

****Disclaimer:** The specific descriptions, goals, desired conditions, and objectives only apply to the National Forest System Lands within the Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area. However, nearby communities and surrounding lands are considered and used as context. ******

Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area

Updated: May 19, 2017

Description of area

The Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area is on the northern end of the granitic dome landscape and characterized by bare, rolling rock faces including, Cedar Rock, Pilot Mountain, John Rocks, and Looking Glass Rock. The landscape, full of unique geology and beautiful waterfalls, is bordered by western North Carolina's densest urban areas, making the Pisgah Ledge the most well-known and visited area in North Carolina's National Forests. This area has the highest levels of visitation on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests and the highest concentration of developed and dispersed recreation sites.

The region is defined by mountain peaks giving way to narrow valleys with striking rivers and waterfalls. Graveyard Fields, Black Balsam, and Devil's Courthouse are popular high elevation areas for visitors seeking access to the region's natural beauty. Waterfalls provide unique sightseeing opportunities, and the rivers provide water-based recreation opportunities including swimming and tubing in areas such as Sliding Rock and the Davidson River Corridor.

The Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area includes some of the most widely known areas and locations connected to Cherokee Tribal community identity: beliefs, traditions, and uses. The Judaculla landscape which figures most prominently in Cherokee tradition is within this geographic area.

The Blue Ridge Parkway and Forest Heritage Scenic Byway bring locals and visitors from around the world to and through the 100,644 acres of Forest Service Land (out of 141,824 total acres) that lie within the Pisgah Ledge and include portions of Buncombe, Transylvania, Haywood and Henderson counties. Local population centers, which include Brevard, Mills River, Hendersonville, Waynesville and Asheville rely on the lands within the geographic area for a variety of benefits centered on water and recreation.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- The Cradle of Forestry in America Historic Site
- Scenic Byway Corridors (Blue Ridge Parkway and Forest Heritage National Scenic Byway)
- Bent Creek Experimental Forest
- John Rock scenic area, Looking Glass Rock scenic/geological/botanical area, and Pink Bed Bogs botanical area
- Davidson River, East Fork of Pigeon River including Dark and Yellowstone Prongs, and Mills River System, portions of which are eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Flat Laurel Creek and West Fork of Pigeon River, portions of which are newly eligible Wild and Scenic Rivers
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

Landmarks within the geographic area that are not managed by the Forest Service include:

- Pisgah Inn (on the Blue Ridge Parkway)
- Blue Ridge Parkway (National Park Service)

Connecting people to the land

Prior to European and Anglo-American intrusions and settlement along with westward expansion, the Pisgah Ledge was home to the Cherokee and Creek tribes. This area contains several locations that are most prominent in Tribal history and have significant meaning to Tribal identities and beliefs. Drainages and balds in all directions around “Devil’s Courthouse” (a non-Indian misnomer) are the center of Cherokee tradition.

The Pisgah National Forest is considered the birthplace of modern scientific forestry in North America. The geographic area was heavily logged and used as farmland by the early American settlers in the 19th century. In the late 1880s, George Vanderbilt began acquiring land in the geographic area to be used as the center of a working estate. He hired prominent landscape architect Frederick Law Olmstead Sr. and Gifford Pinchot, who went on to become the first Chief of the agency that became the U.S. Forest Service, to advise him on how to manage the property. Olmstead recommended turning the lands into a working forest, managed under scientific principles common in European forestry but little used in the United States. Pinchot’s successor, Carl Schenk, established the Biltmore Forest School, the first school of forestry in the United States, in 1898. The site of the former school is now part of the 6,540 acre Cradle of Forestry in America Historic Site in this geographic area, which provides visitors with a glimpse of this history through its museum, events and exhibits. Vanderbilt’s widow, Edith Vanderbilt, sold the tract to the federal government in 1914 to “maintain in the fullest and most permanent way its national value as an object lesson in forestry.” With the acquisition of the Biltmore lands, the federal government established the Pisgah National Forest and Pisgah National Game Preserve in 1916.

Bent Creek Experimental Forest, the oldest federal experimental forest east of the Mississippi River, is within this geographic area. Bent Creek emphasizes silvicultural practices that aid in the rehabilitation of cut-over lands and promote sustainable forestry. Current research goals also focus on understanding and predicting how upland hardwood-dominated forests and wildlife communities are affected by natural disturbances and shaped by silvicultural activities. It is also a popular recreation destination for mountain bikers, hikers, and hunters largely due to its proximity to the Asheville area.

This geographic area is home to some of the most visited recreation sites in the region. The Blue Ridge Parkway crosses the geographic area for 28 miles, and National Forest system lands provide visitors with the scenic backdrop. There is easy access to hiking on trails such as the Art Loeb National Recreation Trail, as well as numerous, horseback riding, and rock climbing opportunities. Pisgah Ledge is also one of the premiere destinations for mountain bikers from many areas of the country and hosts several major races. Additionally, berry picking is a popular activity in the forest.

