

*"The biological health of our region's natural communities is inextricably linked with the economic health of our human communities."*

## WHY THIS MATTERS

### THE CASE FOR RESOURCE PROTECTION

All across the southeastern United States, communities are grappling with an issue that's not going away any time soon. In response to increasing development pressures, public officials in these communities are making land-use decisions that will either preserve land and water or tip the balance toward relentless commercial and residential expansion—tragically, at the expense of precious natural resources that provide real economic value to our communities.

The myths and preconceived notions they encounter during this discussion are persistent. Open space is empty space. Development brings in more tax dollars, and that's always better for the bottom line. Wetlands are wastelands. The questions they are being called upon to answer are increasingly complex. The stakes could hardly be higher.

These incredibly rich ecological systems have nurtured and sustained us through centuries of growth and prosperity. Mountains have sheltered us. Clean waters have quenched our thirst and river-roads have been an important route for commerce. Forests, fields, marshes and coastal estuaries have yielded endless bounty. People have always been drawn to places of natural beauty, and wilderness areas have recently become important destinations for ecotourism.

These resources have furnished us with both livelihood and recreation. In the face of encroaching development, however, their future is in question. The determinations made by communities with regard to the development/preservation issue will shape their economic viability for decades to come.

There are underlying critical linkages within the framework of this discussion that have far-reaching implications. For example, most people would agree that the ability of a community to offer a good quality of life for its citizens is absolutely fundamental to its future. This is also a key issue when it comes to corporate attraction and retention.

*"According to an annual survey of CEOs conducted in 1989 by the world's largest privately held real estate services firm, quality of life for employees was the third most important factor in locating a business—just behind access to domestic markets and availability of skilled labor."*

When asked to describe which features they consider essential to a good quality of life, respondents consistently mention access to natural settings, recreational opportunities, and open space. It follows that making land-use decisions that threaten or deplete natural resources is counter-productive to a contented citizenry, corporate recruitment, and—in the end—to the economic vitality upon which a community's very future depends.

Therefore, it becomes crucial that we learn to recognize that natural resources supply us with much-needed goods and services—though we're not used to thinking of them in this way. That's because the value of these goods and services is seldom expressed in monetary terms. How can you put a price tag on a clear and icy-cold mountain stream brimming with trout, a salt marsh rhythmically cleansed by tides and rich in waterfowl, or deer tracks spotted on a foggy morning walk along a river's edge?

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, best known for his famous hierarchy of needs, had a saying that if the only tool you

use is a hammer, then every problem begins to look like a nail. Following that line of reasoning, **"if the only tool you use for measuring value is a price tag, then those values that are not easily monetized begin to look like they have no value."** And the argument for preserving natural resources is quickly minimized.

It's true that wetlands, forests, streams, estuaries, and open spaces provide us with benefits that are sometimes difficult to quantify. But it's also true that their presence in our lives inspires us and enriches us. They give us places to go that renew our spirits. We often take these woods, wetlands and waters for granted, but—if they were suddenly to disappear—we would find ourselves bereft. To complicate matters even further, it's generally accepted that we lack a complete knowledge of how alterations in biologically complex natural systems affect the level and quality of services they provide. Sometimes, even seemingly minor changes can disrupt a delicate environmental balance and result in unforeseen consequences.

All of which points to the need for proceeding thoughtfully and carefully when faced with land-use decisions. Responsible, environmentally-sound choices can result in solutions that preserve a community's natural resources while maximizing quality-of-life benefits for its residents.

