utilized the Wildcat Rock Trail as a pilot project under supervision and training from the Vermont Youth Conservation Corps. In total, more than 50 youth participated in the creation of the trail. The quality work completed on the project helped successfully launch Conservation Corps North Carolina.

Benefits of using Corpsmembers

The Wildcat Rock Trail benefits from robust community and volunteer support. In particular, Conserving Carolina's Rock Crushers Trail Crew donated more than 1,100 hours to monitor, maintain, and improve the trail. REI Asheville continues to support the project financially through its annual stewardship grants, as does the Henderson County Tourism Development Authority. Conserving Carolina also employs a full-time Trails Coordinator to provide professional expertise and volunteer management in support of the Wildcat Rock Trail.

The Wildcat Rock Trail coincided with a conservation project that perpetually protected 135 acres on the north slopes of Little Bearwall Mountain through acquisition of two tracts of land by Conserving Carolina. According to the Natural Heritage Inventory of Henderson County, these tracts were considered among the most biodiverse and highest conservation priorities in the region. The Wildcat Rock Trail traverses this area and made funding the conservation

project possible. These tracts are now contiguous to a network of over 1,000 acres of protected public lands in the Upper Hickory Nut Gorge.

Mt. Mitchell Trail – American Conservation Experience

Background and Project Work

Over the course of this project, American Conservation Experience (ACE) improved and maintained over 1.25 miles of the Mt. Mitchell Trail on the Pisgah National Forest leading up to the boundary of Mt. Mitchell State Park.

The main goals of the project were to address erosion control issues and user safety. ACE removed berm, installed grade dips, and built rock staircases to improve user safety and improve erosion control. ACE also naturalized switchbacks to prevent trail users from cutting corners and negatively impacting the surrounding areas. ACE collaborated with NC High Peaks Trail Association (NCHPTA), the U.S. Forest Service, and Mt. Mitchell State Park. NC High Peaks Trail Association received the grant and contracted ACE to conduct the labor. NCHPTA approved plans with the U.S. Forest Service and did pre-planning involving ACE and the Forest Service. Mt. Mitchell State Park Staff helped provide access to the trail, a camping location, and logistical support with ATVs or trucks to help the crew pack in gear.

Outcomes and Successes

The benefits of using a Corps for this project would best be illustrated by the remoteness of the work and the numerous project sites, which worked well for a crew-based model. The Corpsmembers adjusted easily to a 1.5-mile hike into a backcountry primitive camping location, and to the two to four-mile daily hike to get to and from the work site. There were also multiple project sites that could be addressed simultaneously by having crews split into small groups of two to three Corpsmembers who were managed by a Crew Leader who could oversee quality-control and teach proper trail maintenance techniques. Because – in keeping with the Corps model – ACE provided Crew Leaders to supervise the work, ACE was trusted to complete quality work with limited oversight from resource managers. This freed up the time of agency and non-profit staff to focus on the broader goals of the project. ACE was chosen for this project for their familiarity with the site, knowledge of trail work, flexibility, ability to work in remote areas, and ability to work under minimal supervision from Forest Service staff. ACE Corpsmembers gained skills through experience using a grip-hoist and chainsaws, and gained skills in dry-stone masonry. Corpsmembers also developed skills in erosion control by installing grade dips and learning to build rock staircases.

Challenges and Barriers

The terrain and adverse working conditions were the main challenges of this project. Building trails in the high elevation of the Appalachians involves dealing with wet conditions, springs, standing water, and an abundance of roots and organic material that must be removed prior to building trail tread. The youth crews handled this by scheduling work during prime weather conditions and addressing water issues before digging the trail.

This was ACE's second year working on an RTP grant with NCHPTA, Pisgah National Forest, and the North Carolina RTP program. A main takeaway from this effort was the importance of

securing agreements well ahead of projected start dates. Due to the number of partners involved in this project, the agreement process took longer than anticipated; work did not begin until over six weeks after the original start date.

For More Information

American Conservation Experience – Southeast

Address:
63 Fletcher Commercial Dr.
Fletcher, NC 28732
Phone: (928) 814-2647

Conservation Corps North Carolina

Address:
1028 Washington St.
Raleigh, NC 27605
Phone: (919) 828-4199

Vermont Youth Conservation Corps

Address:
1949 E. Main St.
Richmond, VT 05477
Phone: (802) 434-3969

Award Winner

Coalition for Recreational Trails Annual Achievement Award