

COMMUNITY CONSERVATION: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH LAND CONSERVATION

CATAWBA LANDS CONSERVANCY Carolina Thread Trail



Students using the Little Sugar Creek Greenway, a part of the Carolina Thread Trail, in Charlotte, NC. *Photo courtesy of Carolina Thread Trail*



In 2015, a new pedestrian bridge spanning the South Fork River connected Goat Island Park to Cramerton's central business district. The bridge and the Goat Island Greenway are a major section of the Carolina Thread Trail in Gaston County. *Photo by Nancy Pierce*

The Carolina Thread Trail is the result of people working together, locally and regionally, to improve their quality of life. The trail is a regional network of greenways, trails and blueways spanning 15 counties in two states around Charlotte, North Carolina.

The Thread Trail, as it is commonly known, was launched as a nonprofit in the early 2000s by a coalition of business and community leaders who were concerned about the impact of

growth on the region's green space. Charlotte is currently ranked seventh in population growth among the nation's metro areas, and it is expected to lose a quarter of its forest land by 2025.

With major funding from the Foundation for the Carolinas (FFTC) and organizational leadership from the Catawba Lands Conservancy, the Thread Trail would be a way to balance this growth—one community at a time. Even the name Carolina Thread Trail captures the mission perfectly. Rooted in the region's rich textile heritage, the effort is an intricate network of trails, a weaving together of people, communities and nature

into a tapestry that connects Carolinians for generations to come.

From the outset, the accredited Catawba Lands Conservancy has made community the hallmark of its planning process. Staff has worked closely with mayors, town planners and local citizens, bringing people together around the shared vision of the Thread Trail. The project engendered such enthusiasm that the master plan ended up being three times its original size.

"The Thread Trail is a great example of community conservation because it has involved a huge outreach effort to all the communities in the Charlotte regional area," says Tom Okel,

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The Diversity in Conservation Internship Program: Building Bridges

With an increasing push toward community conservation, land trusts find themselves wanting to partner with ever broader and more diverse populations. The hitch is that most organizations remain fairly homogenous when it comes to the makeup of staff and board. Addressing this issue will be important if land trusts want to engage fully and authentically with their communities.

One program, launched in 2008 by the Conservation Trust for North Carolina, is already making a difference. Known as the Diversity in Conservation Internship Program, the initiative places applicants from underrepresented communities in 10-week paid internships with conservation organizations. The program introduces promising college students and recent graduates to careers in conservation, and at the same time, it connects conservation organizations to potential employees. Since the program's inception, it has supported 92 interns at 18 land trusts and 13 partner organizations across the state.

The Catawba Lands Conservancy was fortunate to have a Diversity in Conservation intern in 2015. The intern focused on communication and marketing activities and was very involved with promoting the Thread Trail via social media, email marketing and media relations. She also represented the Thread Trail at outreach events and participated in numerous volunteer workdays on Thread Trail segments.

"In addition to providing employment pathways for promising students, the Diversity in Conservation Internship Program brings more diverse faces, perspectives and experiences to land trusts, which helps them better understand, reflect and connect with the communities they serve," says Caitlin Burke, associate director at the Conservation Trust for North Carolina. "We recognize that the benefits of land conservation have not been felt equally in all communities across the state and that going forward we need to engage and build support across racial, economic, generational and geographic lines."

executive director of the Catawba Lands Conservancy. "It included outreach to communities of all socio-economic backgrounds, as well as urban and rural locations. Everyone had a seat at the table."

The trail helps preserve vital open space and recreational opportunities in rapidly growing areas. But it can also help revive areas that have been struggling economically. One example is Cramerton, North Carolina, a former textile town near Charlotte that has been losing manufacturing jobs for several decades. In recent years, Cramerton has experienced an incredible turnaround thanks to a waterfront revival project that is part of the Carolina Thread Trail. Features of the project include a newly revamped greenway; a blueway that follows the South Fork River; and Goat Island, a 37-acre outdoor park and recreation area that is linked to downtown via a pedestrian bridge.

"The trail and the bridge to Goat Island have created this incredible rebirth in Cramerton," Okel says. "It's changed the whole feel of the place. Kids and families are out on the trail walking around. Everyone is embracing the outdoors. Now there's a great sandwich place and a coffee shop where you can rent canoes."

Funding for Thread Trail projects is a multi-faceted endeavor. Private funds are available through the Thread Trail organization, which issues catalytic grants (which fund only a portion of a project) to local communities for planning, design, land acquisition and trail construction. Local communities must make up the difference by securing public or private funds for their individual trail projects. The Catawba Lands Conservancy plays a key role in helping towns apply for state and federal grants and secure other funding sources.

KEY BENEFITS OF THE THREAD TRAIL

• Improves health and the environment.

The Thread Trail benefits the environment in countless ways. It preserves and restores natural corridors within already densely populated regions, thereby improving air and water quality. The trail will encourage a sustainable way of life for generations to come. Equally as important, greenways, trails and blueways nurture emotional and physical health. They provide opportunities for children and families to get outside and enjoy nature, an especially important opportunity for those who might not otherwise have access to the outdoors.

• Fosters community and connectivity.

The Thread Trail fosters connectivity within communities—and throughout the Charlotte region as a



The Oakboro Rail Trail, a segment of the Carolina Thread Trail in Oakboro, NC, runs along the railroad and provides access to many points of interest including the Oakboro Rail Museum and the Oakboro District Park. *Photo by Nancy Pierce*



The Carolina Thread Trail also includes blueway or river trails for paddling. The Rocky and Pee Dee River Blueway is a 65-mile river trail with more than 10 launch sites for paddling and was created by the Carolina Thread Trail and regional partnership of 11 corporate, government and nonprofit organizations. *Photo by Nancy Pierce.*

whole. It encourages local leaders, nonprofit organizations and citizens to build partnerships as they work on their individual trail segments. The goal is for local greenways to link neighborhoods to social centers, schools, churches and other community facilities. Importantly, the Thread Trail provides a framework for local action within a regional planning structure. Connected by a ribbon of blue and green, towns will be more inclined to collaborate in the future.

• **Provides economic benefits.**

The local and regional economy benefits tremendously from the Thread Trail. Consider that the total construction investment over a 15-year period is estimated to be \$100 million; home prices in the vicinity of the Carolina Thread Trail are estimated

to increase approximately 4 percent. The trail attracts and retains new businesses and residents to the area. The population in Cramerton, for example, has doubled in the past decade. “I came here to paddle on the river, and I loved it so much—between the trail and the river—that I got a job and moved here,” says Eric Smallwood, director of parks and recreation in Cramerton. “And I know for a fact that other people have done the same thing.”

LOOKING FORWARD

The Thread Trail has brought people outside and given them positive experiences on land and water. This has enabled the conservancy to reach new audiences and gain more public exposure than it

ever could have solely as a land conservation organization. “It has been a great entry point in terms of educating people about conservation,” Okel says. “Trails are easy to appreciate. Their value is obvious, and they touch so many people.”

Thus far, 250 miles of trails and 150 miles of blueway have opened to the public. The remaining 1,200 miles will be built over the next decade. The speed and rate of the trail’s completion will depend largely on local initiative and support.

“We think that when you look back, it is going to be huge that our region mapped out a plan to preserve corridors of natural space as an integral part of our growth,” Okel says. “For that foresight, we think future generations will be thankful.”

FIND MORE

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