

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

## Nantahala Gorge Geographic Area

Updated: June 1, 2017

### Description of area

The central feature of the Nantahala Gorge Geographic Area is the river that gives the region its name. The Nantahala River cuts a deep gorge that runs for eight miles within the river's 40-mile descent from its headwaters in the Nantahala Mountains to its confluence with the Little Tennessee River. The gorge is famous for its whitewater rapids that bring thousands of visitors to the region each year.

As it flows down from the Southern Nantahala Wilderness to its terminus at Fontana Lake, the river descends an average 38 feet per mile. This steep gradient creates the whitewater rapids that draw visitors for rafting and fly fishing along the lower section of the gorge. The upper section is more rugged and creates many rapids along its length, and the remote surroundings create ideal conditions for extremely rugged cross country hiking.

This area contains several landscape features that figure most prominently in Tribal history and have significant meaning to Tribal identities and beliefs. The Nantahala Gorge tribal landscape serves as one of the most important traditional areas of the Cherokee.

The diverse ecosystems within the gorge are dominated by rich cove forests, interspersed with acidic cove and oak forests. These lower slopes are vital to the persistence of the noontday globe. At higher elevations, weathered rock outcrops give way to mountain top heath balds such as Wesser Bald and Lowing Bald. The lower end of the geographic area includes motor boat access to the upper end of Fontana Lake and the Finger Lake Day Use Area which provides a venue for kayak instruction for outfitters and guides. Natural caves and abandoned mines within the Nantahala Gorge provide habitat for bats and other cave-associated species.

Communities in the geographic area include Topton and the town of Nantahala. These communities rely on the 21,820 acres of forest land in the geographic area (41,589 acres total). The majority of the geographic area is within the Nantahala Ranger District, with small portion in the Cheoah and Tusquitee Ranger Districts. National Forest System lands within the area lie in Macon, Cherokee, and Graham counties.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Appalachian National Scenic Trail
- Trail of Tears National Historic Trail
- Nantahala Gorge Blowing Springs botanical/zoological area and Camp Branch Falls botanical area
- Nantahala River, portions of which is an eligible Wild and Scenic River
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

### **Connecting people to the land**

The Forest Service provides permits for multiple whitewater rafting outfitters and guides. Rafting on the Nantahala River, which bring tourists to the geographic area each year, is one of the most heavily visited sites on the Forests. Trout fishing is a popular activity in the upper and lower sections of the Nantahala Gorge, including guided fly fishing boat trips in the gorge.

The high level of visitation on the river provides a major benefit to the economies of local communities. Businesses in nearby towns and throughout the lower gorge offer visitors access to outfitting services, lodging, retail, and campgrounds, creating jobs for local residents and seasonal workers such as raft guides.

The major economic driver for local communities is tourism. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation in support of tourism. The Appalachian National Trail and Bartram National Scenic Recreation Trail cross through the geographic area which attracts hikers looking for challenging technical hikes and hunters seeking grouse, deer, turkey, and bear. Additionally, local communities benefit from water-based recreation with multiple outfitters and guides basing their operations on the Nantahala River.

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

Forest communities within the Nantahala Gorge are Include dry-mesic oak, mesic oak, rich cove, acidic cove forests. Within mature tracts of forest cerulean warbler habitat exists. Oak and scattered pine ecozones are more abundant across the south-facing slopes. They include partially open fire adapted species and provide an opportunity for increasing an open woodland structure.

Rare ecological communities in this area include caves and forest that support several rare bat species, including the endangered Indiana bat and the threatened northern long-eared bat, acidic shale slope woodlands, and calcareous cliffs. The lower gorge supports the only known population of the federally-threatened noonday globe (a terrestrial snail).

### **Clean and abundant water**

The Nantahala River, and the surrounding geography are the primary features of this geographic area. Tributary creeks such as Queens, White Oak, and Dick Creeks feed into the river. As the Nantahala River leaves the gorge, it flows into Fontana Lake which provides nearby communities with hydroelectric power via the Fontana Dam.

Approximately 106 miles of streams and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands.

## **Goals**

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

- a) Protect cave habitats within Nantahala Gorge, including Blowing Springs, for all species, with a focus on Indiana, northern long-eared, and gray bats and the lost Nantahala cave spider.
- b) Maintain and restore intact forest habitat for the noonday globe.
- c) Manage non-native invasive species prioritizing the rich cove forest with the greatest diversity of rare and common species.
- d) Enhance woodland habitat within dry-mesic oak, mesic oak, and pine-oak heath forests with recurrent prescribed burning.

### **Providing clean and abundant water**

- a) Manage river access through permits and infrastructure to minimize nonpoint-source water pollution.
- b) Enhance hellbender and southern Appalachian brook trout populations where habitat is suitable.

### **Connecting people to the land**

- a) Manage the river for sustainable recreation by continuing to limit commercial weekend use on high-use weekends and limit the number of outfitter and guide permits authorized to operate on the river.
- b) Emphasize scenery for Mountain Water Scenic Byway, Appalachian Trail, and Bartram Trail.
- c) Maintain remote hike-only opportunities in Cheoah Bald IRA, London Bald, and Wesser Bald areas.

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

- a) The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail is a National Register of Historic Places listed property and an American Indian Traditional Cultural Property managed in consultation with Tribes and NPS for its preservation, protection, restoration and interpretation.

### **Opportunities to partner with others**

- a) Continue working with the Nantahala Gorge Association to, encourage use by diverse groups
- b) Work with Duke Energy Corporation on partnership projects and additional recreational releases to support special events.
- c) Continue partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission on fisheries resource management and the North Carolina Parks and Recreation Department on the Nantahala River Bike Trail.
- d) Partner with Tribes and the National Park Service to manage the Trail of Tears corridor; restore traditional plant species important for tribal traditions, culture and arts.

- e) Continue to participate in the Sicklefins Redhorse Conservation Committee and the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to meet goals in providing clean and abundant water.

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