

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Mars Hill College students help conserve a rare plant

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

When it comes to endangered species conservation, one of the toughest, but most fundamental, pieces of knowledge is simply knowing where they are. By definition they're rare and can be hard to find. In the 1990s, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service paid for a thorough inventory of the endangered Roan Mountain bluet, a small plant found at only a handful of high elevation spots in five western North Carolina counties. It was a quality inventory, showing specific locations for plants, and giving plenty of information on those sites, but it's information that has been left behind by an increasingly digital world. Today it sits as a stack of topographic maps with dots on them and a pile of data sheets.

However, that's changing. Students in Scott Pearson's Introduction to Geographic Information Systems class at Mars Hill College will take all those paper files and turn them into digital files, enabling scientists to project on their computers a map showing the locations of all the sites, and call up information for each site, such as habitat type, elevation, and number of plants.

Having it in a digital format will also let scientists overlap it with other spatial-information, for example maps predicting where development is likely to occur. This then helps land managers determine their conservation priorities.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.