

Going green

Plastic bags and public parks among top environmental priorities



BY CHASE DAVIS

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It's no secret that locals and visitors alike fall in love with Western North Carolina largely because of its natural amenities. For some organizations, preserving the region's environment is of paramount importance, as seen in April when MountainTrue, alongside several other local organizations, proposed a ban on single-use plastic bags in Asheville. The initiative garnered support across the community and among local officials but was abruptly brought to a halt in September when the N.C. General Assembly barred municipalities from regulating plastic bags.

However, WNC was able to take several other steps forward to help preserve the local environment. In August, RiverLink opened the greenway at **Karen Cragolin Park** after 17 years of removing toxic soil and replanting native grasses and flora. Additionally, the Southern Appalachian Highlands Conservancy secured 343 acres on top of Deaverview Mountain for a public park.

Xpress asked several local environmental activists to reflect on how the environment and related issues shaped 2023.

What local environmental issue was underreported in 2023?

"After China banned crypto mining, the number of U.S. crypto mines exploded, including here in WNC. Mining cryptocurrencies like Bitcoin provides little in the way of jobs, economic benefits or tax revenues for our communities. Instead, they gobble up immense amounts of electricity that should be used for more socially productive purposes and threaten North Carolina's green energy agenda. Both Buncombe and Madison counties have passed moratoriums on new crypto mines, but we really need broader statewide action."

— **Bob Wagner**,
executive director, MountainTrue

"We learned in 2022 that the French Broad River and its watershed contribute over \$3.8 billion annually to the region's economy but that 19 miles of the river [from the airport to Woodfin] and multiple tributaries are classified as impaired due to fecal coliform. The river's water quality and ecosystem are fragile, but we continue to build and develop, putting additional pressures on the river and watershed without acknowledging the consequences of doing so."

— **Lisa Raleigh**,
executive director, RiverLink

"I think it's easy to lose sight of how the global change in climate is impacting us in the French Broad River valley. For us, it means an influx of people seeking a cool respite and also a reordering of wild species responding to hotter conditions at lower elevations. Our mountains are a treasure box of perfect conditions for humans and biodiversity, but all the systems are under strain now."

— **Jay Leutze**,
senior adviser,
Southern Appalachian
Highlands Conservancy

"Both the City of Asheville and Buncombe County have passed 100% renewable goals. It would be nice if their progress toward meeting these goals was reported and also their plans going forward to meet the goals."

— **Ken Brame**,
president, Sierra Club's WNC Group

Whose local environmental contributions surprised you the most in 2023?

"I was delighted by the attendance and participation in the French Broad River Partnership's annual meeting. The panelists reflected the importance of the river and watershed to the region and included decision-makers and thought leaders from our elected officials, government, industry, business and tourism stakeholders, in



BAG MONSTER: A member of the Plastic-Free WNC coalition shows off a suit of plastic litter at a rally in Pack Square before advocating for a plastic-bag ban. The state legislature halted such bans. Photo by Greg Parlier

addition to the 200-plus in attendance. It was a wonderful example of everyone coming together to talk about this critical resource and how we can work together to protect it."

— **Lisa Raleigh**

"The closing of the Canton paper mill cost our region good-paying jobs and will be a painful chapter for many families in Haywood and Buncombe counties. There are also ongoing pollution issues that need to be addressed. However, the French Broad and Pigeon rivers are already bouncing back. I've also been heartened by Canton Mayor **Zeb Smathers'** commitment to cleaning up the site and his vision for a bright postindustrial future for the town."

— **Bob Wagner**

"Woodfin approved new zoning laws to better manage development, including restrictions on steep-slope development, along with restrictions on short-term rentals to better manage its

explosive grow and shortage of affordable housing. Weaverville purchased its first all-electric police car, making it one of the first towns in North Carolina to do that. Buncombe County is establishing a Green Fund to help local citizens invest in energy efficiency."

— **Ken Brame**

"Kids! At our Community Farm in Alexander, kids keep showing up to help us build trails, help with habitat management and implement our regenerative farming concept. Their enthusiasm and elbow grease inspire us all to keep working."

— **Jay Leutze**

What was your organization's greatest achievement in 2023?

"The Sierra Club, along with a coalition of other environmental groups, worked to educate citizens on the



KEN BRAME



JAY LEUTZE



LISA RALEIGH



BOB WAGNER