

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

## Fontana Lake Geographic Area

Updated: June 1, 2017

### Description of area

Bordered by surrounding mountain ranges, the wide valleys and lakes of the Fontana Lake Geographic Area provide an accessible region for visitors to enjoy boating, camping, fishing, mountain biking, and hiking. The defining characteristic of the geographic area are the man-made lakes created by the Cheoah and Santeetlah Dams, constructed by the Tallassee Power Company (Tapoco) and the Fontana Dam, which was constructed by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA). These hydroelectric dams across the Little Tennessee River and Cheoah Rivers form the lakes and provide recreation and hydroelectric power to nearby communities.

Prior to European and Anglo-American settlement along with westward expansion, the Fontana Lake GA was home to the Cherokee and Creek tribes. This area contains several landscape features that figure most prominently in Tribal history and have significant meaning to Tribal identities and beliefs. These locations serve as some of the most important traditional and ceremonial areas of the Cherokee.

For 16.7 miles, the Fontana Lake Geographic Area stretches out along the historic course of the Little Tennessee River, the southern border of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. The geographic area encompasses the majority of Fontana Lake's shoreline, with 5,032 acres of lakefront contained within its borders. South of Fontana Lake near Robbinsville, the smaller Santeetlah Lake stretches across 2,625 acres of shoreline. More than 75 percent of the lands bordering Santeetlah Lake are within the Nantahala National Forest, and the valleys bordering both lakes are filled with shortleaf pine and oak forests that provide habitat for game and non-game wildlife. The area also includes Cheoah and Calderwood Lakes.

The low elevation and developed road networks of the geographic area makes this area easily accessible by motor vehicles. The Forest Service, in partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, maintains several boat launches that allow visitors to enjoy recreation and fishing on the lakes by motorboats, kayaks, and canoes. Developed and dispersed camping provide multiple opportunities for nature-based recreation by forest visitors.

Communities nearby this geographic area include Bryson City, Robbinsville, and Fontana Village. These communities and others nearby rely on the 33,413 acres of forest land in the geographic area (111,437 acres total). The region is within the Cheoah Ranger District and a small portion of the Nantahala Ranger District. National Forest System lands within this area lie in Graham and Swain counties.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- Appalachian National Scenic Trail Corridor
- National Historic Trails Corridor (Trail of Tears National Historic Trail)
- Inventoried Roadless Areas

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

- Fontana Dam and Visitors Center

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

Prior to European and American settlement, the lands in the area were home to the Cherokee and Creek Tribes. The Santeetlah Dam, constructed in 1928 by the Tallassee Power Company, is recognized on the National Register of Historic Places. The Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) built Fontana Dam in 1944 as a flood control measure as well as a way to provide hydroelectric power to nearby communities.

Local communities benefit from National Forest System lands through and tourism. The rivers and forests that surround the lakes provide hunters with opportunities for deer, turkey, ruffed grouse and bear hunting. With multiple sites for river and lake access, the area is also popular with anglers seeking walleye and bass.

Water-based recreation on the lakes is central to the geographic area. These lakes are one of the most popular attractions for visitors. The Forests, in partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, maintains boat launches on the reservoirs for motor boats, and houseboats are a frequent sight on the Fontana Lake during the warmer months. The rapids along the Cheoah River attract whitewater rafters. The area is very popular with motorcycle riders, who use the highways in Graham County to access the Cherohala Skyway and the portion of U.S. Highway 129 - - The Tail of the Dragon - - between North Carolina and Tennessee. Because of the road and water-based nature of the region's attractions, the area sees the largest seasonal fluctuation in visitors during the winter months of all of the Forests' geographic areas.

The geographic area contains multiple sites for developed and dispersed camping around Santeetlah Lake and Fontana Lake, including Cheoah Point Campground and Cable Cove Campground. The Tsali Recreation Area on Fontana Lake provides access for mountain biking which draws national recognition, as well as and horseback riding, boating, and developed camping. Hiking is popular on the Benton MacKaye Trail and the Appalachian Trail. The resort community Fontana Village is also a major attraction for visitors to this geographic area.

### **Enhancing and restoring resiliency**

The low elevation and abundant water of the region primarily support shortleaf pine, dry-mesic oak, rich cove, and acidic cove forests that provide habitat for larger mammals such as deer and bear as well as bird species including turkey, golden winged warbler, and grouse, as well as other non-game species. The abundant shortleaf pine forest is home to many fire-adapted plant species including several species of conservation concern. Due to the historical abundance of southern pine species, the native southern pine beetle has repeatedly reached outbreak levels altering the species composition within the forests of this geographic area.

