Untapped Potential

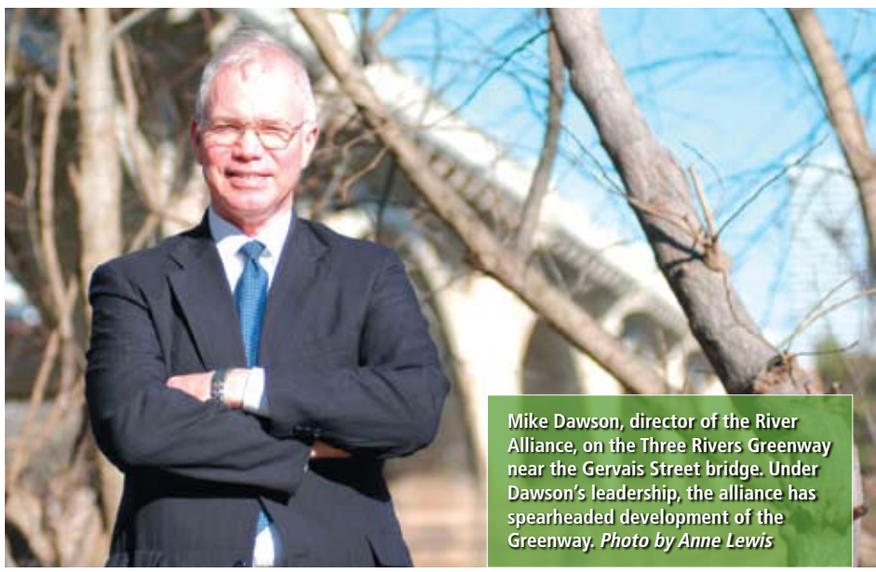
Ecotourism in the Midlands and Statewide

By ERIC KENNETH WARD

S.C. Sierra Club director Dell Isham makes a pop culture reference when he discusses the origins of the term "ecotourism."

Isham's reference is to the iconic 1967 movie *The Graduate*, which tells the story of a confused college graduate, Benjamin Braddock (Dustin Hoffman), trying to map his future amid the changing social and sexual mores of the '60s and against the backdrop of a decadent older generation.

At one point in the film, Benjamin gets some unsolicited advice from family friend Mr. McGuire during a party. "I just want to say one word to you," Mr. McGuire tells him, "just one word — plastics."



Mike Dawson, director of the River Alliance, on the Three Rivers Greenway near the Gervais Street bridge. Under Dawson's leadership, the alliance has spearheaded development of the Greenway. *Photo by Anne Lewis*

About 20 years after *The Graduate* premiered, Isham, then a state legislator in Oregon, gave a speech to a group of environmentalists in Newport, Ore. Ending his talk, he told the gathering, "I just want you to remember one thing — ecotourism." Some in attendance applauded the suggestion, Isham says, but others were aghast, a difference of opinion that reflects one of the main issues surrounding ecotourism — how it impacts the environment.

Down here in Bush country, a lot of red staters tend to deride Oregon as practically communistic, what with urban growth boundaries that actually limit how far a municipality can sprawl into the wild. Yet it's probably a good bet that many of those same Oregon detractors haven't even been to the Beaver State.

And when it comes to ecotourism, *been* is the operative word.

Born in the modern era, ecotourism is not a totally new term, but it is new enough that an understanding of what it means and where it came from is not widespread.

For residents and leaders in the Midlands, however, and across the rest of the Palmetto State, it might be a good idea to brush up on ecotourism. Given what's in plain view on the landscape, and what's not, the suggestion holds as much truth as the slogans "Columbia riverbanks region" and "smiling faces, beautiful places."

Below the Radar

Also called nature-based tourism, ecotourism merges traditional tourism with environmentally themed destinations. In many places it is a burgeoning industry, producing large economic benefits for those communities. It also furthers education about and appreciation of the natural world and the need to protect it.

