



## **Virginia needs to fund land conservation**

by Anna L. Lawson

*Roanoke Times April 11, 2006*

Lawson is chairwoman of The Nature Conservancy in Virginia's board of trustees and a former chairwoman of the Hollins University board.

If you can turn away from the amazing views on top of Brumley Mountain, you might notice a crack snaking across part of the rocky peak. This crevice only hints at the wonders ahead, but if you follow its general direction, maneuver among some shrubs and stunted trees and then use just a little imagination, you may wonder whether you're stepping through a portal to another landscape.

As the temperature dips dramatically, you descend into a canyon-like labyrinth cut into sandstone geologists believe to be 420 million years old. The local people in this part of Southwestern Virginia call these rocky, winding passages the Great Channels of Virginia.

But because of limited access to Brumley Mountain (a well-known landmark in Washington County), many local residents may never have seen the views or the Great Channels for themselves. A new partnership that The Nature Conservancy is pursuing with the state, however, would both permanently protect the mountain's forests and provide visitors with numerous opportunities to explore the mountain.

Virginia's forests are changing rapidly. Just two weeks ago, thousands of acres of Virginia forestland changed ownership overnight when International Paper announced that it was selling the majority of its land across the United States to two separate investor groups.

The conservancy collaborated with conservation-minded private investors to secure nearly 21,000 acres of IP's most ecologically significant lands in southeast Virginia. The conservancy hopes to work with the state to transfer 4,900 acres at Big Woods for a new state forest in Sussex County -- the first in Southside Virginia.

While we are proud of our success in preserving this property, every year in Virginia at least that much forestland -- nearly 21,000 acres -- is converted to some form of permanent development. Closer to home, the upper Roanoke watershed ranks as one of the top 15 areas in the nation where housing density is expected to increase dramatically over the next 25 years, according to the U.S. Forest Service in 2005. Losing forestland means risking the quality of our drinking water, reducing outdoor recreation opportunities, endangering wildlife and transforming our region's rural character.

Though ample warning signs indicate how fast our rural lands are disappearing, Virginia consistently ranks near the bottom among states in funding for land conservation. Last year, we made progress by earmarking about \$12.5 million in funds for the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation. This appropriation, however, represents the commonwealth's first significant contribution since establishing the foundation back in 1999.

In stark contrast, the North Carolina General Assembly has created myriad funding sources and, in 1999, voted to save 1 million additional acres in the state by 2009. The North Carolina Water Management Trust Fund alone receives \$100 million a year. This fund provides grants to state agencies, localities and nonprofits that acquire land and easements along rivers and streams to protect water quality.

Because of North Carolina's diverse funding sources, The Nature Conservancy is partnering with state agencies to acquire roughly 80,000 ecologically significant acres as part of the IP deal announced the other week. North Carolina residents will be able to enjoy most of this land for hunting, fishing, hiking, boating and other recreation.

Without a reliable funding source for land conservation in Virginia, we risk losing such partnership opportunities to preserve Virginia's natural heritage -- places like Brumley Mountain, where developers sought to build vacation homes. Last year, the Virginia Land Conservation Foundation granted the Department of Forestry \$1.4 million for Brumley Mountain, a third of the funds needed to purchase the conservancy's 4,800 acres.

We hope the General Assembly will provide funding to purchase the entire Brumley Mountain property for all Virginians to enjoy. We also hope legislators will recognize the importance of funding the Sussex County state forest at Big Woods, along with other critical conservation lands throughout the commonwealth.

There's still time for the General Assembly to act, but as everyone knows, the cost of land is only increasing, even as conservation opportunities grow scarcer. For the state adequately to protect its natural resources and compete with private developers, it must have funding sources that are sufficient and reliable.

Private land conservation groups and local communities can't go it alone. If Virginia sticks to the status quo in funding natural resource protection, the state will be forced to sit on the sidelines as outside forces reshape the future of our natural and rural lands.