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### **PRESERVATION OF KEY NATURAL HERITAGE SITES MARKS 2003**

RALEIGH – Several key natural areas in North Carolina received permanent protection in 2003, thanks to combined efforts of three state conservation trust funds, non-profit organizations and the new Ecosystem Enhancement Program (EEP).

The North Carolina Clean Water Management Trust Fund (CWMTF), the Natural Heritage Trust Fund and the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund joined with EEP and private land conservation groups across the state to save some of the state's most pristine and ecologically significant natural areas from being lost to development. As a result, water quality and habitat for endangered and threatened species will be permanently protected and more recreational opportunities will be available to the public.

Key conservation projects for 2003 include:

- The 4,468-acre Needmore tract on the Little Tennessee River in Swain and Macon counties — Purchase of the property, to be managed by the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, will conserve 26 miles of the Little Tennessee River and 37 miles of tributary streams, 57 species of fish, dozens of Cherokee and historic sites, and the largest cluster of mountain floodplain forests remaining the Southern Appalachians.
- The “Eno Wilderness” property added to Eno River State Park — At 815 acres, it is the largest single addition to the park and will increase its size by nearly 33 percent.
- The 151-acre Poplar Ridge project at Eno River State Park — This acquisition brings the park to the US 70 Bypass in Hillsborough. Like the Eno Wilderness project, this property would have been developed had it not been acquired for the park.
- The 1,204-acre Elk Knob State Natural Area — The first natural area in Watauga County includes the highest peak in the county at 5,520 feet and

part of a range of amphibolite rock mountains that often support rare plant species and communities.

- Nearly 80 acres along the Haw River in Guilford and Rockingham counties for the creation of the newly authorized Haw River State Park.
- The 2,500-acre Beck tract in Onslow County to protect Stones Creek and the New River — The acquisition, which will become part of the state's gamelands system, will also prevent encroachment on Camp Lejeune.
- The 5,621-acre Mingo tract in Caldwell and Wilkes counties — This project will protect a portion of the headwaters of the Yadkin River. The Wildlife Resources Commission will manage the property as gamelands.

The CWMTF was created by the North Carolina General Assembly in 1996 to help finance projects that enhance or restore degraded waters, protect unpolluted waters, and/or contribute toward a network of riparian buffers and greenways for environmental, educational, and recreational benefits.

The Natural Heritage Trust Fund was created by the General Assembly in 1987 as a supplemental funding source for state agencies to acquire and protect the state's ecological diversity and cultural heritage and to inventory the natural areas of the state.

The North Carolina General Assembly established the Parks and Recreation Trust Fund in 1994 to fund improvements in the state's park system, to fund grants for local governments and to increase the public's access to the state's beaches.

EEP combines an existing state wetlands-restoration initiative from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources with advance-mitigation efforts by the state Department of Transportation to offset unavoidable impacts from transportation projects. EEP's mission, over a two-year transition period and beyond, is to improve habitat, stream and water-quality protection, and to reduce road-construction delays by streamlining required environmental-permitting processes.

The efforts are key parts of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources' One North Carolina Naturally initiative. The program focuses on coordinating a statewide conservation plan with public and private partners and landowners and restoring functional ecosystems, biological diversity and working landscapes through the stewardship of land and water resources.

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