

Landtrust Buys 300 Acres for Catawba to Use as Wildlife Refuge

By Sara Pitzer in the December 15, 1999, issue of the Salisbury Post

John Wear stood on a wooded hilltop in the rain Monday, looking out over the confluence of Second Creek and the South Yadkin River below. You couldn't hear any traffic or other sounds of civilization. You couldn't see any sign of artificial light or man-made structures.

Wear pointed to a fire circle of stones at his feet and said, "You asked if I ever camped here. I did. I camped here 29 years ago."

Dr. John Wear Jr., director of the Center for the Environment at Catawba College and treasurer of the LandTrust for Central North Carolina, has good reason to believe that the spot will remain unspoiled.

The LandTrust has purchased the largest undeveloped tract of land in Rowan County under permanent conservation easement that will allow Catawba College to recreate a wildlife refuge.

The LandTrust, which purchased 300 acres this week, announced today at a special meeting on the Catawba campus that it will present the property to Catawba's Center for the Environment. Catawba, in return, agreed to a conservation easement which will protect the land's natural value.

The land is seven miles north of Catawba on Highway 601, at the confluence of Second Creek and the South Yadkin River. The Catawba College South Yadkin Wildlife Refuge will provide a learning environment for Catawba students in wildlife management and land conservation.

Jeff Michael, executive director of the LandTrust, said a grant of \$500,000 from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund "provided the first big step toward purchasing this important frontage on the South Yadkin River Corridor."

The LandTrust bought the acreage for \$850,000 from Joe Stirewalt, owner of Piedmont Hardwood Lumber Co.

Catawba and the LandTrust are looking for

additional money for the project. Fred and Alice Stanback, known for supporting environmental causes, have pledged to match dollar-for-dollar all gifts to the project beyond the initial grant from the Clean Water Management Trust Fund.



John Wear said the college and the LandTrust "have a larger vision" of eventually acquiring other conserved land in the area to create a much larger refuge system. He said he hopes owners of adjacent properties will decide to find ways to add their land to the preserve.

"This, in effect, would serve the missions of many of our organizations – water quality protection, land preservation and the creation of a functional wildlife refuge that can be used for educating our budding conservationists."

Jeff Michael said the LandTrust has had conversations with a number of landowners "who are favorably disposed to land conservation. That makes us very hopeful that, over the next 5-10 years, even more land will be preserved."

The preserve creates a northern anchor in a region where many organizations have been working on water quality, land conservation and habitat protection, Michael said. "We have all the confidence in the world that this will act as a catalyst for the preservation and management of other tracts in the area."

According to Michael, these 300 acres are significant from a conservation perspective. "It's on

a tremendous bend in the river. It provides for the protection of 1.5 miles of shoreline.”

It includes one of the natural areas identified in Catawba professor Dr. Mike Baranski’s Natural Areas Inventory of Rowan County.

The land includes both uplands and wetlands, and although the drive from the highway into its heart is only about a mile, the area feels remote. Wear said the opportunity to preserve wetlands, uplands and forested areas, all together, is important.

He thinks it will be even more important in 10 or 15 years. Pointing out geese flying low over the water, Wear said, “It’s really going to be important when we look around and the land is all gone.”

Preserving and managing this property could ultimately affect Davie and Davidson counties. Michael said it complements the Cooleemee Plantation, a private conservation easement on the Yadkin River in Davie County. “Add to that Boone’s Cave State Park in Davidson County, and you begin to see the pieces fitting together,” Michael said.

The U.S. Field and Wildlife Service has been a consulting partner on the project. “This is truly a remarkable partnership,” Michael said. “Through internship programs and teaching and the cross fertilization of ideas, it’s a flourishing relationship.”

It won’t be possible to figure out how the public might use the land, Michael said, until they have worked out how to manage the property.

Wear said the refuge will not be open to the public on a daily basis, but the Center for the Environment and the LandTrust will arrange field trips for the public, and it will be the site of many Catawba student classes and projects in wildlife studies and conservation studies. ■