



## Conservancy acquires important land in Hickory Nut Gorge

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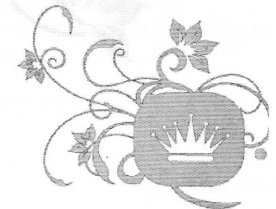
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The Nature Conservancy and the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund announced Tuesday a major acquisition of land at Hickory Nut Gorge that will eventually be added to Chimney Rock State Park. The land was negotiated from the landowner Rolland King. - **Erin Brethauer**

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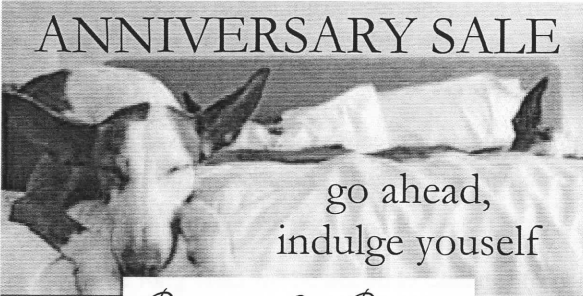


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**LAKE LURE** – The Nature Conservancy's planned purchase this week of a 357-acre tract of land adjacent to Rumbling Bald Mountain will protect one of the most significant undeveloped tracts in Hickory Nut Gorge, the organization announced Tuesday.


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The acquisition of the land is part of a larger conservation strategy in Hickory Nut Gorge and the development of Chimney Rock State Park, which was authorized by the General Assembly in 2005 and includes the 996-acre Chimney Rock Park that was purchased by the state in 2007.

Conservation groups are working to acquire land for the new state park, which now includes more than 4,000 acres of land.

"By preserving a property of this size in Hickory Nut Gorge, what we are doing, is making landscape-scale ecological protection a reality," Ray said of the area that is home to a variety of plant and animal species, including the endangered green salamander, as well as the headwaters of the Rocky Broad River. "We're not just preserving the parts; we're preserving a whole intricate system."

The conservancy and the Clean Water Management Trust Fund had to work quickly to protect the King Tract. Owner Rolland King and his family were in the process of selling the land to developers when the

The conservancy expects to sign off on the nearly \$7 million purchase of the King Tract with a \$3.5 million grant from the N.C. Clean Water Management Trust Fund and a \$3.25 million loan that they hope to repay through private donations.

The tract, which starts on the slopes of Rumbling Bald and descends 900 feet into the valley below, will help ensure that development doesn't encroach on the mountain that is protected by other Nature Conservancy acquisitions, said David Ray, the conservancy's Southern Blue Ridge Project Director.

A popular rock climbing area, Rumbling Bald is distinguished by its series of three mounds and towering rock cliffs that rise 2,800 feet above Lake

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Nature Conservancy and the trust fund stepped in and brokered a deal to sell the land to the conservancy.

"It appealed to us because the land will be left in its natural state," said King, who has owned the land since 1956 and developed about 1,000 acres of the original 1,700-acre tract.

The biggest challenge that the conservancy faces now is raising money to repay the loan on the King Tract, made even more difficult by the current downturn in the economy. The group hopes to raise more than \$2.5 million by the end of next year.

"Clearly, that's one of the things that will be a challenge," said Mike Horak, associate director of philanthropy for the Nature Conservancy in Asheville. "The economy will definitely have an impact on our ability to do that."

Whether the King Tract will be added to Chimney Rock State Park will be decided in the coming months as the N.C. Division of Parks and Recreation develops the park's Master Plan that it received funding for in July, said Don Reuter, the agency's assistant director.

The plan helps the agency decide what services, facilities and additional land will make up the state park.

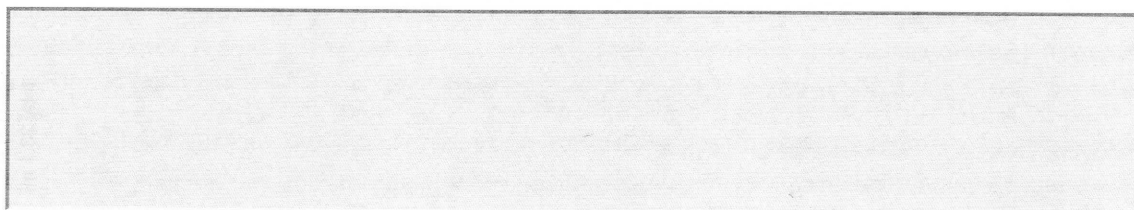
"We are confident that it will be a crown jewel in the state's park system," Reuter said.



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