But at the same time ecotourism holds risks. If not conducted properly it can be counterproductive to the very resources it utilizes, a threat that has given rise to an ecotourism code of conduct.

Meanwhile, despite a bevy of offerings, ecotourism is barely on the radar at the local and state levels, if at all.

In the Midlands, the sites range from Congaree National Park and Harbison State Forest to Lake Murray, the Three Rivers Greenway and others. The list for the rest of South Carolina includes the Palmetto Trail, Brookgreen Gardens and state and national parks.

"It's [ecotourism] coming into its own everywhere, and the Midlands needs to step up and embrace it," says Ken Driggers, director of the Palmetto Conservation Foundation, which is overseeing development of the Palmetto Trail, a 425-mile pathway being built across the state from the mountains to the sea.

So far though, there hasn't exactly been a rush to champion ecotourism here at home.

Steve Camp is president and CEO of the Midlands Authority for Conventions, Sports & Tourism, which runs the Convention Center and other tourism entities. "I wouldn't say it is," Camp says when asked whether ecotourism is a specific part of the authority's marketing. "I think that we would like for it to play a larger part," he says.

Despite the fact that Columbia is draped around the Congaree River, Camp says, "In the past there has been limited opportunity to participate in that part of the community."

But spearheaded by the River Alliance, which is coordinating the ongoing construction of the Three Rivers Greenway, that's beginning to change, he says. "I think we're seeing now a concentrated effort to make the river more a part of what makes our community attractive."

And while most decent-sized cities have museums and the like, far fewer have the type of outdoor opportunities Columbia offers, Camp says. "They're something we can hang our hat on."

Dave Zunker, vice president of the city's Convention & Visitors Bureau, an arm of the Midlands Authority, puts it another way. In Columbia, Zunker says, people can go kayaking or canoeing in the shadows of skyscrapers yet still feel like they're in the middle of wilderness. "People are naturally drawn to water," he says.

Zunker says he believes that it's only a matter of time before ecotourism comes into its own locally. "This is a direction that has great potential."

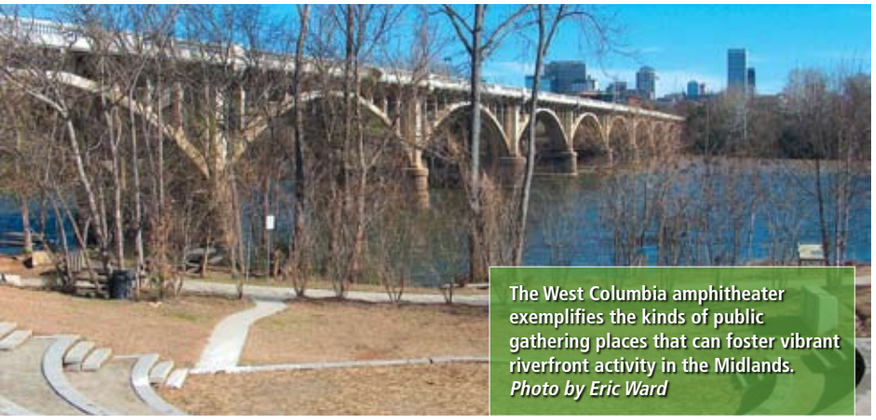
On both counts he could be right, as there are promising signs on the horizon:

- Feb. 8-11, the Chevy Open bass fishing tournament, part of the Wal-Mart FLW Tour for anglers, is slated to be held at Lake Murray. About 400 fishers from 37 states, Canada and Japan will take part in the competition, according to the Capital City/Lake Murray Country Regional Tourism agency.
- Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the International Downtown Association plans to hold its spring conference this year in Columbia. The event is scheduled for April 22-24. Beyond the economic impact of the conference, it promises big-time exposure for the capital city in its continuing renaissance.

Some of the selling points in landing the conference were the city's historic, cultural and recreational amenities. A canoeing and kayaking trip on the Saluda and Congaree rivers is on the agenda for the first day.

