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August 14th, 2021

**Community attitudes and awareness of The Nature Conservancy's conservation efforts
surrounding Bluff Mountain Preserve, Ashe County, North Carolina**



Figure 1: Bluff Mountain Preserve Perkins Rock | Source: The Nature Conservancy (Caroline Kelly)

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Background:

- **Research Question:** How can community outreach be used as a mechanism for strategically increasing environmental conservation efforts in Western N.C., specifically, The Nature Conservancy's Bluff Mountain Preserve?

Over the course of this past summer, I had the opportunity to research the status of Bluff Mountain Preserve to gain a better sense of community feedback, from those directly involved with preservation work through The Nature Conservancy and those outside the organization. According to my mentor for the research project, Sydney Bezanson, there appears to be varying levels of distrust with the people of Ashe County, North Carolina, and surrounding communities regarding the Bluff Mountain Preserve and its purpose.

TNC has a lack of qualitative data from this region within this specific sector and was in need of a researcher to fill in the gaps for future project development. Over the course of 180 hours of research, I compiled analysis from respondents to interview on initial opinions on the reserve, changes they would like to have implemented, and suggested next steps for TNC.

After nearing the completion of my Spring 2022 EcoStudio internship with Peace Boat US as a Youth Outreach Intern, I've developed quite the interest in public engagement's intersection with the environment. What further propels me into TNC's intern and research position is its contribution back to the state of N.C., which is on a more local scale than Peace Boat US' global capacity. I believe strongly in giving back to my home state, which is partially why I chose to come to UNC Chapel Hill, and this extensive study will hopefully foster a symbiotic relationship between residents of Ashe County and their surrounding environment.

Bluff Mountain is located along the Appalachian Trail above the Great Smoky Mountains, a key North American refuge for flora and fauna with exceptional temperate-zone biodiversity. In comparison to the Great Smoky Mountains, Bluff Mountain lacks a lot of key, integral research and advocacy, in part because the mountain is not part of a National Park. Shortly after TNC's North Carolina Chapter office opened in 1977, staff began working with the Wyn Edwards and Mac Edwards families of West Jefferson, Bluff's owners, to explore a way to protect the fragile area (part of the ancient Amphibolite range) for conservation. TNC purchased 701 acres of Bluff from the Edwards family in 1978 (The Nature Conservancy, 2022).

TNC continues to work to protect this entire natural area, currently managing over 3,800 acres as Bluff Mountain Preserve. The preserve is gated and not open to the public, aside from scheduled guided hikes via online registration. Trespassing has been an issue at this site, which is both a safety issue and threatens the species that seek refuge there. TNC staff who perform maintenance activities are not local. However, longtime volunteers remain in the area.

One of the key frameworks for the environmental end of the research will be Ecosystem-Based Management (EBM) and Community-Based Management (CBC). These ecosystem-level approaches will provide some insights to TNC that could help benefit illegal trespassing and other negative impacts the preserve faces. From the socioeconomic end of the research, Ecosystem Services will be considered to some degree, with a strong emphasis on survey data from Ashe County residents (Tarrant and Hull, 2004).

Summary of findings:

Working with my internship mentor, Sydney Bezanson, we've determined the start time of the project to be on or around May 9th, 2022. Over the course of nine weeks, allotting a total of 20 hours per week and 180 hours overall, I'm confident in my ability to deliver a comprehensive array of interviews, surveys and field site visits to compile a review.

One of the first methods I would like to hone in on would be interviewing.

- I intended on gaining further background on Bluff Mountain and the surrounding area via scheduled interviews with those directly involved with TNC, including contractors and employees, as well as those directly outside of the organization's circle. This information guided my understanding of the preexisting relationship with Ashe County and the Bluff Mountain Preserve, while also highlighting similarities in perspectives among respondents. (Timeline: First interview May 29th - Last interview July 16th)

