

THE BOONE AREA

SPRING 2011

OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN



PRODUCED BY: WATAUGA COUNTY TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

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THE BOONE AREA OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

BOONE, NORTH CAROLINA

Prepared For:

Watauga County Tourism Development Authority (WCTDA)
Watauga County Board of Commissioners
Watauga County Parks and Recreation Commission
WCTDA Partner Organizations



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Cove Creek Preservation and Development, Inc.

Watauga River Conservation Partners

Boone Climbers Coalition

Carolina Climbers Coalition

Appalachian Voices

Middle Fork Greenway Association

Green Valley Community Park

Todd Community Preservation Organization

Valle Crucis Community Park

National Committee for the New River

Blue Ridge Conservancy

Watauga County Parks and Recreation Commission

High Country Audubon

Mountain Keepers

Town of Boone

Town of Beech Mountain

National Park Service

United States Forest Service

North Carolina State Parks



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

BOONE AREA OUTDOOR RECREATION PLAN

Executive Summary	1	<i>High Country Disc Golf Club</i>	16	Chapter Four: Implementation	48
Introduction	3	<i>Todd Community Preservation Organization</i>	16	GRANT OPPORTUNITIES	48
Background and Purpose	3	<i>Cove Creek Preservation and Development</i>	16	STEWARDSHIP AND MANAGEMENT	49
Planning Process	3	Chapter Two: Initiatives	17	FIVE-YEAR ACTION PLAN	49
Organization of Plan	4	MULTI-USE GREENWAYS	17		
Chapter One: Profile	5	<i>South Fork New River Greenway</i>	17		
RIVER BASINS	5	<i>Middle Fork New River Greenway</i>	17		
<i>Watauga River Basin</i>	5	<i>Valle Crucis Greenway</i>	20		
<i>New River Basin</i>	7	<i>Grandfather Valley Greenway</i>	20		
<i>Catawba River Basin</i>	8	<i>Cove Creek Greenway</i>	20		
<i>Yadkin River Basin</i>	8	HIKING	23		
PUBLIC LANDS AND PARKS	8	<i>Mountains-to-Sea Trail</i>	23		
<i>Federal Lands</i>	8	<i>Northern Peaks Trail</i>	23		
<i>State Lands</i>	12	<i>Bear Paw State Natural Area</i>	25		
<i>Local Lands and Parks</i>	13	MOUNTAIN BIKING	27		
COMMUNITY PARTNERS	15	<i>Rocky Knob Park</i>	27		
<i>Boone Area Cyclists</i>	15	<i>Elk Knob State Park</i>	27		
<i>Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail</i>	15	<i>Price Park</i>	29		
<i>Watauga River Conservation Partners</i>	15	<i>Wilson Creek Area</i>	29		
<i>Middle Fork Greenway Association</i>	15	<i>Beech Mountain</i>	29		
<i>Carolina and Boone Climbers Coalition</i>	15	ROAD CYCLING	31		
<i>Green Valley Community Park</i>	16	PADDLE TRAILS	32		
<i>Valle Crucis Community Park</i>	16	<i>New River Paddle Trail</i>	32		
<i>National Committee for the New River</i>	16	<i>Watauga River Paddle Trail</i>	35		
<i>Blue Ridge Conservancy</i>	16	FISHING	41		
		ROCK CLIMBING	42		
		DISC GOLF	45		
		Chapter Three: Facility Design	46		

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List of Maps

- Map 1: Boone Area River Basins - p. 6
- Map 2: Major Boone Area Public Lands - p. 9
- Map 3: Trail Master Plan - p. 18
- Map 4: Middle Fork Greenway - p. 21
- Map 5: Pisgah National Forest Mountain Biking - p.30
- Map 6: Watauga River and New River Paddle Trails - p.33
- Map 7: Boone Area Climbing - p.43

