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## **GOOD NEWS FOR THE ENVIRONMENT**

### **Light rail among state's successes**

With so many environmental challenges and ecological problems, is there any good news? There is indeed. North Carolina's environment is healthy in many respects. The air is better than it once was, its forests have rebounded from the widespread clear-cutting of a century ago, and concerted efforts by state and local governments, environmental groups and outdoors enthusiasts have helped preserve, protect and restore much of what we cherish about this old state. Here's a short list of environmental successes:

- 1.** Chimney Rock State Park came under public ownership this year with the \$24 million purchase of this extraordinary natural landmark rising 315 feet above its surroundings and featuring a 400-foot waterfall. It's part of a plan to eventually amass up to 5,000 acres in the Hickory Nut Gorge for one of the state's newest parks and best-known tourist attractions.
- 2.** It's not a done deal yet, but it appears that federal agencies have abandoned the plan for a \$600 million Road to Nowhere that would slice through part of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and a pristine wilderness area on the north shore of Fontana Lake. The government made a commitment in the 1940s to build the road when it flooded the lake as part of a hydroelectric project, but Rep. Heath Shuler, D-N.C., and U.S. Sen. Elizabeth Dole, R-N.C., helped bring about an agreement to pay Swain County a yet-to-be determined sum for economic and community development. It's a sensible, practical alternative to a costly and damaging road.
- 3.** The decline of shell fishing beds on the N.C. coast due to polluted runoff and fouled waters is not news, but the efforts of the N.C. Coastal Federation and its allies up and down the coastline have begun changing things. The federation, among its many other good works, hauled some 700 tons of oyster shells to appropriate sites to create 11 acres of oyster habitat between 1998 and 2006. In 2007, the group reports, it created seven acres of reefs in cooperation with NOAA, the N.C. Aquariums, Wilmington's Airlie Gardens and the group Restore America's Estuaries. UNC Wilmington researchers and the N.C. Division of Marine Fisheries, as well as local oyster harvesters, were key advisers, the group reported.
- 4.** Charlotte's new light-rail line opened at last to enthusiastic ridership. With opening day coming shortly after Mecklenburg citizens voted overwhelmingly to retain a special sales tax to support mass transit, the new commuter line, North Carolina's first in this century, is a model for other growing urban areas. It's also a boon for riders who no longer must sit in congested traffic jams trying to get somewhere.
- 5.** Private conservation groups have taken the lead in preserving and protecting much of North Carolina. One of the best examples of the state's highly effective land trust movement is the Catawba Lands Conservancy, which has worked to protect thousands of acres in the region. The organization has embarked on an ambitious project: creating and protecting the Carolina Thread Trail, winding through 15 N.C. counties with bicycle and walking trails and serving 2 million residents in a region once known around the world for its textile economy.

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<http://www.charlotte.com/291/story/407896.html>