



NORTH CAROLINA SANDHILLS CONSERVATION PARTNERSHIP:



SUSTAINING THE NORTH CAROLINA SANDHILLS

Protection of the longleaf pine and wiregrass ecosystem is essential to recovering the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker and maintaining military readiness.

The red-cockaded woodpecker (RCW) population is estimated to be 3 percent of the population that existed at the time of European settlement, though it has been listed as endangered since 1970. This small, barred-back woodpecker's endangerment is the result of its very specific habitat requirements and human intervention. It is the only woodpecker that excavates cavities in mature (80-100 years old) live trees. The creation of these nest cavities in live trees can take one to three years; family groups, consisting of a breeding pair and "helpers," utilize the same cavities from one generation to the next. RCWs primarily select longleaf pine, which are prone to a heart fungus that makes the wood softer and easier to excavate. However, longleaf pines are often harvested by private landowners before they reach 60 years to avoid this disease.

Only 5 percent of historic longleaf pine habitat remains. Short rotation forestry, development and subsequent fire suppression have caused this decrease in habitat quality. Both the longleaf pine and RCW are dependent on frequent burns that maintain an open midstory. Biologists estimate that 988,000 acres of longleaf pine habitat are needed, in the woodpecker's historical range, to achieve successful recovery.



Fort Bragg and the nearby Sandhills area game lands host the second largest population of RCWs. However, this population is separated by a collection of private lands into two subpopulations. With increasing development, it is essential that land be protected to minimize further fragmentation of this unique bird's habitat. Lands surrounding Fort Bragg are also important to buffer and provide additional space for military training.

Through the protection and restoration of RCW habitat, an entire ecosystem can be conserved and military training can be sustained.



ACQUISITION OF LONGLEAF PINE HABITAT WILL:

- ◆ Protect other threatened and endangered species
- ◆ Benefit game species (deer, quail, turkey)
- ◆ Prevent installation boundary development
- ◆ Reduce training restrictions on the installation, through RCW recovery
- ◆ Increase area available for low-impact Army training exercises

PRIMARY PARTNERS

Protecting the longleaf pine ecosystem can be accomplished through a partnership of diverse governmental organizations to purchase land or conservation easements from willing private landowners.

The North Carolina Sandhills Conservation Partnership is helping to achieve the equally important, but potentially disparate, national objectives of protecting endangered species and maintaining military readiness. Unrelated public agencies and non-governmental organizations, having different but compatible interests, have combined resources and made commitments to achieve common purposes. This stakeholder-based partnership uses multiple funding sources and acquisition strategies to: 1) preserve the longleaf pine ecosystem and its associated species at the landscape level, 2) preserve forested habitat to help recover the red-cockaded woodpecker and other species of concern, 3) maintain military readiness of units and soldiers at Fort Bragg, and 4) increase public recreation opportunities.

Together, the partnership agencies and conservation organizations own or manage approximately 224,000 acres within the boundaries of a proposed North Carolina Sandhills Longleaf Reserve. However, these lands are fragmented and historically have not been managed in a cohesive manner. To accomplish the above objectives, the partnership is purchasing land and conservation easements from willing private landowners. The partnership is also working to create a holistic management approach at a bio-reserve scale. This involves many entities and stakeholders that have a significant impact on the management and development of the Sandhills land base. Those that have made major contributions of time and money are listed below.



The Army is committed to maintaining readiness while providing proper stewardship of natural resources, especially endangered species. Army installations are increasingly becoming "ecological islands" of relatively undisturbed habitat surrounded

by urban development. Fort Bragg is the Army's premiere power projection platform and is home of the XVIIIth Airborne Corps and the U.S. Army Special Operations Command. As development has encroached on the last open spaces in the Sandhills, Fort Bragg has become a critical land manager for the red-cockaded woodpecker and the longleaf pine ecosystem. Purchase and protection of habitat will contribute to the recovery of the RCW and a reduction of training restrictions on Fort Bragg. Some of the protected land may also provide buffer areas and may be available for low-impact training. The Army has contributed significant fund and is involved in the recovery strategy, establishing protection priorities, monitoring, and mapping.



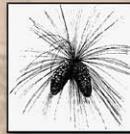
The North Carolina Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) endeavors to protect diverse natural communities through the acquisition of land. Acting as a major "real estate agent" of the partnership, TNC officially purchases large tracts of land and easements with partnership money. In addition, TNC partially funded the project and is involved in research, public outreach, and data management.



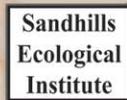
The North Carolina Department of Transportation (NCDOT) contributed funds for the protection of 2,500 acres of RCW habitat as a mitigation with the USFWS for highway construction.



The North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (NCWRC) works to promote the "wise use" of wildlife resources and manages the 60,000-acre Sandhills Game Lands. The Game Lands support the second largest concentration of red-cockaded woodpeckers in the Sandhills. Primarily used for outdoor recreational pursuits such as hunting, the Game Lands Management Plan prioritizes longleaf pine habitat management to benefit the red-cockaded woodpecker. Land acquired through the partnership will provide additional hunting and recreational opportunities and will help to protect the RCW and longleaf pine habitat by reducing fragmentation of the landscape and enhancing connectivity.



The Sandhills Area Land Trust (SALT) consists of volunteers that work to protect significant tracts of land in the Sandhills area. They are involved in land acquisition and public outreach.



The Sandhills Ecological Institute (SEI) is a non-profit science and conservation organization that provides the partnership with the research and scientific basis for managing RCW and protecting the longleaf pine habitat. SEI has provided a leadership role in establishing the RCW recovery strategy and in designing the proposed reserve. SEI is also centrally involved with the development of management strategies, data analysis, and monitoring throughout the Sandhills, to include Fort Bragg.



The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) works with others to conserve wildlife for the benefit of the American public. This includes recovery of endangered species and associated habitats such as the RCW in longleaf pine on Fort Bragg and the Sandhills. The USFWS has partially funded the project and is centrally involved with the RCW recovery strategy, monitoring, proposed reserve design, public outreach, and data management. In addition, the USFWS serves as the primary coordinating body for the partnership, provides technical support, and staffs the Service's North Carolina Sandhills Field Station. The service also maintains relationships with local landowners through the safe harbor program that encourages enhancement of RCW habitat on private lands.