



# **FIVE-YEAR STRATEGIC PLAN**

## **2014-2019**



# TABLE OF CONTENTS

*Page Number*

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1. MISSION, VISION, VALUES	3
2. ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS	4
3. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	5
4. SECTION 1: Conservation, Restoration and Promotion of the Natural Resources	6
5. SECTION 2: Public Access	10
6. SECTION 3: Recreational Opportunities	12
7. SECTION 4: Market the Opportunities Available in the Upper Little Tennessee Watershed	14

## MISSION STATEMENT

A non-regulatory collaborative partnership committed to the coordination, interpretation and promotion of resource conservation, public access and recreational opportunities in the rivers and lakes of the Upper Little Tennessee Watershed for the purpose of increased human, watershed and economic health.

## VISION STATEMENT

The rivers and lakes of the North Carolina Smoky Mountains will be known as the premier outdoor water recreation area in the Southeastern United States.

## VALUES

Accessible Waterways  
Clean Water  
Healthy Environment  
Vibrant Economy

## ADVISORY COUNCIL

The Advisory was established in 2013. One of the first tasks of the Advisory Council was to develop this *Five-Year Strategic Plan* to help their vision become a reality for the Great Rivers and Great Lakes of the NC Smoky Mountain region of North Carolina. This plan is a living document intended to be continually altered to remain effective and meaningful for the individuals, organizations and businesses involved in the process.

## ADVISORY COUNCIL MEMBERS

### Federal Sponsor

United States Forest Service

Mike Wilkins, District Ranger  
Nantahala National Forest

### State Sponsor

NC Department of Environment & Natural Resources

Tim Johnson, Regional Trails  
Specialist, Division of Parks & Rec

### Private Sponsor

Duke Energy

Chair, Lisa Leatherman,  
District Manager - Nantahala Area

### Regional Government

Ryan Sherby, Executive Director  
Southwestern Commission

### Local Government

Jack Debnam, Chairman  
Jackson County Commissioners

### Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians

Forrest Parker, Deputy  
Department of Administration

### Conservation

Paul Carlson, Executive Director  
Land Trust for the Little Tennessee

### Conservation

Fred Harris  
American Fisheries Society

### Recreation

Mark Singleton, Executive Director  
American Whitewater

### Tourism

Fred Alexander, Board Member  
Smoky Mountain Host of NC

### Private Industry

Sutton Bacon, CEO  
Nantahala Outdoor Center

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*The Rivers and Lakes of the North Carolina Smokies provide some of the cleanest water and most spectacular natural venues for outdoor water sports in the Southeastern United States. The natural landscape of the region has unparalleled beauty, diverse outdoor recreation opportunities and a strong private and public infrastructure in place for the outdoor water recreationist.*

Smoky Mountain Host, a 25-year old regional tourism organization, has taken the lead on further developing the opportunities for outdoor water recreation while fostering conservation of the natural resources that make this region one of the most attractive regions in the US for outdoor recreation.

The Advisory Council for the North Carolina Smoky Mountain Blueways has focused on developing a partnership of organizations that will work together to create resources for resource preservation and conservation, educational programs, increase public access points, market the opportunities available in the Little Tennessee Watershed, and therefore stimulate the economy for the people who live and work there.

The watershed consists of five major rivers: **Little Tennessee, Nantahala, Tuckasegee, Oconaluftee** and **Cheoah** along with the following major lakes: **Fontana, Nantahala, Glenville** and **Santeetlah**.

This Five-Year Strategic Plan focuses on

**1) Co-ordination, interpretation & promotion of resource conservation, 2) Public access, 3) Recreational opportunities 4) Market the recreational opportunities that are available.**

## ACTION ITEMS

### SECTION 1. CONSERVATION, RESTORATION AND PROMOTION OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES

**Land Protection Action Item #1:** Continue protection of undeveloped open space lands along the Little Tennessee, particularly Franklin to Fontana, but also Georgia to Franklin; Develop a land protection plan for the Tuckaseegee.

*Partners: Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, NC Wildlife Commission, USFS, EBCI and local governments* **Priority Ranking: HIGH**

**Land Protection Action Item #2:** Initiate land protection efforts on key high-quality tributary watersheds and headwater lands of the Little Tennessee and Tuckaseegee

*Partners: Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, USFS, Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy, Highlands Cashiers Land Trust*

**Priority Ranking: MED**

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**Watershed Restoration Action Item #1:** Continue stream restoration efforts, in the Little Tennessee, Tuckaseegee and Oconaluftee watersheds to reduce sediment and other types of stream pollution (e.g., fecal coliform) from non-point sources (currently 4 miles of stream-bank restoration planned in conjunction with Macon and Jackson County Soil and Water Conservation Districts by 2016).

