

Five years ago, Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy (CMLC) began pursuing a complement to our budding conservation efforts in the Hickory Nut Gorge: the development of an extensive hiking trail network that would provide public access to visitors seeking to enjoy these natural treasures as well as connectivity to enable them to traverse the ridges, hollows, and forests that link them together. This trail network-which has now reached nearly 10 miles in length-enables nature seekers of all abilities and interests the opportunity to enjoy our conserved lands, and ultimately make the connection between the importance of natural resource protection and public access and recreation. CMLC quickly discovered that public trails quickly increased the immediate relevancy and the direct tangibility of land conservation.

This trail network-and its incalculable benefit on land conservation in our region-would not be possible without the tireless efforts and dedicated service of the Carolina Mountain Club (CMC). Simply put, the CMC has put these trails on-the-ground. Since our initial partnership with the CMC on the Bearwallow Mountain Trail in 2010, to the completion of the Trombatore Trail linking conserved lands of CMLC and SAHC in 2013, to the extension of the Little Bearwallow Trail in 2015, the CMC has created-from scratch-the Upper Hickory Nut Gorge Trail and brought its planned 15-mile length to 66% completion. And they're still just getting started.

To do this, the volunteers from the CMC donated an astonishing 5,563 hours to Carolina Mountain Land Conservancy. That is the equivalent of one volunteer building trail eight hours a day, every day, for nearly two straight years. And while their donated hours are impressive, the demanding nature of their selfless work is even more impressive. Volunteers endure extreme temperatures and challenging weather conditions all while carrying heavy tools in particularly rugged and steep terrain. Their work is mentally daunting, sometimes often dangerous, and always physically taxing. Bugs, snakes, poison ivy, falling rocks, dirt and mud, sweltering humidity to frozen ground, and long arduous hikes to the work sites-no obstacle is too much for the CMC in their pursuit of building trail to enable others-for generations to come-to enjoy our natural heritage and cherished conserved lands.

The CMC has defined selfless devotion to facilitating the enjoyment of our natural heritage among the community. Land conservation is more known, appreciated, and directly "touched" thanks to the immense involvement of the CMC in the Hickory Nut Gorge. And thanks to their hard work, the stage is set for much more of it to come.

For their incomparable, selfless contribution of time, effort, and energy to CMLC's Upper Hickory Nut Gorge Trail network-as well as their ongoing steadfast stewardship to the trails they have created-the NC Land Trust Council and CMLC are honored to recognize the Carolina Mountain Club as the 2015 Community Conservation Partner of the Year.