



Times-News

Environment A Top Priority to Most Folks in WNC

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ECO NOTES



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Everywhere I go, folks collar me to discuss their concerns about our stewardship of the land.

I hear stories about development that's gone awry, causing havoc to their streams and ponds, logging that creates sediment flows that roll down slopes, agricultural practices that could be more sensitive to the needs of the land and water.

Many of these folks are not what you might call "tree huggers." They are local businessmen, farmers, retirees, Republicans, Democrats, tea partiers, students, natives and newcomers. They tell me about their concerns for how we're protecting our natural resources and what we're leaving to the next generation.

They also want me to know that they wish more people had similar interests.

I always tell them, there are more of us than they might think, and there's plenty of proof for that assertion.

This county has done many surveys of its citizenry that demonstrate strong support for the environment. The most recent assessment was conducted by the United Way, who polled 1,700 local residents and convened 20 focus groups. The United Way wanted to better serve the community, and although environmental protection is not their focus, they agreed with ECO to include some environmental questions in the mix.

The results were not surprising to anyone working in this field for any length of time.

Among the questions asked were "Are you concerned about the environment in Henderson County?" 76.3 percent said "yes."

Sixty-eight percent were concerned about too much development, 63 percent were troubled by pollution in rivers and streams, and 61 percent were disturbed by the loss of beauty and character of our mountains.

The United Way took great pains to ensure this survey fairly represented the entire population.

Not long ago a more extensive survey was conducted in Watauga County about environmental concerns after development had deeply scarred the community, similar to what's happening in our own backyard. There as here, a strong majority expressed concern about overdevelopment, and they feared for their natural heritage. From 70 percent to 80 percent expressed concern over impact to water quality, groundwater, hiking and fishing access, open space, forest land, the county's rural character and scenic views. Sixty-four percent of respondents were concerned about impact to agricultural land.

The Watauga survey didn't only focus on threats to the local environment, but also looked at possible solutions. Here WNCers shined. Ninety percent agreed with policies which preserve buffer areas adjacent to mountain streams to protect water quality; at least 80 percent agreed with the need to protect wildlife habitat and corridors, promote voluntary conservation easements, and preserve scenic views; 70 percent supported policies to maintain access to trails and rivers; and 60 percent supported efforts to create connections between existing parcels of open space.

With a new body of county commissioners coming into office, it's more important than ever that citizens demand that their voices get reflected in the policies our elected representatives follow.

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