- In July 2007, meanwhile, the Junior Wildwater World Championships are scheduled to be held on the Saluda River, an event that Zunker says will lure 100 or so competitors to the city. "And they're gonna race," he says.

The calling card — expert-level rapids created when water is released from the



The West Columbia amphitheater exemplifies the kinds of public gathering places that can foster vibrant riverfront activity in the Midlands. *Photo by Eric Ward*

Saluda Dam.

In some respects, that Columbia isn't promoting itself as an ecotourism destination might not be surprising. As Zunker says, traditionally the city has not seen itself as a tourist town nor marketed itself as such. "So we can change our focus a little bit," he says.

Buddy Baker, Midlands regional wildlife coordinator for the S.C. Department of Natural Resources, sees the same dynamic. Until recently, tourism in the state has been centered on the coast, and only now are the "natural gems" in the Midlands being discovered, Baker says. "And once [ecotourism] is discovered it'll probably be a very profitable industry," he says.

More generally, Baker says, "There is no doubt that ecotourism is a growing industry."

Others share Driggers' and Baker's perspective on ecotourism in the Midlands. Fran Rametta has been a naturalist at Congaree National Park for more than 25 years. Among other things, Rametta's job entails coordinating and leading "owl prowls" and other treks at the park.

"It is definitely growing," he says of ecotourism. "But I don't think we're anywhere near getting the potential visitation that we could have in South Carolina."

On State Street in Cayce, Giles Page manages Adventure Carolina, a retail outlet specializing in recreational gear. Page also is a member of the South Carolina Nature-Based Tourism Association, a trade organization of some 60 businesses, tourism groups, state parks and other government entities dedicated to protecting, promoting and enhancing outdoor recreation.

The association has existed for only about 15 years, another indication that ecotourism remains in the infant stages in the Midlands and statewide. "There's a lot of potential that's not being utilized," Page says.

To illustrate the point, he tells a story of canoeing on the Little Pee Dee River in the northeastern part of the state a couple of years ago. During the outing he saw a mink, and when he told friends about the sighting they were in disbelief, asking how on earth it could have happened, Page says.

His answer: He was navigating the river in virtual silence rather than barreling along it at 25 knots. "People don't realize what's right under their noses," he says.

One thing that would boost ecotourism in the Midlands, he says, is an "adopt a landing" program for rivers similar to the state's Adopt-a-Highway initiative to keep roadways litter free. Unfortunately, Page says, landings frequently are trashed.

Another thing that would help, he says, is construction of more public access points for sporting on the Saluda. Presently, people often have to cross private property to pursue their canoeing and kayaking fancies, sometimes running afoul of landowners in the process, Page says.

As it happens, the River Alliance is working on that issue at least to some degree.

The organization aims to build a whitewater put-in on the Saluda along the Greenway near Interstate 26, says Mike Dawson, director of the River Alliance. The plan is to have it completed in time for the international competition in 2007, Dawson says.

Dollars and Sense

That event alone represents the potential of ecotourism in the Midlands and statewide. Some numbers from the S.C. Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism affirm the point:

- More than 1 million visitors camp in South Carolina annually, spending a total of at least $82 million.
- When it comes to hiking, camping and backpacking, PRT says it is indisputable that "the popularity of these activities has grown throughout the 1980s, 1990s and now 2000s, and the amount of expenditures on these activities has rapidly increased as well." Nationwide, camping and hiking equipment is a more than $1.7 billion industry, while apparel for the activities rings up another $259 million in sales annually.
- "Well-managed trails running through communities can foster sustainable economic activity through business development and tourism. Trail users need food, lodging, campgrounds, special clothes, shoes and equipment. Many also buy souvenirs and other items during the trip." Catering to the economic needs of trail users creates clean industries and businesses like bed-and-breakfast destinations. And, "Studies related to various trails have found that they created $300,000 to $1.9 million in new money for the adjacent communities."
- "In South Carolina, the total output of the wildlife watching industry for 1996 was $393 million, according to the [U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service]. Wildlife watching generated $247 million in sales, 6,623 jobs, $114.2 million in employment income, $12.3 million in state sales tax, $4.4 million in state income tax and $18 million in federal income tax."

