

Proposal for Natural Area Priorities

Introduction:

The following proposal is submitted jointly by The Wilderness Society, MountainTrue, Defenders of Wildlife, and the Southern Environmental Law Center. Many other groups support various pieces of the proposal, and they have helped us immensely in developing this proposal.

Together, we have worked collaboratively throughout the planning process to identify zones of agreement around different management strategies, from timber harvest to wilderness. We have tentatively offered support for most of the areas where our colleagues have requested an emphasis on active management and wildlife habitat creation, subject to future agreement on the areas we identified as Natural Area Priorities (NAPs).

This proposal relates to the NAPs for which we have not yet found complete agreement or where agreement is not yet reflected in the draft building blocks. These areas could be viewed as potential conflicts, but we believe they should be viewed in light of the larger progress toward overall agreement. Most of the areas below have considerable support for our proposed management emphasis, subject to an understanding of how other needs will be met on the broader landscape.

From either perspective, conditional or tentative support is only one step away from consensus. What remains is to articulate the “glue” that will hold the various pieces together and ensure that projects coming out of the plan can sustainably provide for the many different ecological and social needs that we’re all advocating for. In the meantime, we offer this as our best effort to describe management strategies to care for these areas’ special values without undermining others’ needs.

This proposal is the culmination of many area-specific compromises. The wilderness inventory included 362,411 acres potentially eligible for wilderness designation. These areas have long been recognized by our organizations and supporters as Mountain Treasures, and some of us have worked for decades to maintain their special values and to preserve their eligibility for designation. Despite changing and inconsistent levels of protection for these areas, they remain on a good ecological trajectory and are largely intact today because of those efforts. Rather than holding an uncompromising position on these areas, however, we have worked in good faith with other stakeholders to support recreation, ecological restoration, and other uses in these areas to the greatest extent compatible with maintaining their unique values. Accordingly, the areas below are proposed for a spectrum of management approaches, from ecological restoration to wilderness.

Background:

The NAPs are a composite of old growth values, state natural areas (which include rare and exemplary communities), and the Mountain Treasures areas or Wilderness Inventory Areas (WIAs). The WIAs have relatively high densities of old growth and natural areas, but they are important for more than just protecting and connecting those embedded values. They also rank among the most important roadless areas in the nation for biodiversity, connectivity, ecological integrity, and ecosystem representation. Some of these areas can and should benefit from careful management for their unique values, but regeneration for young forest habitat, irrespective of site-specific need, would not be compatible.

If maintenance and restoration of ecological integrity is our goal across the forest, our approach must vary in different contexts. “The intent of the [planning] directives is that plan components be designed to maintain resources that have ecological integrity and to restore conditions where they are degraded, damaged, or destroyed.” Managing an area primarily through the use of natural process does not forgo an opportunity to maintain or restore ecological integrity; it simply recognizes that some areas have greater ecological integrity than others.

For some of the areas below, the context would be appropriate for targeted, site-specific ecological restoration and maintenance. This proposal assumes that the Forum will recommend and the Forest Service will create an ecological restoration MA distinct from the Matrix. NAPs could most appropriately be allocated between Backcountry, Special Interest Areas, and an Ecological Restoration MA. If not, we propose that the areas recommended for ecological restoration be managed as backcountry.

Proposal:

At the Forest-wide level, we propose a desired condition to “Maintain sufficient forest in core unfragmented blocks where natural processes dominate across all ecozones and elevations to assure movement toward NRV of old growth as well as other ecological conditions expected under natural processes and natural disturbance. This will also contribute to realizing other ecozone desired conditions, will improve forest structure, related health and resiliency, and habitat diversity.” Unfragmented blocks of forest will contribute to ecosystem function and resiliency by providing a protected reserve of ecosystems with intact and recovering ecological integrity.

Large and medium old growth patches in the current plan as well as known existing old growth patches should be allocated wherever possible to Wilderness recommendation, Backcountry, Special Interest Areas, or Ecological Restoration.

NC Natural Heritage Program Natural Areas should be allocated wherever possible to Special Interest Areas, Wilderness recommendation, Backcountry, or Ecological Restoration.

Wilderness Inventory Areas as well as Mountain Treasure Areas not in WIAs should be allocated to Wilderness recommendations, Backcountry areas, Special Interest Areas, and Ecological Restoration.

We have mapped a specific proposal into a shapefile for allocation of areas according to the general guidelines above and will have maps of this proposal to share.

Below is a narrative description of the proposal relating to Wilderness Inventory Areas and Mountain Treasure Areas by Geographic Area:

Bald Mountains

Nolichucky Gorge within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological restoration.

