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Op-ed: 10 years of saving the Sandhills

By Katherine Skinner

This paper recently reported that red-cockaded woodpeckers are thriving at Fort Bragg. It is fair to say that the news was brought to you by the North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership, which is celebrating its 10th anniversary this month.

The partnership was formed in response to the loss of longleaf pine forest, which in turn led to reduced habitat for the federally endangered red-cockaded woodpeckers. Since its creation, the partnership has accomplished some amazing things, including:

- Protection of more than 16 miles of Fort Bragg boundary.
- Creation of the 4,400-acre Carvers Creek State Park.
- Addition of more than 3,300 acres to the Sandhills Game Lands.
- Conservation of more than 25,000 acres of land across the region.

Collectively, the partners are burning more than 88,000 acres of longleaf pine annually - a process necessary for the health of this fire-adapted ecosystem - and have planted more than 350,000 longleaf seedlings to restore the longleaf forest across the Sandhills.

Of course, one of the crowning partnership achievements was recovery of the red-cockaded woodpecker. Originally, that recovery was slated to occur next year. But, it was accomplished in 2005 - six years ahead of schedule.

While all of this is great news for the environment, it is also important news for the Sandhills economy. Clearly, protecting Fort Bragg's border has ensured that the base continues to operate at full throttle, providing a valuable economic driver for the region.

The creation of a new state park also will pay off for the local economy. A 2008 study by N.C. State University researchers estimated that state parks contribute about \$400 million annually to the state's economy. Increasing hunting and fishing opportunities also help the local economy.

Conservation also is a good selling point when it comes to attracting new businesses. Businesses want to locate where the quality of life is good. Having places such as Carvers Creek State Park in your backyard will give businesses yet another reason to locate here in the Sandhills.

A group effort

None of the individual entities that make up the Sandhills Conservation Partnership could have accomplished all of this on their own. This is truly a case of the whole being greater than the sum of its parts. Groups as diverse as the U.S. Army, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission, North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation, North Carolina Division of Forest Resources, The Nature Conservancy, the Sandhills Area Land Trust and the Sandhills Ecological Institute have found common interests that make working together the best way to accomplish each of their individual missions.

On Sept. 11 from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m., the Partnership will hold a 10th anniversary public open house at Weymouth Woods Sandhills Nature Preserve in Southern Pines. There will be guided nature walks and a variety of displays, highlighting the Partnership's work. This is a great opportunity for all of us to think about how much we have accomplished in the past 10 years. It also is a time to look ahead to what more we can accomplish together in the years to come.

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