II. PARK PURPOSES

MISSION STATEMENT FOR THE STATE PARKS SYSTEM

The North Carolina State Parks System exists for the enjoyment, education, health, and inspiration of all our citizens and visitors. The mission of the state parks system is to conserve and protect representative examples of the natural beauty, ecological features, and recreation resources of statewide significance; to provide outdoor recreation opportunities in a safe and healthy environment; and to provide education opportunities that promote stewardship of the state's natural heritage.

GORGES STATE PARK PURPOSE STATEMENT

Prior to the Flood of 1916, the land that is now Gorges State Park was comprised of several large parcels of land owned by local citizens. Singer Sewing Machine Company purchased the property and used it for logging purposes in the 1920's and 1930's. Due to its steep topography and high levels of annual rainfall, the Gorges tract and surrounding lands offered potential for the development of hydropower projects. This potential use enticed Duke Energy Corporation to purchase the property between 1940 and 1960. In the late 1970's, Duke began conducting conservation studies and limiting access to the property to protect the environment. Nearly 275 acres were placed on the North Carolina Registry of Natural Heritage Areas in 1982 due to the presence of numerous rare species. By the late 1990's, Duke Energy had determined that it no longer needed large areas of the Gorges property and offered to sell the land to both North and South Carolina. The State of North Carolina purchased 10,000 acres in Transylvania County in 1999 and established Gorges State Park and the adjacent Toxaway Game Land.

A significant geologic feature, from which the park derives its name, is the abundance of deep gorges created in part by a dramatic change in elevation of over 2,000 feet in a little over three miles. This abrupt transition, combined with the high levels of annual rainfall and a large drainage area, produces an abundance of waterfalls that visitors seek and enjoy. Gorges State Park is unique within the state parks system in that it straddles two major geologic provinces and the Brevard Fault Zone, which separates the two. The Brevard Fault Zone, one of the major ancient fault zones of the Appalachians, contains unusual rock types such as mylonite and marble. Mass slope movement features, such as the large slide on the east side of the Toxaway River, are evident. In addition, many boulder and cobble deposits have been identified along an 8,000-foot reach of the Toxaway River, attributed to flooding that followed an earthen dam failure at Lake Toxaway during August of 1916.

The exceptional terrain and climate within Gorges State Park has made possible a rich and unusual assemblage of flora and fauna. The large and unbroken natural landscape includes high quality examples of extensive natural communities such as Montane Oak-Hickory Forest, Chestnut Oak Forest, and Acidic Cove Forest, and widespread Pine-Oak/Health Forest. Rich Cove Forest and Spray

Cliff Forest, uncommon natural communities, occur in small patches within the park. The area contains a concentration of rare plants, such as Southern Oconee Bells (Shortia galacifolia var galacifolia), that is significant for the state and the entire southern Appalachians. A particularly rich assortment of bryophytes and ferns, including a species more common to the tropical forests of Central America, is presumably owed to the high moisture and sheltered temperatures of the gorges. The animal diversities of natural communities in the park are also high, and rare mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians, fish, and invertebrates are present.

The park's river and streams combine with topography to create a variety of scenic waterfalls that draw visitors to the park. Powerful waterfalls plunging over rocky cliffs, falls shrouded in mist, cascading waters and riffles offer sights and sounds that are among the park's more significant features. Higher up, ridge-top vistas extend for miles, offering panoramas of tree-blanketed slopes, rugged mountain ranges and lush vegetation. Overlooks offer spectacular views of the surrounding natural landscape, with the view from the Bearwallow Valley observation deck stretching up to 20 miles into South Carolina on clear days. Whether listening to the thunder of Bearwallow Falls, breathing in the rich, organic smells of the forests, or seeing the trees shimmer in a breeze along the mountainside, visitors find their time spent in the park to be both exhilarating and peaceful.

Gorges State Park offers many recreational opportunities that immerse visitors in its rich natural resources. Diverse bird species, from breeding residents to neotropical migrants, lure both the amateur and serious bird-watcher. Miles of trails offer hikers a range of experiences, from the easy Buckberry Ridge loop trail conveniently accessed from a picnicking area, to rugged overnight backpacking adventures deep within the park. Some old roadbeds are sufficiently constructed to allow a mix of trail uses such as horseback riding and mountain biking. Opportunities exist for group camping, picnicking, primitive camping and tent and trailer camping. Fishing is permitted in the park's river and streams. The park's large amount of undeveloped land and rugged terrain creates exceptional opportunities for visitors to experience wilderness.

Despite the rugged topography that typifies this portion of North Carolina, the area encompassed by the park has a history of human use that covers several thousand years. Archaeological investigations have documented numerous sites and features throughout the park. These include pre-historic sites used by Indians, such as small hunting camps, as well as historic sites used by European settlers, such as homesteads and cemeteries. The earliest pre-historic sites are believed to be up to 8,000 years in age, and sites established by Europeans date to the early 1700's.

Gorges State Park exists primarily so its outstanding geologic, biologic and scenic features can be protected, and also for its recreational and archaeological resources. The Division of Parks and Recreation is charged with preserving these values and providing experiences within its units that promote pride in and understanding of the valuable natural heritage of North Carolina.

03/04