

south carolina update



PEE DEE RIVER © TOM BLAGDEN

Preserving Our Land, Water and Quality of Life



From the Executive Director

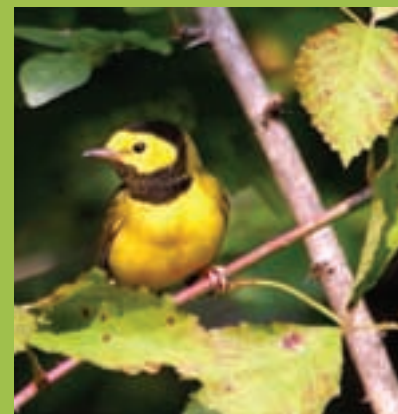
For 25 years, The Nature Conservancy of South Carolina has focused on the mission of protecting natural lands and waters for future generations. To date, we have protected 202,000 acres of environmentally significant land in our state.

We are proud of our accomplishments, but are well aware of the challenges facing South Carolina with a burgeoning population, particularly in the coastal and piedmont areas.

In the past several months, the Conservancy has participated in two significant land transactions. A 909-acre tract in Berkeley and Dorchester counties was added to the National Audubon Society's Francis Beidler Forest, a Registered National Natural Landmark. The Conservancy partnered with Audubon to purchase the property from MeadWestvaco for \$1,650,000. In fact, the protection of a 3,400-acre tract in 1969, which established the Beidler Forest, was also a collaborative effort between Audubon and the Conservancy. Now

totaling nearly 11,500 acres, the Francis Beidler Forest supports some of the most dense breeding populations of migratory song birds in the eastern United States. The Forest also contains about 1,700 acres of virgin blackwater bald cypress and tupelo gum forest, the largest stand of this forest type in the United States. The newly added acreage ensures a necessary corridor of protection for the upper Edisto River watershed.

The second addition of protected land is located in our Sewee to Santee region, outside McClellanville. In October, we announced the purchase of a 150-acre tract for inclusion in the Francis Marion National Forest. Supporting high quality longleaf pine communities, one of the most botanically diverse natural communities in North America, this area provides critical habitat for the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpecker. Prior to European settlement, longleaf pine forests dominated much of



HOODED WARBLER © PIERRE HOWARD

The mission of The Nature Conservancy is to preserve the plants, animals, and natural communities that represent the diversity of life on Earth by protecting the lands and waters they need to survive.



FRANCIS BEIDLER FOREST SWAMP © APRIL STALLINGS/AUDUBON SOCIETY SOUTH CAROLINA

the southeastern United States, covering more than 90 million acres from southern Virginia to Florida to eastern Texas. Today, only 3 percent of the forest remains and what is left is disappearing at a rate of 100,000 acres a year.

A new and exciting area of focus for the Conservancy in South Carolina is the study of freshwater mussels by our aquatic ecologist, Eric Krueger. Mussels are considered an indicator species, similar to the proverbial canary in the coal mine. As filter feeders, mussels absorb all impacts to a river system, such as alterations in water flow, pollution and increased sedimentation. If mussel populations are healthy and abundant, it is a pretty good indication the river system is healthy.



Aquatic ecologist Eric Krueger studies mussel species of the Pee Dee River.

ERIC KRUEGER © DAVID DANIEL

Eric will primarily focus on the Pee Dee River, the third largest watershed on the east coast. With headwaters beginning in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, the Pee Dee flows across the North Carolina and South Carolina state lines, providing a haven for numerous



PINEWOODS DARTER © FRITZ ROHDE, NC MARINE FISHERIES DIVISION

rare and endangered plants, animals and natural communities. For instance, the pinewoods darter is found no where else in the world except in the waters of the Pee Dee River. Large areas of longleaf pine forest

and Carolina bays comprise the landscape of the lower river basin, supporting the rare Bachman's sparrow, the Swainson's warbler and the

prothonotary warbler. While the rivers of the United States are believed to support about 300 species of mussels, 70 percent of which are endangered or threatened, the mussel populations in South Carolina's waterways are still very much a mystery.



CAROLINA HEELSPLITTER © JOHN ALDERMAN

During the next two years, Eric and partners from the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources, Progress Energy, South Carolina Aquarium and Winyah Rivers Foundation will search 50 sites in the lower Pee Dee River system for mollusk populations with colorful names like Carolina heelsplitter, yellow lamp mussel and tidewater mucket. Scuba diving in deep water and searching by hand in the shallows, Eric and his colleagues will try to determine what mussel species exist in the river system and what reaches of the river support these species. This information will be made available to other conservation partners to incorporate into future surveys of the Pee Dee and other regional water systems. Once we know what mussels species exist here and the health of their populations, the Conservancy and our partners will have a better idea of where we need to concentrate our land and water conservation activities.

South Carolina is rich in history, heritage and natural beauty. For us to continue to enjoy these gifts, we must accept our role as good stewards, and together, we will save the last great places. Thank you for your support, and don't forget to mark your calendars for the opening of our landscape photography exhibit, *In Response to Place*, at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, S.C. from January 16 to April 25, 2004.

Mark L. Robertson

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Executive Director

For more information about our work, please visit nature.org/southcarolina.