*Partners: Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, Maco* **Priority Ranking: HIGH**

**Watershed Restoration Action Item #2:** Restoration of the brook trout in Wayehutta Creek, in the Tuckaseegee Watershed, Hurricane Creek (Clay County) in the Nantahala Watershed and Wolf Creek (Macon County).

*Partner: USSF, Duke Energy (Could be an early effort of the Little Tennessee Fish Restoration Project)* **Priority Ranking: HIGH**

**Watershed Restoration Action Item #3:** Develop an erosion control plan for the Standing Indian Basin that includes replacement of the concrete fords with bridges or arched culverts at the Hurricane and Kimsey Creek locations.

*Partners: US Forest Service, USFW*

**Priority Ranking: MED**

**Watershed Restoration Action Item #4** Remove crushed cars along the lower Tuckaseegee (private land or DOT ROW) where they were used as riprap and bank stabilization. They should be replaced with native materials and restore natural condition. The Old Drexel Plant dike may need to be encapsulated since it is constructed completely by crushed cars.

*Partners: US Fish & Wildlife Service, NC Department of Environment & Natural Resources, Jackson County and Swain County*

**Priority Ranking: MED**

**Watershed Restoration Action Item #5:** Stabilization of the stream bank and the stream itself on Buck Creek in (Macon County) in the Little Tennessee watershed.

*Partner: US Forest Service*

**Priority Ranking: MED**

**Watershed Restoration Action Item #6:** Removal of "High Hazard" Houston Dam and restore the natural stream channel to lower stream temperatures flowing into the Cullasaja. In addition, modification of the Cliffside Lake dam for cold-water intake to improve downstream water temperatures that would have safety and economic impacts on the region.

*Partner: US Forest Service, US Fish & Wildlife*

**Priority Ranking: HIGH**

**Stream Restoration Action Item #7:** Develop and implement storm-water management planning across the Little Tennessee Watershed.

*Partners: EBCI, RENCI, USFS, local and state government, Southwestern Commission*

**Priority Ranking: MED**

**Watershed Conservation Action Item#8:** Integrate updated GIS, biological and physical data and watershed project plans into ongoing planning initiatives at the county, municipal and tribal level. Develop and implement

adaptation planning regarding climate change impacts on cold-water fish resources.

*Partners: USFS, EBCI, local and state governments*     **Priority Ranking: MED**

**Watershed Conservation Action Item #9:** Expand EBCI Natural Resources Enforcement capacity to enforce recreational fishing and natural resource use codes.

*Partner: EBCI*

**Priority Ranking: HIGH**

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**Citizen Science Action Item #1:** Continue aquatic bio-monitoring program along the Little Tennessee; build in USDA based “Stream Visual Assessment Protocol” or SVAP as Citizen Science tool for monitoring stream/riparian habitat condition. Work with partners to begin use of SVAP as stream monitoring protocol in the Tuckaseegee.

*Partners: Land Trust for the Little Tennessee and USDA*

**Priority Ranking: HIGH**

**Citizen Science Action Item #2:** Expand the partnership with Coweeta Long Term Ecological Research Program for monitoring of ecosystem health in the Little Tennessee watershed.

*Partners: Land Trust for the Little Tennessee, Coweeta Lab and citizens*

**Priority Ranking MED**

**Citizen Science Action Item #3:** Continue “Shade Your Stream” public awareness program in the Little Tennessee watershed; evaluate potential to extend concept to the Tuckaseegee watershed.

*Partners: LTL, WATR, Cowetta LTR and citizens*

**Priority Ranking MED**

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**Public Awareness Action Item #1:** Expand outreach to local communities in the region regarding health/wellness opportunities available through outdoor recreation.

*Partners: All agencies and organizations, local and state governments, EBCI*

**Priority Ranking HIGH**



**Public Awareness Action Item #2:** Develop natural resources education facility/program on the Qualla Boundary.

Partners: EBCI, USFS, etc.

***Priority Ranking HIGH***

**Public Awareness Action Item #3:** Quantify economic impact of outdoor recreational activities at Cherokee and dissemination to the general public and the tribal leadership.

Partner: EBCI

***Priority Ranking HIGH***

## SECTION 2. PUBLIC ACCESS

**Public Access Action Item #1:** Establish overnight paddleboat campsites along the Little Tennessee and the Tuckaseegee (i.e., campsites, accessible by public only via paddleboat). This objective might be obtained by securing long-term leases with private landowners (as per French Broad River Trail model).