The high level of visitation from across the country, as well as the close proximity to major population centers in North Carolina, Georgia, and South Carolina, creates a large demand for recreation opportunities, and along with it comes major challenges in managing visitor impacts.

In addition to this area’s popularity among a diversity of recreationists, there is a dedicated contingent of sportsmen that continue the hunting and fishing heritage, notably for white-tailed deer, wild turkey, black bear, and ruffed grouse. The area is also a popular fishing destination, especially for anglers seeking to fish its cold water trout streams

Major economic drivers for local communities include tourism, manufacturing, health care, and education. The area is home to several colleges and universities, including University of North Carolina-Asheville, Brevard College, Warren Wilson College, and Montreat College. This geographic area also

includes the North Carolina Arboretum, as well as the Bobby N. Setzer Fish Hatchery and Pisgah Center for Wildlife Education which operate under long-term special use authorizations. National Forest System lands are considered a major tourism asset for local communities and commercial gathering of forest products such as Galax contribute to local economies.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

The Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area marks the northeast extent of the state's granitic dome range. Acidic cove, rich cove, mesic oak, spruce fir, and dry-mesic oak forests predominate in the geographic area, with high elevation red oak and northern hardwood forests frequently found at higher elevations.

Habitat restoration in the geographic area will focus on increasing biodiversity and in particular on retaining a vigorous oak component. The region includes several bear sanctuaries, and vertical rock faces such as Cedar Rock, Looking Glass Rock, and Victory Wall that provide critical nesting habitat for the peregrine falcon. The only existing population across the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests of the federally threatened small whorled pogonia occurs in this geographic area.

Rare communities in the geographic area include high elevation rock outcrops, montane cliffs, Carolina hemlock forests, bog and seeps, waterfall spray cliffs, and rocky bar and shore habitats.

Clean and abundant water

The Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area features a large number of streams and rivers that provide recreation and scenic beauty for residents and visitors, with approximately 1,200 miles of streams and rivers flowing through National Forest System lands. Additionally, Catheys Creek provides water to the Town of Brevard, and the North Fork Mills River and Bradley Creek are municipal water sources for the city of Hendersonville.

Pisgah Ledge is one of the most popular destinations in North Carolina for trout fishing. Major trout fishing destinations include North and South Mills River, Yellowstone Prong, East and West Fork Pigeon River, and Davidson River, providing a major benefit to local economies via tourism and income for outfitters and guides.

Goals

The following goals contribute to identification of management priorities in the Pisgah Ledge Geographic Area. These goals highlight key opportunities and values that will guide Forest Service management and reflect values the Forest Service has heard from the public. These goals are not inclusive of all activities that will occur within the geographic area and do not represent all the values that are present.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Management activities will focus on sustaining oak species across a range of age classes, contributing to the Natural Range of Variation, forest health, game and non-game species habitat as well as watershed condition.
- b) Reduce the abundance of white pine in the North Mills River and Davidson River watersheds while enhancing oak regeneration.
- c) Maintain and restore Southern Appalachian bog habitats within geographic area. Management actions will focus on reducing woody plant encroachment and eliminating NNIS plant populations.
- d) Continue to utilize seasonal closure orders on rock faces where peregrine falcons nest to facilitate species recovery.
- e) Enhance structural diversity within the dry-mesic oak forest surrounding small whorled pogonia.

Providing clean and abundant water

- a) Sustain and improve aquatic habitat to benefit vertebrate and invertebrate species in Davidson and Mills River drainages as well as headwaters of French Broad. Management actions will focus on key species including brook trout and hellbenders.
- b) Protect seeps and waterfalls at Courthouse Creek.
- c) Provide high quality water sources for municipal watersheds within the geographic area. Management actions will focus on reducing sedimentation and sustaining forest health.
- d) Continue to improve trail conditions at Graveyard Fields, Black Balsam, and Sam Knob areas to accommodate high visitation and mitigate erosive impacts to fragile soils.

Connecting people to the land

- a) With increased visitation along the Forest Heritage National Scenic Byway corridor (U.S. 276), emphasize management actions that sustain and enhance high quality recreation experiences, with a focus on visitor safety, improving access, and reducing impacts to natural resources.
- b) Utilizing visitor education and collaboration with multiple user groups, improve interactions between users to enhance visitor experience and safety.
- c) Utilize the Cradle of Forestry to demonstrate both historical and contemporary forestry practices.
- d) Continue to support scientific forestry research at Bent Creek Experimental Forest and manage the area to support this function.

Opportunities to partner with others

- a) Improve coordination with local governments, volunteer organizations and non-governmental organizations to leverage the high level of public interest and support in this geographic area. Management actions will focus volunteer and partner efforts to meet critical forest needs.
- b) Work with the rock-climbing community to identify appropriate routes and new locations of rare species.
- c) Consult and partner with Cherokee tribes to identify and ensure preservation and protection of special tribal areas and to develop interpretation as appropriate. Include the National Park Service's Blue Ridge Parkway in the latter.

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