List of Exhibits and Site Plans

- Exhibit 1: NC Watauga River Basin - p. 5
- Exhibit 2: Phase 1: South Fork New River Greenway - p. 19
- Exhibit 3: Middle Fork Greenway: Tweetsie, Mystery Hill, Sterling Creek Park Connector - p. 22
- Exhibit 4: Mountains-to-Sea Access Improvements - p.24
- Exhibit 5: Howard Knob Park - p.26
- Exhibit 6: Rocky Knob Park - p. 28
- Exhibit 7: Beech Mountain Adventure Trail Park - p.29
- Exhibit 8: Watauga County Road Cycling Map Concept - p.31
- Exhibit 9: New River Paddle Trail: Pine Run Access - p. 34
- Exhibit 10: New River Paddle Trail: Green Valley Park - p. 36
- Exhibit 11: Watauga River Paddle Trail: Valle Crucis Access - p. 38
- Exhibit 12: Watauga River Paddle Trail: Upper Gorge Access - p. 39
- Exhibit 13: Watauga County Trout Streams - p. 41

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Watauga County District U Tourism Development Authority (WCTDA) was created by the North Carolina General Assembly to promote travel and tourism to Watauga County, North Carolina. The WCTDA is funded through a six-percent occupancy tax levied on overnight visitors throughout Watauga County. Enabling legislation designates two-thirds of the occupancy tax be used for promotion and marketing of tourism, while up to one-third of the revenues, currently \$250,000 per year, is available for tourism-related capital investment.

The vision of the WCTDA is to establish the Boone Area as a top-ten outdoor recreation destination in America and the number one such destination in the East. The Boone Area Outdoor Recreation Plan serves as a roadmap for realizing this vision. By utilizing the capital funds to enhance and expand our outdoor recreation opportunities, we are investing in new, long-term tourism product development. With this strategic focus, we can nurture and grow the tourism economy, thereby increasing travel, lodging occupancy, job growth, and the vitality of small businesses.

During an 18 month period, WCTDA staff worked with public land managers, outdoor recreation enthusiasts, and community partners to establish priorities for this plan. This plan emphasizes recreation infrastructure initiatives that fill a void in current offerings or present a significant opportunity for resource connectivity. As a result, this plan does not reflect the many outdoor recreation activities available in the Boone Area.

Resources and Assets

The Boone Area is well-known for its extensive natural resources. Our rivers, mountains, and public lands yield tremendous recreation opportunities. The Boone Area serves as the headwaters of four major river basins, including the New River, Watauga River, Catawba River, and Yadkin River. Our unique water resources provide opportunities for world-class trout fishing, canoeing, tubing, and kayaking.

Many federal, state, and local public lands are found throughout the Boone Area. The Grandfather Ranger District, which is part of Pisgah National Forest, includes 192,000 acres. Managed by the United States Forest Service (USFS), this District serves as home to the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area and the Wilson Creek Area. International attention comes to the Boone Area via the Blue Ridge Parkway, which is managed by the National Park Service (NPS). State managed lands include Elk Knob State Park, Grandfather Mountain State Park, Bear Paw State Natural Area, and the Tater Hill Preserve. Finally, there are ten local parks with significant recreation development implications. Together, these federal, state, and local lands serve as the physical cornerstone for recreation infrastructure initiatives.



The Watauga River is one of many significant natural resources found throughout the Boone Area.

The WCTDA has witnessed an outpouring of citizens and community organizations willing to partner in efforts to expand Boone Area outdoor recreation opportunities. Accordingly, twelve non-government partnering organizations are working alongside the WCTDA to plan, develop, and implement the proposed outdoor recreation initiatives. These organizations include Boone Area Cyclists, Friends of Mountains-to-Sea Trail, Watauga River Conservation Partners, Middle Fork Greenway Association, Carolina and Boone Climbers' Coalitions, Green Valley Park, Valle Crucis Park, National Committee of the New River, High Country Disc Golf Association, Blue Ridge Conservancy, and Todd Community Preservation Organization.

With a thorough understanding of the Boone Area's natural resources, public lands, and human capital, we establish a broad foundation for developing specific outdoor recreation initiatives.