Restoration efforts will focus on increasing the resilience of the forest to southern pine beetle infestations and outbreaks, conducting timber stand improvement projects on degraded forest types, and increasing the amount of habitat for golden winged warblers. Rare habitats in the region include patches of rocky bar and shore and montane alluvial forest along the lakes and low elevation basic

glades on scattered upper slopes. Almost all of the known bald eagle nests in western North Carolina are within this geographic area.

### **Clean and abundant water**

Water defines the nature of the geographic area. The course of the Little Tennessee River and Cheoah River shaped the landscape and provided the waters for the surrounding pine and oak forests. With the damming of Lake Santeetlah in 1926 and Fontana Lake in 1942, the rivers swelled into lakes that provide hydroelectric power to nearby communities. The Nantahala River terminates its course in the geographic area, emptying into the Little Tennessee at Fontana Lake.

The Cheoah River supports several federally listed aquatic animal and plant species, including the endangered Appalachian elktoe threatened spotfin chub, and threatened Virginia Spiraea, which is the most abundant population known across North Carolina. It has been the subject of interagency efforts to restore the native fish community for the last several years. Non-native invasive plant species infestations threaten the Virginia Spiraea population and other associated species of conservation concern plants.

Approximately 130 miles of creeks and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands.

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## Goals

### Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) Emphasize active restoration, maintenance and management of shortleaf pine forests using timber harvest and prescribed fire to maintain southern pine beetle at endemic levels.
- b) Conducting stand improvement and other restoration projects on forest communities degraded by past management and forest health impacts like SPB.
- c) Increasing the amount of habitat for golden-winged warblers.
- d) Restore structural and compositional diversity to enhance habitat for game species such as white-tailed deer and wild turkey, bald eagles, and neotropical migratory birds.
- e) Protect bald eagle nesting locations within the geographic area.

### Providing clean and abundance water

- a) Enhance populations of sicklefin redhorse, one of the rarest fish species in North Carolina, and culturally important to the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians, through augmentation or reintroduction where habitat is suitable.
- b) Enhance brook trout, the only salmonid native to the southeastern United States, populations where habitat is suitable.
- c) There are five 6<sup>th</sup> level watersheds identified as areas where the Forest Service will focus resources to improve watershed conditions and function.

### Connecting people to the land

- a) Emphasize water-based recreation around Santeetlah and Fontana Lakes. Provide access to the shore and water and support recreational boating and fishing opportunities.
- b) Promote sustainable access and opportunities to support the local economy along the lakeshores that does not compromise scenic or recreational experiences.
- c) Support recreation opportunities and access to the Cheoah River.
- d) Enhance mountain biking opportunities along Santeetlah Lake and near Fontana Village, emphasize horse and bike use at Tsali Recreation Area, and continue to provide hiking opportunities.

### Places within the area that will be managed in consideration of their unique features

- a) Appalachian Trail and Benton MacKaye Trail
- b) Cheoah River:
  - 1. Restore aquatic habitat and fish and freshwater mussel communities within the river.

2. Restore montane alluvial forest along the river and ensure non-native invasive plant species are not impacting Virginia Spiraea.
3. Provide for river access and maintain and enhance recreation opportunities.

**Opportunities to partner with others**

- a) Continue partnerships with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission for boat access at lakes and to enhance Southern Appalachian brook trout.
- b) Continue working with partnerships and volunteers to maintain and improve hiking trails, mountain biking and horseback riding opportunities.
- c) Continue to work with marina and mooring point special use permit holders to modernize and improve water-based recreation.
- d) Partner with Tribes to manage and restore traditional plant species important for tribal traditions, culture and arts.
- e) Work collaboratively with TVA to address conflicts with mooring and recreation opportunities and heritage resource concerns.
- f) Develop partnerships with Tribal governments to restore traditional plant species important for tribal arts and culture.
- g) Work with local governments, elected officials and tourism boards on community development and to support additional access in winter months to extend the recreation season.
- h) Continue to participate in the Sicklefin Redhorse Conservation Committee and the Little Tennessee River Native Fish Conservation Partnership to meet clean and abundant water goals.

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