- The initial interviewee list included my mentor, Sydney Bezanson, and Kelly Clampitt, Bluff Mountain Preserve Volunteer Monitor. I automatically included Kelly on my projected list of interviews due to her being the first point of contact listed on TNC's Bluff Preserve page. Clampitt gives guided walking tours of the preserve to visitors and local residents. Clampitt adds a unique perspective to the Bluff Mountain Preserve's narrative as she experiences first hand the tourism culture of the research area (The Nature Conservancy, 2022). During her interview, I gained insights into her lived experiences with visiting the site, communicating with the local community and disseminating her findings back to the TNC. (Timeline: First interviews May 29th)
- From these first two initial interviews, I curated a list of other interviewees that were either referred directly to me or researched given information provided. In order to uphold the privacy of each one of the respondents, I codified their names for reference in this report. In doing so, conversation to construct positive change for the reserve and the TNC community can be reviewed equally.
 - List of codified references for interviewees (in no specific ranking or order):
 - TNC Interviewee 1
 - TNC Interviewee 2
 - TNC Interviewee 3
 - TNC Interviewee 4
 - Interviewee 5

In accordance with University of North Carolina policy, I also submitted an application for IRB approval by the Human Subjects Research Office of Human Research Ethics. After a month of

carefully curating my application and methodologies, I submitted my initial application. With the next round of edits, my application was approved a month later for a journalism-style body of research.

The second method was a field site visit to the preserve. I toured Bluff Mountain with my mentor, which allowed me to gain multimedia for my EcoStudio presentation and connect with the local community on a more personal level. Physically being at the site also illuminated a lot of the insights I gained from interviews. (Timeline: Week 10 July 13th)



Figure 2: Bluff Mountain Preserve Indian Paintbrush Flowers & Trailmarker | Source: The Nature Conservancy (Caroline Kelly)

Some of the sample questions I asked interviewees included:

1. How does TNC initiate land transactions?
2. At what points does TNC involve the community during land acquisition? / When do we solicit community input?
3. How do you think TNC could improve their efforts on Bluff Mountain?

Following the interviews, I combed through the dialogue and created transcripts of the conversations to ensure I caught every detail. During this process, I made connections among varying interviews that allowed me to develop my key findings in which I'll discuss in the next section. However, here are some of the most *significant* quotes I obtained during this process:

- **Related to community engagement differences between Western and Eastern North Carolina**

- **TNC Interviewee 1:** *“So, you know, it just kind of depends on you know, where you're working, you know, in Southern Communities, some places where we worked. Another example would be Green Swamp, down in Brunswick County, South of Wilmington, there, that's the kind of habitat that can withstand a lot of human traffic. This is unlike Bat Cave, or Bluff Mountain, which are very sensitive areas to a lot of use. And so there, we've always been able to have a public trail on some of the savannas into the preserve.”*
- **TNC Interviewee 5:** *“It's going to be dependent upon the types of stakeholders we would expect to see in those areas, especially considering where we work in the mountains is so drastically different from, say, eastern North Carolina, or the sand hills... In terms of the mountains, I think that the need for community*

discussion would look more, maybe more town hall style, simply because I think people in the mountains are a bit more amenable to our land acquisition projects than they would be, say, in eastern North Carolina and the sand hills. And so I can't say with definitiveness, that that's how it would be, but I could see that it is more likely there."

- **Related to level of volunteerism**

- **TNC Interviewee 3:** *"We have a higher demand for volunteering than we have work in, because of the nature of our work, it requires a lot of training for the volunteers to kind of be really involved. So that's, I do feel like that is kind of an engagement issue is like, how, if people want to be involved, how do we? How do we engage them?"*
- **TNC Interviewee 4:** *"I do have an interest or reach out for some of the work we've done on Phoenix Mountain which is nearby to promote some of the sustainable forestry practices and some of the other projects we have going on up there... And sort of to expand that out from our volunteer monitor base."*

- **Related to external involvement with other organizations**

- **TNC Interviewee 4:** *"There's an organization up there called the Blue Ridge Conservancy and I stopped in one day and introduced myself. The director did make a comment that some folks up there just don't have the best opinion of TNC. I was, I mean, I'm a little biased, obviously. But I was really shocked by that."*
- **TNC Interviewee 3:** *"... You know, some people have been a little pushy, because Bluff is a special place. And it's like, they want to be involved. And so they have tried to go around, they sometimes don't understand that other people have been*

waiting to be monitored. Yeah, I'm not sure how to manage some of that sometimes. And I tried to be nice, as nice as I can. But sometimes they'll go... to Walter Clark at Blue Ridge Conservancy to try to figure out how to get in."

