



Times-News

Can the Mountains Speak for Themselves?

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ECO NOTES



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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 spends 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.

In the old days, running a green business, required that the owner wear Birkenstocks, drive a VW van and own at least five Grateful Dead albums. Nowadays it's becoming clearer that running a green business is not only good for the environment, but also makes good business sense.

A number of recent studies have demonstrated that even in a poor economic climate, increasingly consumers are making purchasing decisions based on how serious a business is about environmental stewardship. In a study this year by Miller Zell, 50% of shoppers surveyed were willing to pay a premium for green products. In fact, lower income shoppers were more likely to pay extra for eco-friendly products than higher income consumers. As an increasing number of retailers carry green products, their cost decreases, offering greater incentives to the shopper. A good example of this is Motorola's "Renew" phone which is made of 100% recycled materials and is offered at the same price as their other models.

One of the major concerns shoppers repeatedly indicated in these surveys is the need for more information about the products sold. People were concerned about the impact their purchases had on the environment and their relative advantages vs. traditional products whose destiny is often the nearest landfill. The study made clear that shoppers are beginning to equate good citizenship with good stewardship.

In addition to the product side of green, having a green building envelope might make the difference in whether a business can continue to stay in business. Since many downtown businesses face problems with old, leaky buildings, ECO has partnered with Waste Reduction Partners to offer energy audits to businesses in downtown Hendersonville. A typical main street business spends about \$5000 for utilities and for many a reduction of 10% could be achieved with a small effort and modest expense: changing operating procedures, a little weatherization, and adjustments to heating and cooling or lighting changes. Since every dollar saved in retail is worth three dollars in profit, these businesses will gain a competitive advantage in a difficult market. These changes would also save at least 6000 pounds of CO2 from being released into the environment, something we can all appreciate.

Finally, consumers appreciate businesses that follow a green business model. How is waste handled, are shoppers given plastic bags for every purchase, do distributors come everyday or is a distribution system created that minimizes trucking long distances. Is there a preference for products from local sources rather than around the country and the world?

Some examples of good green businesses practices in our town include:

West First Wood-Fired Pizza incorporates sustainability into every facet of their green business by purchasing local produce, relying on renewable energy through their wood-fired oven to cook, using compostable to-go containers and cutlery from corn-based plastics and using waterless urinals which save 40,000 gallons of water annually. Mast General Store has integrated recycling into their store operation, from containers for employees in their lunch room to recycling bins for customers at each checkout register. All packing material from their deliveries are likewise recycled and the clothing they sell includes recycled and natural cotton fiber.

One of the centerpieces of the Waverly Inn's hospitality has been the support of the local economy in their use of local foods including eggs, blueberries, breads, and grits. Pancake mixes and hot cereal are purchased from family operated mills. The Hendersonville Community Co-op includes among its environmentally-friendly practices 100% organic produce, the co-op deli uses all natural products, recycled paper is used in all printing, all equipment is energy star rated which reduces energy, and 95% of cardboard waste is recycled.

During this holiday season don't forget to buy locally and support the local businesses that have gone out of their way to offer a green Christmas, Chanukah and Kwanzaa to all. Happy holidays!

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