*Partner: NC State Parks, LTLT, SW Commission, NC Fish & Wildlife Commission*

**Priority Ranking MED**

**Public Access Action Item #2:** Acquire key/strategic paddleboat putin/takeout sites along the Little Tennessee and the Tuckaseegee and then develop a plan for who will hold and maintain these properties. Develop some type of oversight/management structure for assuring best management practices are followed in the establishment and management of river access sites and Identify public access by location, type and recreational opportunities

*Partners: NC DENR, USFS, NC State Parks, Southwestern Commission, Smoky Mountain Host, NC State Parks and Duke Energy*

**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Public Access Action Item #3:** Increase visitor-use facilities for river users (mixed-use path, fishing, tubing, etc.) and improve aesthetics of outdoor areas highly used by the public.

*Partners: EBCI, USFS, LTLT local governments, NC State Parks*

**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Public Access Action Item #4:** Improve USFS parking in Panthertown on the East Fork of the Tuckaseegee. Panthertown Valley is a very popular destination in the headwaters of the East Fork Tuck for fishing access. Friends of Panthertown is the local community group working on stewardship of the resource. *Partners: USFS, Friends of Panthertown, NC State Parks*

**Priority Ranking HIGH**

### SECTION 3. RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #1:** Work with the NC Wildlife Resources Commission to increase awareness of the fishing opportunities. Develop a method to promote different types of fishing such as delayed harvest on the Tuckasegee and the Small Mouth Bass on the Little Tennessee.  
*Partners: NC WRC, USFS, Smoky Mountain Host*      **Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #5:** The Cheoah River provides a high adventure recreational whitewater experience unlike any other river in the region. Engage with Brookfield Smoky Mountain Hydro to evaluate the schedule of Cheoah River releases. These releases are part of the operating license for the hydro operation and are ripe for evaluation (there is language in the license allowing for an evaluation of the flow schedule). Moving more release into the summer months would greatly improve the economic benefits of river recreation for Graham County and provide additional adventure tourism product in the region.  
*Partners: Brookfield Smoky Mountain Hydro, Graham County TD and American Whitewater*      **Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #6:** Evaluate the removal of Cullowhee Dam as part of a river restoration effort in Cullowhee. Outside grant funding is available NOAA is one source. American Whitewater and the whitewater paddling community have a long history of supporting dam removals across the country. It is only natural that paddlers are active advocates for dam removal since whitewater boaters are one of the groups most impacted by dams. Removal of the dam also provides for the migration of fish up and down the river. This is a big project that can provide a very visible (and fundable) anchor for the Blueway. The dam is owned by WCU and they would be open to exploration of removal with identification of grant funding for the project.  
*Partners: WCU, American Whitewater, Jackson County, Jackson County TDA*      **Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #7:** Construction of a whitewater park in Cullowhee. Whitewater parks are a growing segment of the paddling experience and are proven economic drivers in rural communities. Colorado is the leading state for the development of whitewater park development. The unique Get Outdoors Colorado (GOCO) offers a funding model that has been highly effective for that state. The Arkansas River Whitewater Park And Greenway is model for what is possible on the Tuckaseegee in and around Cullowhee. A Cullowhee whitewater park piggybacked on a dam removal is a BHAG that would have huge impacts in the region

*Partners: WCU, Jackson County, NOC, Jackson County TDA*

***Priority Ranking MED***

## 4. MARKET THE RECREATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE UPPER LITTLE TENNESSEE WATERSHED

**Marketing Opportunities Action Item #1:** Establish a new logo for: NC Smoky Mountain Blueways: *Great Rivers and Great Lakes of the NC Smokies*  
**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Marketing Opportunities Action Item #2:** Conduct a resource database with all pertinent information on access points and amenities on the rivers and lakes. Market these resources under the NC Smoky Mountain Blueways umbrella.  
**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Marketing Opportunities Action Item #3:** Develop the website for **smokymountainblueways.com** that will also be a segment of the [visitsmokies.org](http://visitsmokies.org) website.

- a. Purchase the domain
- b. Conduct search engine optimization work for the site
- c. Develop the landing page and new section for [visitsmokies.org](http://visitsmokies.org) site

**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Marketing Opportunities Action Item #4:** Establish all social media sites for the Blueways: Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Tripadvisor, Instagram, etc.  
**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Marketing Opportunities Action Item #5:** Develop and publish a digital and printed map for the initiative.  
**Priority Ranking HIGH**

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #6:** Expand marketing efforts relating to fishing, camping, tubing, hiking, wildlife viewing, paddling, etc.  
Partners: EBCI, TDAs, Smoky Mountain Host, private sector

***Priority Ranking HIGH***

**Recreational Opportunities Action Item #7:** Use the NC Smoky Mountain Blueways brand (once established) to market the region for additional outdoor water sports opportunities.

Partners: Smoky Mountain Host, TDAs, private sector, etc.

***Priority Ranking HIGH***