

Executive Summary

The Southern Appalachian ecosystem is widely recognized as one of the most diverse in the temperate region. The headwaters of nine major rivers lie within the boundaries of the Southern Appalachians, making it a source of drinking water for much of the Southeast.

The Southern Appalachian Assessment (SAA) area (fig.1) includes parts of the Appalachian Mountains and Shenandoah Valley extending southward from the Potomac River to northern Georgia and the northeastern corner of Alabama. It includes seven states, 135 counties, and covers approximately 37 million acres. The Southern Appalachians are one of the world's finest remaining ecological regions. Early in the 20th century, the Appalachian landscape and natural resources were being exploited; croplands, pastures, and hillsides were eroding; and timberlands were being cut with little thought for sustaining the resources. National forests and national parks were created to preserve and restore the natural resources in the region. The seven national forests in conjunction with three national parks, the Blue Ridge Parkway, and the Appalachian Trail form the largest contiguous block of public lands east of the Mississippi River.

The SAA, a comprehensive, interagency assessment, began in the summer of 1994 and was completed in May 1996. It was designed to collect and analyze ecological, social, and economic data. The information provided will facilitate an ecosystem-based approach to management of the natural resources on public lands within the assessment area.

Public participation has been, and will continue to be, an important part of the assessment. One of the first actions of the assessment was to conduct a series of town hall meetings at which the public gave suggestions on the major themes and questions to be addressed. These questions, supplemented by additional concerns expressed by land managers and policy makers, form the structure for the assessment.

Historically, the Southern Appalachians have greatly influenced transportation and commerce. Native Americans and the later settlers

that replaced them relied upon combinations of hunting and subsistence farming, and in those times, transportation was not a big concern. The land was ideal for that lifestyle. Until well into the 20th century, families, kinship groups, and small communities dominated most aspects of life. People had strong attachments to the land.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, exploitive logging and farming of hillsides threatened the watersheds of major rivers originating in the region, and national forests were established to protect watersheds. But poverty in the region was extensive and people left for better opportunities elsewhere.

In the last 20 years, economic progress has been faster in the mountainous portions of Virginia, North and South Carolina, eastern Tennessee, northern Georgia, northern Alabama, and a piece of eastern West Virginia than the average across the seven states that contain the highlands. As the highland economy grew, it became more diverse and less dependent on manufacturing. At the same time, the proportion of families living below the poverty level decreased from 20 percent in 1970 to 11 percent in 1990.

Newcomers in the last 20 to 30 years have dramatically changed the social climate for management of public land. Retirees and employees in service industries are more interested in scenery and recreation than in resource extraction. Residents of communities near national forests favor balance between local and regional interests. They also seek a balance in the way national forests are used. To them, recreation and tourism are important, but so are timber and other commodities from the land. Management of public land and the way natural resources are used can sometimes impact groups of people within a region differently. In the Southern Appalachians, there is no indication of environmental injustice toward any particular ethnic group based on the limited data available.

The attitudes of residents of the study area toward natural resources and ecosystem management are generally similar to those across the

nation. A survey of residents indicates that most feel that the Endangered Species, Clean Water, and Air Quality Acts have not gone too far to protect highland ecosystems.

Groups inside and outside of the region represent environmental protection and various resource uses. These groups influence management of public land by providing information and analysis and by expressing opinions. They have considerable scientific expertise and consider education of the public to be a major goal.

Of the 37 million acres in the study area, 28 million are privately owned. Many owners of private tracts get little or no monetary return from ownership. They might be attracted by potential profits, but they would be reluctant to take any action that would reduce the future selling price of their land.

There are almost 25 million acres of forest in the Southern Appalachians. Government agencies manage a little over 20 percent of the region's timberland.

Over the last 20 years, the region's timber markets have been strong. High-quality sawlogs are becoming increasingly scarce, and prices for them have risen rapidly. In contrast, lower quality material has been relatively abundant. Recently, markets for the lowest quality timber also have grown to make products such as pulpwood and composite board.

Since 1980, national forests have provided 10 to 12 percent of Southern Appalachian timber production. National forest production expanded from the late 1970s through the mid 1980s. Since 1985, production has dropped, and levels now are comparable to those in the late 1970s. In some localities, national forests make up the majority of the area and sales from these lands dominate local markets.

The wood products industries have provided stable employment and income in the region over the last 20 years. However, since these industries grew at a slower rate than the economy as a whole in the last 20 years, their share of the economy declined from 6 to 4 percent.

Outdoor recreation is an important use of forest lands. In order to determine the character of the recreation resource, the study area was divided into "settings" based on suitability for various kinds of recreation. The public owns about 16 percent of the land in the study area. It has considerably higher percentages of the remote and natural-appearing settings. Public

land appears to be best suited for recreation activities in which people interact with nature. The private sector is best suited for providing expensive facilities for specialized activities.

Over the last 10 years, the number of older individuals recreating in the study area has increased. In addition, the population as a whole has risen, increasing demands for most types of activities. Improvements in equipment have created demands for new activities such as mountain biking, jet skiing, and sailboarding.

In general, amounts of various types of settings appear to be sufficient to meet most demands for nature-based activities. However, some capacities will have to be increased on private and public land, and new investments in facilities will be required.

Rising demands for nature-based activities will have to be met primarily on public land. Many key corridors on public land are already operating at or above capacity. Overcrowding results, but it can be overcome by increasing the capacity of facilities and by dispersing use to new facilities.

There is little doubt that recreation opportunities improve local communities. In some communities in the study area, however, rapid changes have been made to accommodate recreators. These changes have created conflicts with long-time residents. Ways are needed to preserve important community values while necessary development is occurring.

People are interested in the number, size, location and status of roadless areas and wildernesses because they are thought of as the last remaining large tracts of unroaded natural appearing lands in the region. The region's national forests, national parks, and state parks contain 144 roadless areas that cover 1,231,961 acres, about 3 percent of the study area. There are 39 units of the Wilderness Preservation System in the Southern Appalachians. They cover 428,545 acres or about 1 percent of the study area.

Designation as a roadless area does not necessarily preclude a wide range of management activities that can change the area's status. Any project that would change the character of a roadless area, however, must be analyzed with full public participation.

To date, most of the Forest Service management activities in wilderness have been oriented toward inventory and monitoring. Many research and administrative activities are underway.

The use of wilderness appears to depend primarily on the attractions that are found there. For southeastern wilderness, the effect on use of nearness to a city does not appear to be very strong.

Using other assessment teams' data and GIS analysis, about 3 percent of the national forest land in the Southern Appalachians has been

identified as potential old-growth forest. Roadless areas and wilderness account for 48 percent of the land in this category. In addition, about 56 percent of the land in the Southern Appalachians is classed as potentially suitable habitat for black bears. Roadless areas and wilderness account for about 7 percent of these acres.