PRT includes bird watching in wildlife watching and says that among South Carolinians' favorite forms of recreation, bird watching is second only to walking. One of the three most popular bird watching destinations in the state: the Midlands, according to the department.

For its part, the S.C. Sierra Club's local chapters across the state conduct about 100 outings a year combined, everything from hiking and kayaking to bird watching and visiting historical sites like American Indian burial grounds, Isham says. All trip leaders must be certified by the club.

Using survey data from consultants, the Washington, D.C.-based International Ecotourism Society depicts the U.S. ecotourist profile as ages 35 to 54 (divided evenly between male and female) and highly educated (more than 82 percent college graduates). Interest in ecotourism among people with less education is growing, the society says.

In addition, among "experienced" ecotourists, which the society defines as those who have been on at least one ecotourism trip, the largest group, 26 percent, said they were willing to spend $1,000 to $1,500 per outing. Their three most important elements of a nature excursion were wilderness setting, wildlife viewing and hiking/trekking, respectively. Their top two motivations for taking their next trip: the scenery and experiencing a new place.

Meaning and History

Yet, for all the market research on ecotourism, the meaning and origins of the term are vague.

"It's a hard thing to define I think," Isham says, adding that he sees an overlap between ecotourism and cultural tourism, which also holds significant but underutilized potential for the region and state.

Dawson agrees. "It may be different from cultural tourism but not necessarily," he says.

Dictionary.com defines ecotourism as "travel to areas of natural or ecological interest, typically under the guidance of a naturalist, for the purpose of observing wildlife and learning about the environment."

The International Ecotourism Society approved the following definition in 1991: "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people."

Like Isham, Dawson says he remembers

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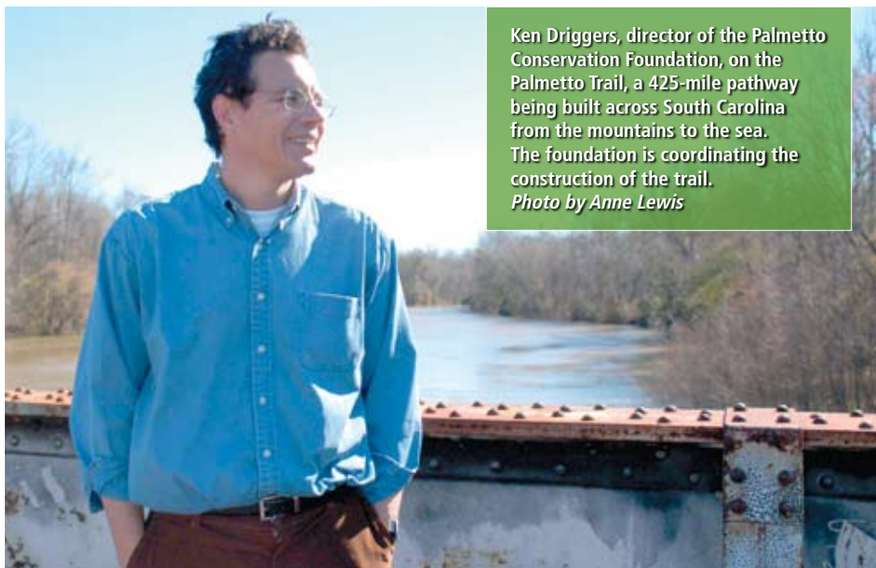
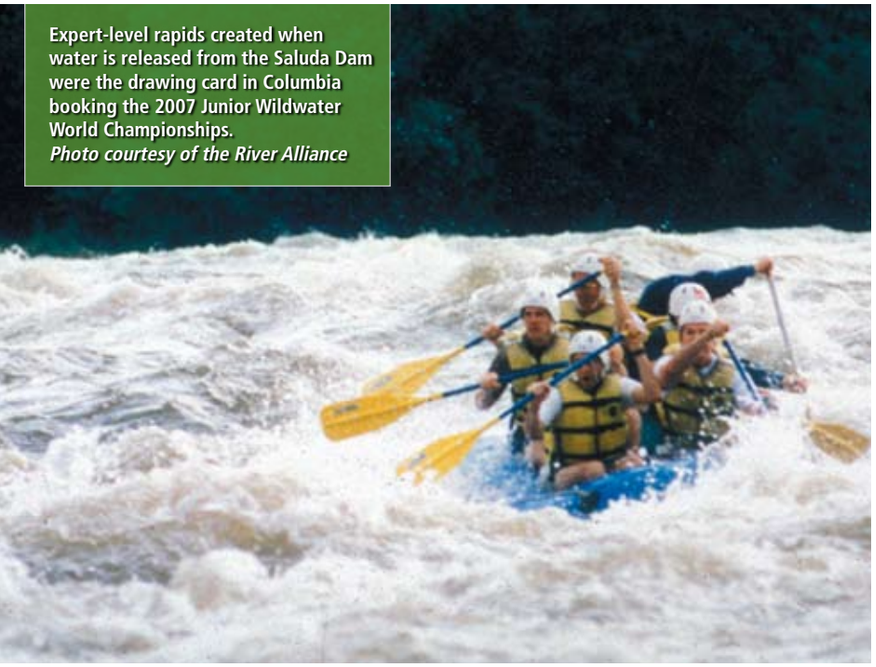
> *— Dell Isham, director of the S.C. Sierra Club, on a practice known in conservation circles as "green washing"*



