



August 5, 2008

Law creates 2 new natural areas

Nanci Bompey

Gov. Mike Easley signed legislation Monday creating two new state natural areas in Western North Carolina.

The law authorizes the creation of Yellow Mountain and Bear Paw state natural areas, both centered in Avery County.

The designation allows the state parks system to begin acquiring land to add to the natural areas while making additional sources of funding available to conservation groups for land acquisition. There are 17 other state natural areas in North Carolina. In contrast to a state park, a state natural area's focus is on conservation of the area's scientific and ecological value, although some support limited recreation activities.

State parks spokesman Charlie Peek said the designation of the two areas fulfills a mission of the park system to preserve representative examples of North Carolina's unique resources.

"It is especially important right now and especially important in the mountains because of development pressure," he said.

"This is the time to start identifying them and setting them aside," Peek said.

Yellow Mountain State Natural Area will be established with an initial land acquisition of about 850 acres on the Avery-Mitchell county line just west of U.S. 19 and south of Pisgah National Forest.

The area is part of the Roan Highlands region, which boasts at least 76 rare species along with other significant water and land features, according to Jay Leutze, a trustee at the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy.

The group along with other conservation organizations helped to acquire tracts of land through private donations and loans.

"I think it's an exciting area that very few people in the state are aware of," Leutze said. "It's a very rural part of the mountains still, and our objective would be to keep it that way so recreational users and people drinking the water there are going to have a protected area for perpetuity."

Bear Paw State Natural Area will be established with an initial land acquisition of about 350 acres just north of Grandfather Mountain and the town of Seven Devils.

The site includes Hanging Rock Ridge, Four Diamond Ridge and the headwaters of Dutch Creek and contains an example of a rare, high-elevation, rocky summit that supports nine rare species including an endangered bat.

The area will also protect a well-known viewshed that can be seen from the Mission Crossing Scenic Byway, said Teresa Buckwalter, conservation planner for the High Country Conservancy, which is working to secure tracts of land for the natural area.

"A lot of people know and love that area," she said.

Future expansion of both areas will depend on negotiations with willing landowners. The extent of public access and recreation in the areas will depend on the availability of suitable tracts of land.
