

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

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Maps With a Message

Here in the northeast region of North Carolina we have something very special—quite rare in the southeast. There are large expanses of undisturbed forests and other types of habitats that still exist along our rivers and sounds. There are many wild places here with surprising diversity in every form of life. How do we plan for a future that will enable us to protect the natural areas that make the region special? In order to preserve the essence of this place we must know and understand the natural communities, the natural forces shaping them and their interrelationship with human development.

Since 1979 The Nature Conservancy has been working with universities, and national, state and local organizations to study this region's vegetation, wildlife, and the action of the rivers and their influence on the region. With the help of The University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill and funding through the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mellon foundations, the Conservancy began building a computerized mapping library that links research and surveys to the lands on which they were performed. At first it detailed the lower Roanoke River and Cashie, and now expands to embrace the Chowan, Scuppernong and Alligator Rivers, as well as the Albemarle Sound.

A combination of computerized topographic maps overlaid with satellite images forms the foundation of the library. In essence, this foundation consists of some very colorful maps that depict specific landforms and vegetation, complete with coordinates that accurately match points on the ground. The computerized map is comprehensive, with community boundaries (like Windsor), flooding patterns (water levels at different times of the year), roads, railroads, boundaries of nationally recognized wetland areas and other details. The library continually expands, with additions of completed and ongoing research (such as bird, bat, reptile, moth and vegetation studies). Each study is entered into the computer library complete with mapping coordinates, further enlarging the collection, adding more detail.

With each new entry we gain a more complete picture of this region's wild places and how they are interrelated. In my next column I will tell you about a new project that is using information from this library in order to give us a picture of where some of our most important wild places lie. Such mapping will provide a valuable tool for planning the future management of our area's natural resources.