

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

Nantahala Mountains Geographic Area

Updated: June 1, 2017

Description of area

A land of large, rounded mountains and lush coves, the Nantahala Mountains Geographic Area contains one of the largest contiguous blocks of National Forest System lands on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. The geographic area's vast expanses provide a diverse range of forest uses for visitors and residents.

The Nantahala Mountains provide tens of thousands of acres of remote forest areas for visitors and residents to use and explore. From high elevation heath balds like Wayah Bald and weathered rock outcrops to lowland cove and mesic oak/pine forests, the Nantahala Mountains offers a range of biological and scenic diversity special to the National Forests in North Carolina.

The geographic area's large block of contiguous ownership provides visitors with multiple access points for long-distance hiking, rock climbing, hunting, highly developed camping, group camping, horseback riding, and shooting sports at the Dirty John Shooting Range. Anglers enjoy the many creeks and river headwaters, as well as the high mountain Nantahala Lake whose waters flow into the Hiwassee, Nantahala, Little Tennessee, and Tallulah Rivers. These mountains are the setting for multiple Louis L'Amour novels of the famed Sackett family.

Communities within this geographic area include Franklin, Andrews, Upper Peachtree, and Nantahala. These communities and others nearby rely on the 175,660 acres of forest land in the geographic area (326,835 acres total). The region is within the Nantahala and Tusquitee Ranger Districts and the National Forest System lands within this area lie in Clay, Cherokee, Macon, and Swain counties.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Southern Nantahala Wilderness
- Nantahala River Bogs botanical area, Standing Indian Mountain botanical area, Buck Creek Serpentinized Olivine Barrens botanical area, Runaway Knob botanical area, Riley Knob/Chunky Gal Mountain botanical area, and Wildes Cove botanical area
- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
- Mountain Waters Scenic Byway
- Coweeta Hydrologic Laboratory
- Inventoried Roadless Areas
- Nantahala River, portions of which is an eligible Wild and Scenic River, and Fires Creek, portions of which is a newly eligible Wild and Scenic River

Connecting people to the land

Prior to European and American settlement, the lands in the region were home to the Cherokee and Creek Tribes, whose traditions and culture are evidenced in archeological sites in the forest. The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail, managed by the Forest Service in consultation and partnership with the Cherokee Tribes in North Carolina and Oklahoma, as well as Creek Tribes in Oklahoma, Alabama, Louisiana, and Texas, recognizes the forced removal of the Cherokee and Creek people from the region in 1838.

The Nantahala Mountains are the largest geographic area in the Forests, and the Forest Service provides opportunities for camping, hiking (from day trips to extended backcountry and wilderness excursions on trails such as the Bartram National Recreation Trail), as well as horse and pack riding in the Standing Indian Basin, Fires Creek, Chunky Gal Trail, and Rim Trail. The area provides a mix of developed, primitive, and dispersed camping opportunities, including the Standing Indian Campground and Appletree Campground, Kimsey Creek and Hurricane Creek Camps, and the Hunters Camp and Bristol Fields Horse Camp in the Fires Creek watershed.

The area's creeks and rivers are popular destination spots for fishing, tubing, picnicking, and dispersed camping. The Dirty John Shooting Range provides opportunities for rifle and pistol shooting in a safe and environmentally sound area. Hunting is an important traditional and recreational activity as the geographic area provides quality habitat for ruffed grouse, wild turkey, white tailed deer, and black bear.

Major economic drivers include local communities are tourism, health care, agriculture, manufacturing, and mineral extraction. National Forest System lands provides permits for some mineral leasing operations. Additionally, these lands are considered a major tourism asset for local communities and the geographic area is popular for both commercial and personal medicinal herb collections and ramps. Ramps and medicinal plants are harvested across this geographic area at a greater rate than all other geographic areas.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

The Nantahala Geographic area supports all the common ecozones except for spruce–fir forests. Mesic mid elevation habitats such as acidic cove, rich cove, and mesic oak forests are particularly abundant within this geographic area.