Reflections:

After I conducted each one of the interviews and created transcripts of the conversation, I was able to connect greater ideas that hinted at some important themes for TNC to reflect on. What became present from the first interview was the dichotomy between how Eastern TNC Preserves utilize community engagement in comparison to Western TNC Preserves. As TNC Interviewee 5 stated, engagement is dependent on the types of stakeholders land acquisition professionals expect to see in a given area. Accordingly, the culture of residents, political officials and the community as a whole to Interviewee 5 speaks more to the level and types of engagement seen in the two regions.

However, there is an interesting counter to Interviewee 5's perspective on the stakeholders being the deciding factor on engagement within a preserve. TNC Interviewee 1 suggests that the physical conditions of the preserved land has a greater impact on deciding what level of engagement the public occurs. They mention how in Bat Cave, North Carolina, a public site was opened by a landowner unfamiliar with TNC in Rutherford County. Foot traffic, according to Interviewee 1, increased significantly with field trips and trespassing as well. This negatively impacted the natural features of the land, encouraging the landowner to entrust the land to TNC

for protection to limit visitors. Foot traffic in Nags Head Woods, a TNC preserve on the East Coast, on the other hand, amounts to nearly ‘30,000 visitors’ a year.

There seems to be a fairly steady consensus when it comes to the demand for volunteerism on Bluff Mountain among interviewees. More so than interest by tourists, albeit limited marketing for tourism or restricted awareness from those outside of Ashe County, there appears to be a growing interest in volunteering. TNC Interviewee 3 ponders the question of how to provide enough work for volunteers when the demand is higher than the available positions. TNC Interviewee 4 asserts that, at least for Phoenix Mountain, promoting more of previous sustainable forestry work done would attract more volunteers to a preserve that could use more than Bluff Mountain. The nature of training volunteers also needs to be considered throughout this process, as it’s extensive and requires a well-rounded knowledge of the area.

The interview that was conducted with an employee outside of TNC’s realm, Interviewee 2, illuminated the demographic of volunteers from their perspective.

“People in my holler, they won't volunteer, but they will pretend that they're not going to volunteer. Again, it's very reserved... There are a lot of older people that it's a different culture, so you really have true locals to break down and it takes a long time to break the ice with people grown up here. It's just a different culture but not much volunteering at all. And if you do get the volunteers it's gonna be the elderly guys mainly from our group who are mainly semi retired–retired, loving nature.”

Challenges

From the start of the research, one of the largest challenges I faced was receiving the IRB Human Research Approval from UNC, not because the research posed a security risk to the respondents of the interviews, but because the structure of the research drastically changed. Instead of doing a wide scale survey, my mentor and I decided it would be best to do more of a journalistic-style body of research to gain first hand perspective from those who have worked with TNC and those who independently volunteer.

With that being said, I want it to be known that I tried to push the outside boundaries of research by reaching out to local officials of Ashe County. In total, I emailed five different Ashe County commissioners and even went into the office building following my field site visit to Bluff Preserve to request an interview. Time after time, there was complete silence on their end, inhibiting me to understand the impact local government has on environmental efforts. Their silence quite honestly speaks louder than what I could've projected to get out of an interview. In future research projects, I would like to have the resources to make these connections with political figures as I do believe they're important.

Another challenge I have just in general as a college student is public speaking. I will say throughout the process of this body of research, I improved on my interpersonal skills with cold calls to interviewees and conducting longer interviews than I normally conduct for my school's newspaper I write for. I hope to carry the skills I gained from this experience with me throughout the rest of my professional career.



Figure 2: Bluff Mountain Preserve Bee Balm | Source: The Nature Conservancy (Caroline Kelly)

Recommendations

- Facilitating Conversation from East to West Coast

Acknowledging the current level of communication between both offices, there is always potential to learn more!

- Sample town-hall style meetings/wider scale engagement for land acquisitions
- Comparing foot traffic and durability of preserves to gauge marketing for tourism/opening more to the public
- Balancing Volunteerism

TNC Interviewee 3 asserted that the demand is higher than the supply of volunteer work...

- Sending out interest surveys to those seeking volunteer opportunities on Bluff/Phoenix/Bat Cave
 - Reviewing volunteer training & placing emphasis on protocol for trespassing
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- Managing External Relations

In several interviews, feedback on TNC was reported to a similar organization in the area.

- Maintaining good relations with external organizations
- Getting a better sense of local government's perceptions
- Fielding feedback with a grain of salt

Citations

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