

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

Hiwassee Geographic Area

Updated: June 1, 2017

Description of area

The Hiwassee Geographic Area is defined by large rivers running through broad flat valleys and two large lakes surrounded by mountains that provide distinct visitor experiences. The broad river valleys lie at lower elevations than other geographic areas in North Carolina's National Forests. The steep mountains of this area support short leaf pine, mixed hardwood forests, and large pockets of eastern hemlock.

Passing through a gentler mountain landscape, the major rivers of the region include the Hiwassee, Valley, and Nottley Rivers which flow into the Chatuge, Hiwassee, and Apalachia lakes. These rivers and the lakes created by Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) dams provide recreational opportunities for fishing, boating, and other water sports. The lakes of this geographic area form a chain that is home to a diverse number of plant, animal, and warm water fish species that are native to riparian floodplain ecosystems.

Prior to European and Anglo-American settlement along with westward expansion, the Hiwassee geographic area 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 are important traditional and ceremonial areas for the Cherokee.

Communities within this geographic area include Murphy, Hayesville, Warne, Peachtree, Brasstown, Hiwassee Dam, Ranger and the smaller incorporated areas of Unaka and Violet. National Forest System lands within this area lie in Cherokee and Clay counties. The region is within the Tusquitee Ranger District.

Management areas within the geographic area include:

- National Historic Trails Corridor (Trail of Tears National Historic Trail)

Connecting people to the land

Cherokee and Creek traditions and culture are showcased in archeological sites in the Forests. The Trail of Tears National Historic Trail runs through the area, incorporating sections of the Unicoi Turnpike, Georgia Road, and the Great State Road from Franklin to Fort Butler that were used to remove Cherokee and Creek Tribal members from their traditional homelands in Western North Carolina and North Georgia. Modern historical sites include the TVA-built Chatuge Dam, Hiwassee Dam, and Apalachia Dam, which provide hydroelectric power to neighboring communities. The Panther Top Fire Tower in this area is a National Historic Register-eligible site.

With almost three quarters of the geographic area accessible by car, the area draws visitors from neighboring states for sightseeing, motor boat access, fishing, mountain biking, and hiking. The proximity of the rivers and lakes to the region's roads, developed campsites, and boat launches provides

easy access to recreational opportunities for day visitors from North Carolina and neighboring states. Mountain bikers can enjoy dedicated mountain bike trails at Jackrabbit Mountain and Hanging Dog. The Panther Top Shooting Range provides opportunities for target practice with rifles and pistols. This area also has the Benton MacKaye Trail, a long distance trail.

The less developed portions of the geographic area provide undisturbed habitats with populations of game, especially deer, turkey, and bear, and non-game wildlife which is popular with hunters and bird watchers.

Major economic drivers for local communities include manufacturing, health care, agriculture, wood products, and tourism. National Forest System lands provide a wide variety of opportunities for nature-based recreation. Additionally, the communities in the geographic area rely on the land and water of the lakes for flood safety and power.

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

The geographic area supports the largest acreage of shortleaf pine among the geographic areas on the Nantahala and Pisgah National Forests. Shortleaf pine – mixed hardwood forests would have been the dominant ecosystem, which also would have featured large tracts of predominantly hardwoods in acidic cove, dry-mesic oak, and montane oak heath forests, but have been encroached by white pine as a consequence of past management practices and fire suppression.

The abundance of sites suitable for shortleaf pine in the area present an opportunity to improve the structure and composition of remaining shortleaf stands to contribute to a healthy forest that can better address catastrophic fire, climate change, and impacts from insects and disease. The forest requires fire to maintain fire dependent plant assemblages, to improve forest health and habitat quality, and to reduce off-site pine in both the shortleaf pine and dry-mesic oak forests. Young forest and woodlands are important to wildlife in these areas.

Rare habitats within the geographic area are more abundant across the lower elevations and include montane cliffs, low elevation glades, low elevation seeps, and floodplain pools. These habitats provide important breeding ground for amphibians and a diversity of wetland plants.

Clean and abundant water

The geographic area is defined by the waters that flow from the surrounding peaks and mountains into the area's many creeks and rivers. Approximately 101 miles of creeks and rivers run through the geographic area on National Forest System lands. The reservoirs formed by TVA dams provide recreation and drinking water to the communities in the region.

The geographic area contains geology with high concentrations of sulfide minerals. When exposed by excavation or landslides, these acid-producing rocks can degrade water quality in the immediate area and downstream via runoff, or if the rocks are used in embankments or stockpiled in waste areas.

Goals

Enhancing and restoring resiliency

- a) This GA contains the largest shortleaf pine belt across the forest, and activities will emphasize this shortleaf pine as well as associated ecozones such as dry oak, pine oak/heath and dry-mesic oak.
- b) Shortleaf pine and shortleaf pine – mixed hardwood restoration concurrent with reduction of off-site white pine and removal of white pine plantations.
- c) Increasing size and frequency of prescribed fire within the shortleaf pine and pine oak heath communities along Hiwassee Lake and the Valley River Valley.
- d) Enhancing high-quality habitat including woodland and young forest conditions for low elevation forest plant and wildlife communities especially along Hiwassee Lake.
- e) Restore and maintain woodland conditions across, dry-mesic oak, and mesic oak, and dry oak heath ecozones.

Providing clean and abundant water

- a) The area is known to include outcroppings of acid producing geological formations. Utilize best management practices to minimize acidification of surface waters when ground disturbing activities are necessary in acid rock areas to achieve forest management goals.
- b) Enhance habitat for the sicklefin redhorse where marginal habitat exists.
- c) In the geographic area, there is one 6th level watersheds identified as areas where the Forest Service will focus resources to improve watershed conditions and function.

Connecting people to the land

- a) Respond to demand for a variety of outdoor recreation experiences by continuing to provide developed camping, dispersed camping, and day use sites with a mix of lake-based (motor boating, kayaking, swimming, fishing) and land-based (mountain biking, hiking, picnicking, camping) recreation opportunities.
- b) Respond to demand for sport shooting by providing opportunities for rifle and pistol shooting in a safe, secure, and sustainable location.
- c) Respond to demand for hunting opportunities for ruffed grouse, wild turkey, white tailed deer, and black bear by maintaining and enhancing habitat, both alone and in partnership with the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission.

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

- a) The Trail of Tears and Unicoi Turnpike
- b) Utilize seed production resources at Beech Creek Seed Orchard and continue to enhance its ability to contribute to future restoration efforts across the southern Appalachians.

Opportunities to partner with others

- a) Continue partnership with North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission for boat access, wildlife habitat management, and improvements to the Panther Top Shooting Range.
- b) Continue partnering with the TVA on lake projects.
- c) Continue partnerships with mountain bike groups and hiking trail associations to maintain and improve area trails.
- d) Partner with Tribes and the National Park Service to manage the Trail of Tears and Unicoi Turnpike corridor; restore traditional plant species important for tribal arts and culture.
- e) Continue partnership with Sicklefin Redhorse Conservation Committee to meet clean and abundant water goals.

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