Restoration efforts in the geographic area are focused on using silvicultural techniques to create needed young forest habitat in mesic oak, high elevation red oak, pine-oak heath, acidic cove, and rich cove forests. Young forest within these areas can provide habitat for grouse and golden-winged warbler priority areas within the geographic area. Woodland habitat gaps identified in the geographic area are in both mid and older forests of high elevation red oak, mesic oak, acidic cove, dry-mesic oak, dry oak, and pine-oak heath forests. The greatest needs for more old growth forest in the geographic area are in rich cove, acidic cove, and mesic oak forests.

The Nantahala Mountains Geographic Area are home to a wide range of rare habitats, including Southern Appalachian bogs, boulderfields, heath balds, abandoned mine shafts that provide bat hibernacula, montane red cedar woodlands, montane cliffs, low elevation glades, and serpentine

woodlands. Buck Creek serpentine barrens includes two endemic plant communities, two endemic newly described plant species, and numerous species of conservation concern.

Clean and abundant water

The Nantahala Mountains Geographic Area supports many high quality streams and rivers, including the Fires Creek and Buck Creek watersheds, parts of the Hiwassee, Nantahala, and Little Tennessee Rivers, and the Tallulah River headwaters. The town of Franklin gets its water supply from the geographic area.

Approximately 640 miles of creeks and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands.

PRE-DRAFT

Goals

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Restore and maintain age class and structural diversity utilizing a range of management approaches with focus on the mesic oak, high elevation red oak, pine-oak heath, acidic cove, and rich cove forests.
- b) Restore woodland characteristics and other structural and compositional conditions in high-elevation red oak, mesic oak, dry-mesic oak, dry oak, and pine oak heath forests.
- c) Reduce off-site species especially white pine and improve hunting opportunities for a range of game species across the area.
- d) Maintain and restore serpentine and red cedar woodlands with fire. Reduce impacts from non-native invasive plants.
- a) Maintain and restore native populations of ginseng. Manage permitted collection of American ginseng at sustainable levels.
- e) Ensure sustainable harvest of ramps and diverse selection of medicinal plants.
- f) Reduce woody plant encroachment and invasive plants within Southern Appalachian bogs.

Providing clean and abundant water

- a) Maintain and expand range of brook trout and restore stream passage for aquatic organisms.
- b) Maintain water quality for hellbenders in waters that support them.
- c) Consider the potential for acid-bearing geological formations in project planning.
- d) The geographic area contains two 6th level priority watersheds targeted by the Forest Service for restoration.

Connecting people to the land

- a) Maintain and balance access for a diverse range of recreation opportunities, settings and experiences across the area, including sites for developed and dispersed camping, day-use, long-distance hiking, day-hiking, horseback riding, and water sports
- b) Respond to demand for quality hunting opportunities for ruffed grouse, wild turkey, white-tailed deer, and black bear by maintaining and enhancing habitat, in partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.
- c) Expand scientific forest research aimed at restoration of sites impacted by an overabundance of white pine.

Places within the geographic area that are recognized and managed in consideration of their unique features.

- a) Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
- b) Standing Indian Basin
 - i. Continue to provide a mix of recreational opportunities, including developed and tent camping, hiking, horseback riding, fishing, day use, and backcountry access
- c) Fires Creek Watershed

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Opportunities to partner with others

- a) Partner with trail conservation and maintenance groups, hiking associations, and hiking clubs.
- b) Work with local communities, county governments, and chambers of commerce
- c) Partner with equestrian organizations and trail riding club and wilderness advocacy and management groups.
- d) Partner with Tribes and the National Park Service to manage the Trail of Tears and Unicoi Turnpike corridor; and restore traditional plant species important for tribal traditions, culture and arts.
- e) Continue partnership with NCWRC to expand the range of southern Appalachian brook trout.
- f) Continue to participate in the Sicklefin Redhorse Conservation Committee and the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to meet goals in providing clean and abundant water. Continue to participate in the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to meet goals in providing clean and abundant water.