Recreation Initiatives: The Heart of the Plan

This plan focuses on nine different areas for outdoor recreation infrastructure development, including: 1) Multi-use Greenways, 2) Hiking, 3) Mountain Biking, 4) Paddle Trails, 5) Rock Climbing, 6) Fishing, 7) Road Cycling, and 9) Disc Golf.

Multi-use Greenways are wide trails that provide recreation opportunities for walkers, runners, bikers, and users with wheelchairs, strollers, and in-line skates. Five (5) greenways are proposed throughout the Boone Area, including (1) the Middle Fork New River Greenway, which strives to connect the Town of Boone and the Town of Blowing Rock; (2) the South Fork New River Greenway is proposed from Brookshire Park in Boone to the community of Todd in Ashe County; (3) the Cove Creek Greenway stems from the Old Cove Creek School; (4) the Valle Crucis Greenway is a proposed river trail within Valle Crucis, a North Carolina Rural Historic District; and (5) the proposed route for the Grandfather Valley Greenway meanders along the Watauga River in the community of Foscoe.

A new section of Mountains-to-Sea Trail is underway between Blowing Rock and Deep Gap.

Hiking trail opportunities include a new 18-mile section of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, named one of NC's Top 10 Natural Wonders, along the Blue Ridge Parkway between Blowing Rock and Highway 421 at Deep Gap. Also, with the proliferation of state land holdings along the Northern Peaks of Watauga and Ashe Counties, an opportunity exists to link the Town of Boone, Howard Knob Park, Rich Mountain, Tater Hill Preserve, Snake Mountain, Elk Knob State Park, and Three Top Mountain. Finally, Bear Paw State Natural Area, purchased by the State in 2009, presents new opportunities for hiking-centered trail development.

Mountain Biking opportunities are currently limited in the Boone Area; there are no legal mountain biking trails in Watauga County.



For this reason, the WCTDA's first major recreation infrastructure project includes the creation of a 185-acre mountain bike facility: Rocky Knob Park. Land acquisition for Rocky Knob, located just east of the Town of Boone, began in 2009 and construction started in May 2010. During the development of this plan, the WCTDA and Watauga County leveraged WCTDA capital funds to secure \$515,000 in grant funding for Rocky Knob Park. Other mountain biking development opportunities exist at Beech Mountain, Elk Knob State Park, where the State will soon develop a long-range plan, and in the Price Park area of the Blue Ridge Parkway, a possibility that National Park Service officials continue to consider.

Paddle Trails are proposed along the Watauga River and the New River. A series of legal river access areas will be created for kayakers, canoeists, and families wanting to explore our region's unique water resources. During the development of this plan, the WCTDA leveraged a generous land donation by the Holton Family to secure a \$75,000 grant to develop the Upper Gorge Access along the Watauga River. Several access areas have also been secured along the New River. There are six access areas planned for the Watauga River and the New River, respectively.

Rock Climbing opportunities abound in the Boone Area. The majority of the climbing destinations are located on federally managed public lands. This plan highlights eight (8) of these existing areas, including: Blowing Rock Boulders, Holloway Mountain Crag, The Dump, Ship Rock, Grandmother Boulders, Hound Ears, Lost Cove Boulders, and the Linville Gorge. Efforts should continue to purchase the Howard Knob Boulders, a profoundly unique climbing resource located near downtown Boone, but currently in private ownership.

Fishing

The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) manages an extensive trout stocking program throughout Watauga County and surrounding counties. The WCTDA is partnering with NCWRC to establish new trout stocking program areas, key to continuing the dramatic growth of fly fishing as a new source of visitors to the Boone Area. Specifically, the South Fork New River, Watauga River, and the Winkler Creek Reservoir emerge as opportunistic areas for new trout stocking. Also, the WCTDA proposes the development of the Boone Area Fly Fishing Trail Map to highlight appropriate parking and river access areas for fishing on NCWRC supported trout waters throughout the region.