Bald Mountain Inventory Roadless Area recommend that both Pisgah areas and Cherokee NF areas in TN be analyzed and considered for Wilderness recommendation.

Bluff Mountain within Mountain Treasure Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological restoration.

Pigeon River Gorge area within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Ecological Restoration.

Black Mountain

Black Mountain in USFS proposal as Backcountry recommend for Wilderness designation, omitting area around Ray Mine and Bowlens Creek and portions of Moody Mtn which would be recommended for Backcountry.

Big Ivy within Wilderness Inventory Area as Special Interest Area that includes the southern lobe centered on the Wilderness Study Area, the Northern Lobe running from Big Butt to Cedar Cliff, and the connector strip that parallels the Parkway above the Laurel Gap Trail recommend as Wilderness the area. SIA for the multi-use portion of the trail system. The remainder in SIA.

Snowball Mtn in area mapped by USFS as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area/Ecological Restoration.

Coxcombe Mtn in area mapped by USFS as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area/Ecological Restoration.

Mackey Mountain within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Backcountry recommend for Wilderness recommendation with two projections recommended as

Ecological Restoration; Portion of area in USFS proposal as Matrix recommend as Ecological Restoration.

Pisgah Ledge

Daniel Ridge within Wilderness Inventory area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

Cedar Rock within Wilderness Inventory area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

South Mills River within Wilderness Inventory area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

Laurel Mountain within Wilderness Inventory area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

North Slope

Middle Prong Wilderness Extension within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Backcountry recommend for Wilderness.

Middle Prong Wilderness Extension within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface (Lickstone Ridge) change to Backcountry.

Highland Domes

Overflow WSA recommend for Wilderness designation, leaving out buffer along FS road 79. This area should also be recognized as part of a much larger contiguous roadless/backcountry area in Georgia.

Ellicott Rock Extension within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface recommend for Wilderness designation

Terrapin Mtn within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Backcountry.

Panthertown Valley, including area around Dismal Falls, portion mapped in Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Special Interest Area.

Fishhawk Mountain within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area.

Great Balsam

Alarka Laurel Mountain Treasure Area mapped in USFS management proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area.

Nantahala Mountains

Siler Bald: within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface, Core area around AT corridor and state natural areas/old growth to backcountry; Ecological Restoration outside core.

Tellico Bald: within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface Core area around AT corridor and state natural areas/old growth to backcountry; Ecological Restoration outside core.

Wesser Bald: within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

Southern Nantahala Wilderness Extensions within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Wilderness recommendation and Ecological Restoration.

Botetler area within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Backcountry and Ecological Restoration.

Fires Creek/Tusquitee Bald WIA: within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Backcountry and Matrix/Interface change to Wilderness recommendation, Backcountry, and Ecological Restoration.

Piercy Mountain area within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

Nantahala Gorge

Piercy Mountain area within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Backcountry/Ecological Restoration.

Hiwassee

Unicoi Mountain area within Wilderness Inventory in USFS proposal as Backcountry and Matrix/Interface to Wilderness recommendation and Ecological Restoration.

Unicoi Mountains

Upper Santeetlah and Joyce Kilmer southern extensions within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area and Ecological Restoration.

Snowbird WSA recommend for wilderness recommendation.

Lower Snowbird within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Ecological Restoration.

Joyce Kilmer Wilderness Extensions on north side, excluding extension adjacent to Tapoco Lodge, recommend for Wilderness recommendation. Extension adjacent to Tapoco Lodge would remain Backcountry.

Ash Cove area within Wilderness Inventory area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Backcountry/SIA/Ecological Restoration.

Fontana Lake

Yellow Creek Mountain area within Wilderness Inventory Area in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface change to Special Interest Area and Ecological Restoration.

Eastern Escarpment

Wilson Creek area within Wilderness Inventory Area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Backcountry.

Sugar Knob area within Wilderness Inventory Area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Backcountry and Ecological Restoration.

Steels Creek area within Wilderness Inventory Area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal around largely inaccessible state natural area and old growth to Backcountry and Ecological Restoration.

Remainder of Steels Creek area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Ecological Restoration.

Western Linville Extension in Wilderness Inventory mapped in USFS proposal as Matrix/Interface to Ecological restoration.

Dobson Knob area within Wilderness Inventory Area mapped as Matrix/Interface in USFS proposal to Backcountry.

Harper Creek and Lost Cove WSAs: These areas have strong wilderness character and could meet important wilderness needs, but they could also remedy an unmet need for multi-use backcountry recreation in the Eastern Escarpment. We propose that future management in the Eastern Escarpment meet both needs to the greatest extent possible with clear milestones for both wilderness recommendation and multi-use backcountry recreation.