

Keeping our Mountains

By Nancy Spann

I recently read in our local newspapers about the results of two surveys that measure what both tourists and local citizens say is important to them about living in and visiting Boone and Watauga County.

The first article (“Scenic Byways and downtown areas help sustain region’s tourism industry,” *Watauga Democrat*, July 30, 2007) questioned a wide range of people in the Blue Ridge Natural Heritage Area, including Boone and Watauga County, about the activities that bring them to the area and what they do when they get here. The top three activities were drives on parkways, outdoor recreation, and visiting historic sites. The authors state that one of the main industries in our area will continue to be tourism and that policymakers and leaders need to protect view sheds and open spaces as these are the features that draw visitors to our area and drive our economy.

The second article (“Tourism study rates environment as important,” *Watauga Democrat*, August 9, 2007) suggested that local residents are concerned about the natural environment, as it is the primary thing that makes Watauga County special. According to these authors, the environment “may well be the engine that drives the county’s economy and contributes to the quality of life residents have come to know and love over the years.”

Many people are moving to our area to have a quality of life that includes the scenic vistas, the recreation, the small town, and the offerings of the University. Our visitors come to this area for the same reasons. Our own residents live and work here because they love the environment and the quality of life they find here. These facts tie our economy to our environment in such a way that it is in the best interests of all of us to “keep our mountains” natural and our scenic vistas free of pollution and eyesores. It also includes protecting our rivers and streams which supply our drinking water, protecting our hillsides from erosion and overbuilding, reducing pollution, balancing growth while keeping our town character, and promoting our cultural heritage.

The results of these surveys reminded me of why I live here and why I am involved with MountainKeepers. These surveys suggest that a sustainable economy is directly connected with the natural environment for both citizens and visitors. They suggest that we need to “keep our mountains” in as pristine and natural condition as possible. They reinforce ways that individuals can be active in their own lives to protect the environment and “keep our mountains.” In the last eight months, this column has offered ideas for individuals to incorporate a “mountain keeping” approach in their own lives and has included information on conserving water, stopping litter, recycling, alternative transportation, and other ways to have a sustainable lifestyle. By incorporating these ideas into our daily lives, collectively we can make a significant difference that will have

long-term effects, both economically and environmentally, on our community and on these mountains that we all love.

Go to www.mountainkeepers.org for information both about the organization and for archived copies of the “MountainKeeping” articles.