Ken Driggers, director of the Palmetto Conservation Foundation, on the Palmetto Trail, a 425-mile pathway being built across South Carolina from the mountains to the sea. The foundation is coordinating the construction of the trail. *Photo by Anne Lewis*



Expert-level rapids created when water is released from the Saluda Dam were the drawing card in Columbia booking the 2007 Junior Wildwater World Championships.
Photo courtesy of the River Alliance

running across the term ecotourism in the '80s, and he tells his own story about it, although a much more recent one.

He says he bumped into a man from Germany at Congaree National Park a couple of years ago when a new visitors center was opening at the park. The man told Dawson he was visiting three places in the United States: Disney World, Vicksburg, Va. (for Civil War sites) and the park.

"He probably knew more about the biosphere there than the average South Carolina resident," Dawson says. "The guy said it's an internationally recognized 'biosphere preserve.'"

The 2002 report "Ecotourism: Principles, Practices & Policies for Sustainability" by the U.N. Environment Programme traces the beginnings of ecotourism to a rush of research and documentaries on coral reefs and rain forests in the early '80s. The burst of interest in those ecosystems spawned a fledgling industry of bird watching, tour guiding and other activities that gradually spread across the globe and blossomed, according to the report.

Coinciding with the release of the document, and in another sign of the newness of ecotourism, the United Nations declared 2002 the "International Year of Ecotourism."

"Ecotourism has been growing rapidly over the last decades," the U.N. report says. "Yet, while ecotourism has the potential to create positive environmental and social impacts, it can unfortunately be as damaging as mass tourism if not done properly."

Ethical Conduct

In that regard, the national Sierra Club's ecotourism policy spells out a simple code of conduct: "Take home memories, photographs when appropriate, and leave only good will."

In 1993, the board of the national Sierra Club adopted an ecotourism policy that describes principles of the activity. They include:

- "Development of ecotourism should be integrated with broader land-use planning to avoid destruction of ecosystems."
- "Infrastructure and other development within natural preserves and surrounding areas should be limited to basic maintenance needs and support services."
- "Respect must be given to wildlife migration routes and to the maintenance and restoration of interconnected ecosystem structure and function."

