



Times-News

CAN THE MOUNTAINS SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES?

Monday, November 16, 2009
David Weintraub
ECO NOTES



How much are our mountains worth? How about our rivers and streams? Or our trees? I suppose if my neighbor comes onto my property and plays George Washington and chops down my prize apple tree, I can find a lawyer to sue for my damages. But does that tell me anything of its *value*?

It's not an academic question. As a community, we need to set priorities and typically the environmental benefits of trees, waterways and mountains are valued when they're gone, not when they are still here waiting to be protected. We've all driven past developments with naturalist names like "Oakwood Estates", "Fox Run" and so on, standing as grey epitaphs for what's gone and isn't coming back.

It's hard to think of natural resources in economic terms. We all have an innate connection to forests, running water and farmland. It probably stems from the fact that biologically, we are still hunters and gatherers. But when we grow up, we're supposed to be "realistic" that a silly old tree and a green piece of land is a commodity without value until it's sold and developed. However, what if we could put a price on a tree or an old growth forest, for instance? What would be its worth?

Trees provide timber and food, and habitat for wildlife. They also replenish the environment with oxygen and filter pollution. All of these are values to which it is possible to attach a monetary figure. Urban trees reduce the runoff of pollutants into waterways, a problem caused by impervious surfaces like concrete. Foliage slows rain so it gets absorbed better, rather than overwhelming drainage systems. A study of municipal trees in Boulder, CO., for instance, found that the average tree intercepts 1,271 gallons of precipitation annually, saving the city \$523,311 in storm-water retention costs.

Property values are 7 percent to 25 percent higher for houses surrounded by trees. Consumers spend up to 13 percent more at shops near green landscapes. One study even suggests patients who can see trees out their windows are hospitalized, on average, 8 percent fewer days. Yet, according to Deborah Gangloff, executive director of American Forests, "Every city we've looked at, about three dozen, shows a decline of about 30 percent of the urban tree canopy in the past 10 to 15 years." In some places, the loss from disease, development, and neglect has been catastrophic. According to the US Forest Service, fast-developing Henderson County lost 32,000 acres of forestland from 1990-2002 a whopping 25% percent. In comparison, Buncombe to the north lost just 3% of the forestland in the same period of time.

The US Forest Service has a computer model which can produce a precise environmental and economic value for each tree. For example: A 50-foot oak tree in Hendersonville stores 1,476 kilograms of carbon and removes 124 grams of sulfur dioxide from the atmosphere each year. To remove that same amount of pollution would otherwise cost society \$5.44 annually. Multiply that by the millions of trees in our region and the benefits of protecting our remaining forestland adds up.

If we can accept that our environment has ecological, economic and mental health benefits, then it's easier to understand that the organizations working to protect the health of our streams, forestland and farmland also have value to our community. ECO expends thousands of dollars annually to monitor our watersheds to insure they can continue to sustain life. We work to advocate for policies that will insure our open spaces get protected and that our sensitive habitats are preserved. For over twenty years we've worked to advocate for expanded recycling so that our waste stream is reduced. And our green energy programs have educated thousands to renewable energy and energy conservation projects. This holiday season, please consider putting your money where your mountains are and make a tax deductible donation to ECO online at www.eco-wnc.org or by mail to ECO, 121 Third Avenue West, Hendersonville, NC 28792. Thank you.