

CASE STUDY: TYRRELL COUNTY CONSERVATION AND ECO-TOURISM DEVELOPMENT

SUMMARY

CHALLENGES

- Recent Land Acquisition
- Distressed Economic Climate
- Tax Revenue Loss
- Racial Inequality

SOLUTIONS

- Cultural and Eco-Tourism Plans
- Community Engagement

RESULTS

- Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge
- Visitor Center
- Scuppernon River Festival
- Tyrrell County CDC
- Tyrrell County Youth Corps
- Palmetto Peartree Preserve

LESSONS LEARNED

- Engaging Community is Good Investment
- Don't Make Assumptions



Project: Tyrrell County Conservation & Eco-Tourism Development

Partners:

- **Local Partners:** Tyrrell County, Town of Columbia, Cooperative Extension, Tyrrell County Chamber of Commerce, Tyrrell County School System, local businesses and churches
- **Regional / Statewide Partners:** US Fish & Wildlife Service, Albemarle Council of Governments, NC Department of Transportation, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, Duke University, NC State University Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism Management

Location: Tyrrell County is located in northeastern North Carolina and lies on the route that many tourists take to reach the Outer Banks. It is also the least populated county in the state and one of the poorest. Wetlands cover more than three-fourths of the county and more than 90% of the county's land base is considered unbuildable. The county lies at the center of seven national wildlife refuges: Alligator River, Cedar Island, Lake Mattamuskeet, Pocosin Lakes, Roanoke River, Pea Island and Swanquarter.



Albemarle-Pamlico Region, Source: Groundswell

Setting the Context:

- **Recent Land Acquisition:** TCF's initial involvement began with the bankruptcy sale of the 110,000-acre First Colony Farms, a proposed peat mining venture and agribusiness that had been in operation, but ultimately failed, leading to the loss of hundreds of jobs in three counties. TCF acquired the property in bankruptcy court and helped create a new wildlife refuge. Unfortunately, this resulted in a loss to the county of more than 30% in tax revenues on the 110,000 acres.
- **Economic Climate:** With such a small population and such a challenging landscape, traditional economic development strategies like industrial recruitment are not feasible in Tyrrell County. Extractive industries (e.g., logging and fishing) and agriculture were the most viable industries, but even these were starting to suffer in the economic climate of the early 1990s.

- **Racial Inequality:** The table on the left shows some of the racial disparities that exist in the county, especially economically. Although Tyrrell County is the smallest county (population-wise) in the state and has a roughly equal demographic distribution between whites and minorities, it suffers from significant, long-standing social justice and economic inequities.

How Challenges Were Met:

- **Cultural and Eco-Tourism Plans:** A year prior to the acquisition of First Colony Farms, Tyrrell County had undertaken a comprehensive strategic planning process to craft Vision 2000, a plan to revitalize both Tyrrell County and the county seat, Columbia. The plan focused on cultural and heritage tourism as a revitalization strategy that would capitalize on the passing tourists. The vision was to revitalize and develop their waterfront so that it appealed to both visitors and residents. However, if the plan had any chance of success, Tyrrell County would have to engage *all* its citizens, a significant deviation from the way the county was run at the time. When First Colony Farms was sold, local leaders saw potential in the new National Wildlife Refuge providing the “green infrastructure” for heritage and eco-tourism as economic development strategies.
- **Engagement of the Entire Community.** This is where TCF’s Resourceful Communities Program played an important role. Resourceful Communities facilitated community outreach and planning in the wake of establishing the National Wildlife Refuge and the development of eco-tourism priorities. They made an intentional effort to involve and engage people who had traditionally not been involved in decision-making processes. This included retired African-Americans, low-income residents and other minorities. Engaging the entire community made the implementation of Vision 2000 a truly sustainable effort.