The code of conduct and principles prove useful in the face of a dubious practice by some.

"The term ecotourism is sometimes used as a marketing ploy," Isham says.

In conservation circles, such disingenuous advertising is known as "green washing."

With a few exceptions, the golfing industry is particularly prone to green washing, Isham says, nothing the high levels of water consumption and pesticide use required to maintain courses.

Says the U.N. report, "Many travel and tourism businesses have found it convenient to use the term 'ecotourism' in their literature, and governments have used the term extensively to promote their destinations, all without trying to implement any of the most basic principles [of ecotourism]. This problem of 'green washing' has undermined the legitimacy of the term ecotourism."

To counteract green washing, Isham says he would like to see the establishment of a certification program for ecotourism destinations similar to AAA's rating system for hotels and restaurants. "The fact that there are tourism-related businesses who try to paint themselves green is evidence of the popularity of ecotourism," he says.

Isham asserts that tourism should be a natural ally of the environmentalist community and that sometimes it is, but sometimes it isn't.

"It's almost, I can't get it built fast enough."

— Mike Dawson, director of the River Alliance, on the public's appreciation and use of the Three Rivers Greenway

Tourism, he says, holds the potential of providing valuable hands-on education about the environment that otherwise wouldn't happen. "On the other hand tourism also has the potential of destroying the very things we want to protect in nature." Take off-road four wheeling for example. "That's not very good ecotourism," Isham says, chuckling through the understatement.

Likewise, while their party politics might differ from traditional conservationists, many avid hunters and fishers also are ecotourism supporters because they are very concerned about the environment, he says.

But inescapably, the "eco" part of ecotourism carries another meaning besides the one rooted in the ecosphere — economic.

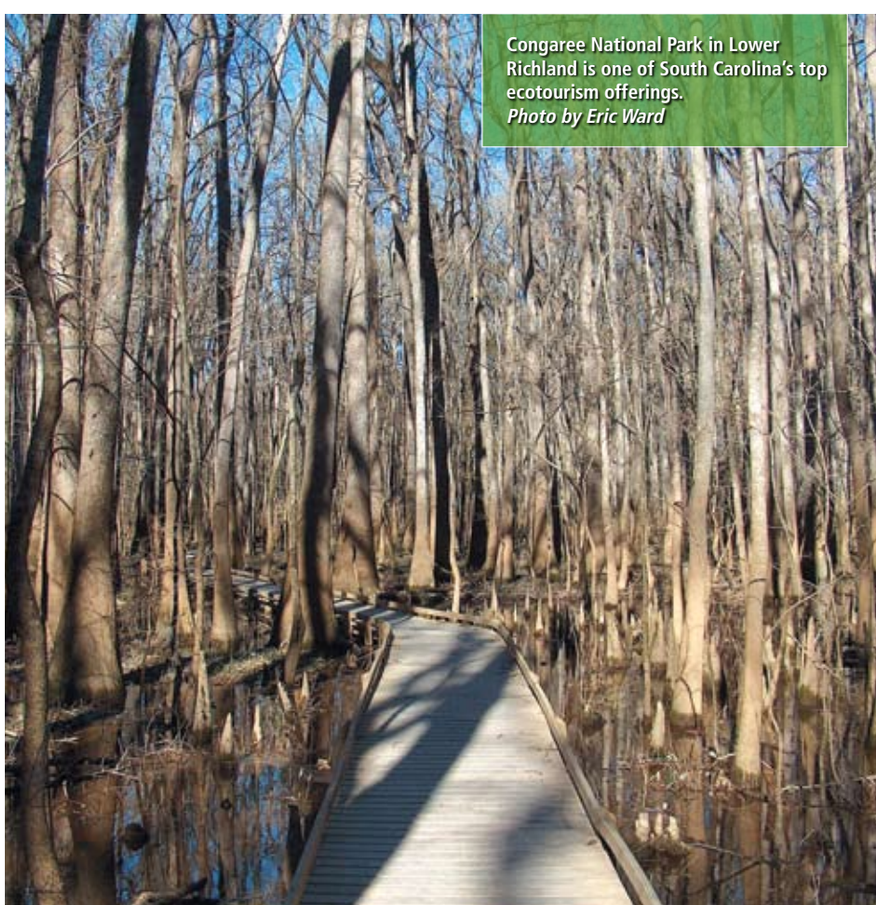
Says Driggers, "It's getting people to experience the natural features that we have, and generating economic activity from those visits."