A new trail section is just completed at Rocky Knob Park. photo by Taylor Woolridge

Cycling

Cycling enthusiasts from across the region and country recognize the Boone Area as a significant and unique destination for road cycling. The WCTDA, in partnership with Boone Area Cyclists, Inc., are working to develop the Boone Area Cycling Map to illustrate the area's most popular road routes. The WCTDA will spearhead efforts to place cycling route signage throughout the county. Efforts should be made to create formal cycling or multi-sport parking areas throughout the county. The WCTDA will assist in the development and expansion of cycling events throughout the Boone Area.

Disc Golf

Disc golf continues to grow in popularity as both a family-fun and competitive sport. There are no disc golf courses in Watauga County and only one in the region, which is located at Ashe County Park. The planning process did not reveal any definitive locations for a course, but the Winkler Creek Reservoir, through a partnership with the Town of Boone, should be further explored for such an opportunity.

Facility Design

A consistent facility design and signage theme is critical for linking together the Boone Area's outdoor recreation offerings. Accordingly, architectural renderings have been developed for shelters, park and trail gateway entrances, kiosks, and signage. With a unified architectural theme, a park and open space *system* will emerge throughout the Boone Area.

Implementation

There are a host of federal and state agencies and programs that support local recreation initiatives, including: Parks and Recreation Trust Fund, Clean Water Management Trust Fund, Recreation Trails Program, NC Adopt-a-Trail, and NC Department of Transportation. To realize our ambitious vision, it is critical that WCTDA resources are leveraged to win grant funds from these and other grant-making agencies to buy land, secure conservation and trail easements, and construct recreation facilities.

The WCTDA proposes the creation of a Stewardship Fund, a program to support the long-term maintenance needs of outdoor recreation facilities. The Fund will be supported by allowing private businesses to "adopt" park facilities and trails and through the issuance of commercial permits to professional guide services using county-owned or supported facilities. The Stewardship Fund, along with the vast network of WCTDA partnering organizations and their volunteers, offer exciting new minimum cost ways to sustain the quality of Watauga County outdoor recreation facilities.

The final element of this plan includes an implementation matrix that concisely presents the host of project opportunities identified within this plan and a priority timeline for implementation. Rocky Knob Park and multiple paddle trail access areas and greenways emerge as immediate priorities for implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Background and Purpose

Created in 2006, the Watauga County Tourism Development Authority (WCTDA) serves as Watauga County's official tourism-based economic development agency. The revenue source of the WCTDA is derived from a six percent (6%) occupancy tax levied on overnight visitors of short-term lodging establishments within the unincorporated areas of Watauga County. The WCTDA then invests these dollars to nurture and grow the tourism economy, thereby increasing travel, lodging occupancy, job growth, and the vitality of small businesses.

The WCTDA enabling legislation, passed by the NC General Assembly in 2006, provides two broad categories in which the agency can spend funds. First, the WCTDA must utilize two-thirds of occupancy tax revenues to further market and brand Watauga County. Accordingly, the WCTDA operates ExploreBooneArea.com, Watauga County's official tourism website, and, among many other promotional efforts, coordinates print ads and radio advertisements across the region and state.

Second, the WCTDA is authorized to commit one-third of occupancy tax revenues toward tourism-related capital infrastructure projects. The WCTDA Board of Directors believes that we can best use these capital funds by investing in outdoor recreation infrastructure. The vision of the



ExploreBooneArea.com serves as the official website of the WCTDA.

WCTDA, Watauga County, and our community partners with a unified vision and foundation for good decision-making, but it also serves as our primary communication tool for petitioning federal, state, and private grant-making organizations to become financial partners in realizing

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Not only does this plan offer the

our ambitious vision. Thus, this plan both establishes our priorities, and better positions the WCTDA to leverage occupancy tax revenues to secure grant funds. The Boone Area Outdoor Recreation Plan represents a new and powerful economic development strategy meant to multiply WCTDA resources.