Tyrrell County Residents

Results:

- **Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge:** The former First Colony Farms was eventually turned over to the US Fish & Wildlife Service and now comprises the Pocosin Lakes National Wildlife Refuge. It draws about 34,000 visitors annually and has a staff of sixteen.
- **Visitor Center:** Recognizing the refuge was here to stay, Tyrrell County sought to use the refuge as a means to draw tourists. They sought and gained funding from the NC Department of Transportation (NCOT) to create a rest area, hoping to induce tourists to visit Tyrrell County on their way out to the Outer Banks, and then received federal funds to build a visitor center for the refuge (and the six surrounding refuges).
- **Scuppernong River Festival:** This river festival began in 1991 as a means to create one community-wide event that would draw the *entire* community and outside residents. Held annually in October, the festival regularly draws a crowd of over 10,000 people. It is a day-long event, with music, pontoon boat rides, dancing, art shows and fireworks and has become firmly established in the fabric of the community.
- **Tyrrell County Community Development Corporation (CDC):** The Tyrrell County CDC was formed in 1992 to help low-income residents with their entrepreneurial endeavors, especially those seeking to start up natural resource or tourism-based businesses, that would catalyze and supplement the county’s efforts to promote tourism. The CDC, still in existence, provides technical assistance, business management experience and other counseling to help those residents with a business idea get their business off the ground.



Columbia Waterfront



Tyrrell County Youth Corps

- ***Tyrrell County Youth Corps:*** One of the most rewarding projects to come out of the community outreach and planning process, was the creation of a youth conservation corps. Established as a response to the lack of opportunities for Tyrrell County youth, the corps was initially comprised of 24 youth (ages 14-18) who worked part-time on building boardwalks and trails, planting trees and other eco-tourism infrastructure development. The corps later evolved into a full-time, year-round program (comprised of young people aged 17-25), who worked 4.5 days a week on eco-tourism infrastructure development and community service projects, then spent a half day on educational training. They worked towards their GED and focused on such topics as civic engagement, mediation, health and leadership skills.
- ***Palmetto Peartree Preserve:*** In 1999, TCF used NCDOT mitigation funds to purchase a 10,000-acre preserve along the Albemarle Sound in Tyrrell County. Established as a mitigation bank for the endangered red-cockaded woodpecker, TCF primarily manages the property as wildlife habitat. However, TCF is also using it as a model for sustainable forestry and sustainable rural ecotourism development, mostly by trying to attract birdwatchers and other nature lovers to the property. TCF also negotiated with the NCDOT to secure a \$1+ million endowment that is supporting management costs, and ensures that annual property taxes (which currently total more than \$75,000) will be paid in perpetuity.

Tools Used:

- ***Conservation Tools:*** Land acquisition, Youth Conservation Corps project implementation (Forest Restoration, Eco-Tourism Development, Eco-Tourism Infrastructure Development)
- ***Community Development Tools:*** Community Planning Process, Non-Profit Creation, Small Business Incubator Development, Leadership Training, Youth Corps Job Creation

Lessons Learned:

- ***Time spent engaging the community is a good investment.*** Although a community engagement process takes time, true sustainable achievements are made if the entire community is involved. TCF faced some initial opposition to the acquisition of the 110,000-acre First Colony Farms. However, TCF continued to work with county leaders to help achieve and implement their eco-tourism goals. Their continued work and presence in Tyrrell County enabled the purchase of the 10,000-acre Palmetto Peartree Preserve. Without this investment, TCF would probably not have continued their conservation efforts in the county.
- ***Don't make assumptions:*** Initially, there was some resistance to engaging the *entire* community in the eco-tourism development process. Some community members felt that low-income and minority residents who had previously not taken a role in the process had done so because they did not care about the environment. Once they became involved, however, residents saw that they had environmental concerns as well. Whether it was unsanitary wastewater conditions, stream degradation, or other concerns, minority and low-income residents had a stake in seeing the protection of their natural resources.



Environmental Education Trip at Palmetto Peartree Preserve