

Cash Crunch Hamstrings Programs Boosting Trails, Rivers, Natural Areas

While North Carolina has inarguably failed to hold its own in funding for state parks, officials say other programs within the Division of Parks and Recreation are even more cash starved.

The worst case example may be the *Natural and Scenic Rivers program*. The program began with a flourish in 1971 and aimed at preserving qualifying free-flowing rivers in their natural state.¹ Segments of more than 100 rivers were identified through surveys as worthy of consideration, but so far portions of only four rivers have been designated. A lone Parks and Recreation staff member dedicates one-sixth to one-seventh of his time to the program. "We have a keen river interest," says Kim Huband, the division planner responsible for maintaining the program. "We just have no staff — no resources to do it." Huband says the Natural and Scenic Rivers program has been reduced to the passive role of pressing for designation of a river when a request comes from county commissioners and there is unanimity among the local legislative delegation. Segments of the New River and the Linville River in the northwest, the Horsepasture River in the southwest, and the Lumber River in the southeast have been designated. "Obviously, you don't have a representative sample of rivers — by any stretch of the imagination — protected," says Huband.

The *Natural Heritage Program*, which aims at identifying and protecting the state's most outstanding natural areas and endangered natural resources — also is severely underfunded, state parks and recreation officials say.² Chuck Roe, the program's director, says inventories have been completed in only 10 of the state's 100 counties of natural resources worthy of protection. He says the program has in its 12-year history managed to secure conservation agree-

ments to preserve 240 areas. But Roe says the program maintains a data bank that includes some 7,000 individual records of the locations of special ecological features across North Carolina, with 850 of them on a priority list for preservation. "If we were successful in systematically and thoroughly surveying the state's resources, that number would obviously climb," says Roe. He says the "frustration level is high" within the program because the legislature has rejected efforts at expanding it to complete the county-by-county inventory and establish and manage nature preserves.

The *N.C. Trails System*, by contrast, got a boost in the 1987 General Assembly when lawmakers approved the hiring of four regional trails coordinators. Duties of the coordinators include work on the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, which upon completion will traverse the entire state, connecting existing park lands and natural areas where possible. The coordinators also are to provide technical assistance for the development of trails in state parks and on other public lands, and to work with cities, counties, and recreational interest groups to develop local hiking trails, greenways, and the like. State Trails Coordinator Darrell McBane says the major weakness of the program is its almost complete reliance on volunteer labor. "We're asking volunteers to do a great deal of the work," says McBane. "If trails are to be developed, the people power has got to come from volunteers. We're asking a great deal of the volunteer, but there are a number of successes."

—Mike McLaughlin

FOOTNOTES

¹ *Parks and Recreation in North Carolina 1984*, report prepared by the Department of Natural Resources and Community Development for distribution at a 1984 series of public hearings on the future of the state parks system, p. 11.

² *Ibid.*, p. 9.