Planning Process

The process for developing this plan began in March 2009¹ and includes five major steps: Discovery, Project Development, Plan Framework and Recreation Summit, and Plan Adoption.

Step 1: Discovery

First, we conducted a comprehensive inventory of local, state, and federal lands, and our natural resources. These assets serve as the backbone of all initiatives and projects proposed within this plan. In addition, this step required that we identify the individuals and community organizations -- the Boone Area's human resources -- presently working to further outdoor recreation opportunities in the Boone Area. This plan is a reflection of the ideas and support drawn directly from these citizen partners. The core information gathered during the *discovery phase* is found in *Chapter One: Boone Area Profile*.

Step 2: Project Development

Immediate implementation is a rather unusual second step in a planning effort. However, there are significant grant funding opportunities available from November - February. Rather than let this "grant season" pass to complete the entire planning effort, the WCTDA worked quickly with partnering groups to solicit grant funds for key projects identified during the discovery process.²

Step 3: Plan Framework and Recreation Summit

This phase allowed the planning team and partnering organizations to present the major concepts and themes of the recreation plan to the entire Boone Area community. The framework plan was developed after twelve months of intensive effort between the WCTDA, recreation enthusiasts, and partnering



¹ The WCTDA hired a staff recreation planner in March 2009.

² The WCTDA and Watauga County solicited \$830,000 during the planning process; at the time of plan writing, \$585,000 in grants funds had been successfully awarded.

organizations. A planning framework should create excitement among citizens and spark public comment and discussion. The climax of this phase unfolded on March 30, 2010 at the Boone Area Outdoor Recreation Summit when more than 400 government, nonprofit, business, and community leaders gathered for a plan presentation by the WCTDA. In addition, WCTDA community partners were also on-hand to share their recreation and environmental initiatives.

Citizen participation was evident throughout the Recreation Summit. Before and after the WCTDA presentation, citizens were encouraged to study 20 maps and site plans that were on display, talk with community leaders assigned to each recreation station, and provide comments or concerns. This input has been incorporated throughout the plan.

As a follow up to the Recreation Summit, the WCTDA created a clearinghouse of information on the WCTDA planning website and blog: www.BooneAreaOutdoors.com. This website, with regular blog posts and twitter updates, serves as continual portal for the WCTDA to provide and receive information.

Step 4: Plan Adoption

Beginning in March 2011, the general public, WCTDA partners, and elected officials will review the Boone Area Outdoor Recreation Plan. The WCTDA anticipates formal plan adoption in spring 2011.

Organization of Plan

This plan includes four subsequent chapters: Boone Area Profile, Initiatives, Facility Design, and Implementation.



More than 400 government, nonprofit, and business leaders, and outdoor recreation enthusiasts gather for the Boone Area Outdoor Recreation Summit. photo by Sam Calhoun

Chapter 1: Boone Area Profile

This chapter provides a foundation for the plan. Foremost, we identify the host of significant natural resources and public lands found throughout the Boone Area and outline the implications of these assets for expanding outdoor recreation offerings. Second, the *Profile* describes the mission of our partnering organizations; these non-governmental entities offer significant insight into recreation development opportunities and possess experience and knowledge to help the WCTDA and Watauga County implement this plan.

Chapter 2: Initiatives

This chapter is the heart of the Outdoor Recreation Plan. It explicitly proposes how to improve outdoor recreation infrastructure throughout the Boone Area. Focus areas include multi-use greenways, hiking trails, biking trails, paddling, cycling, fishing, rock climbing, and disc golf.

Chapter 3: Facility Design

This chapter provides guidelines and design schematics for recreation support facilities, such as picnic shelters, information kiosks, and signage. An important objective of this plan is to “brand” the Watauga County outdoor recreation system with uniform facilities and signage.

Chapter 4: Implementation

The plan’s final chapter outlines grant opportunities, objectives to ensure facility stewardship and maintenance, and a concise plan timetable that identifies each initiative and its respective priority.