In that sense, although the Three Rivers Greenway might not produce ecotourism dollars directly, arguably it does so indirectly.

The Greenway runs alongside established tourist destinations like EdVenture Children's Museum, the S.C. State Museum and Riverbanks Zoo and Garden as well as private-sector locations in the way of restaurants and retail outlets.

"It's changed the image of Columbia," Driggers says of the Greenway, "And it's an incredible economic development tool." Says Zunker, "The economic [component of the Greenway] is that there's a reason to come downtown."

Driggers contends that the Greenway exemplifies the sort of amenities a community must possess in order to be a magnet for high-skilled workers in the new, information-driven economy, a la Columbia's efforts to position itself as a hydrogen research hub. "If you want to attract those kind of people, you've got to



Congaree National Park in Lower Richland is one of South Carolina's top ecotourism offerings.
Photo by Eric Ward

build a community where those people want to live," he says.

Dawson says he doesn't have any definitive numbers on Greenway usage. Still, he says, "I don't know who's coming from where, but they're sure as heck coming." At certain times, if someone stood on a rock with a counting clicker at the West Columbia amphitheater they would see as many as 400 people an hour pass, Dawson says.

The same is true of the Greenway section at Riverfront Park in Columbia, he says.

In addition, the numbers are increasing, Dawson says, adding that seemingly every neighborhood wants to be connected to it. "It's almost, I can't get it built fast enough."

As for cultural tourism, which overlaps with ecotourism and is driven by similar factors, PRT's economic impact numbers for it are equally impressive.

In 2001, more than 4 million people visited heritages sites in the Palmetto State, such as historical sites, museums, cultural events, festivals and certain national and state parks, the department says. "This number includes only visitors who traveled 50 miles or more one way or overnight, which eliminates most local or residential visitors. They stayed a total of over 17.2 million visitor days and spent nearly $883 million."

Also relevant to the region and state, blacks represent one of the fastest-growing demographic groups engaging in cultural tourism, many in order to connect with their history in the former Confederate states of the Southeast.

"It's the second-fastest growing market segment of tourism," USC professor Rich Harrill tells CNN in an August story headlined "South rides wave of black heritage tourism."

In another sign of the rising importance of black cultural tourism in South Carolina, in October the state Department of Archives and History hired a full-time "heritage coordinator" to identify and document significant sites, structures and subcultures that need to be preserved, such as cemeteries.

Among some 1,000 historical markers in the state, only about 60 are dedicated to black sites, according to Archives and History director Rodger Stroup.

Moreover, time is of the essence where black history is concerned. Because much of it prior to the 20th century was not written down it is rapidly being lost, Stroup says. "It's oral history that's been passed down."

Among the states, South Carolina ranks 15th in historical tourism, PRT says. But in a familiar refrain, the agency says, "Interestingly, despite its historic past and numerous notable historic attractions, South Carolina ranks behind all its Southern neighbors in attracting historic visitors."

Locally and statewide, the opportunities for ecotourism and cultural tourism are vast. Nevertheless, it seems clear that they are not being fully realized. Going forward, with the appropriate stewardship measures, the Midlands and the rest of South Carolina could tap into a resource that at once promotes their natural treasures and generates prosperity from them.

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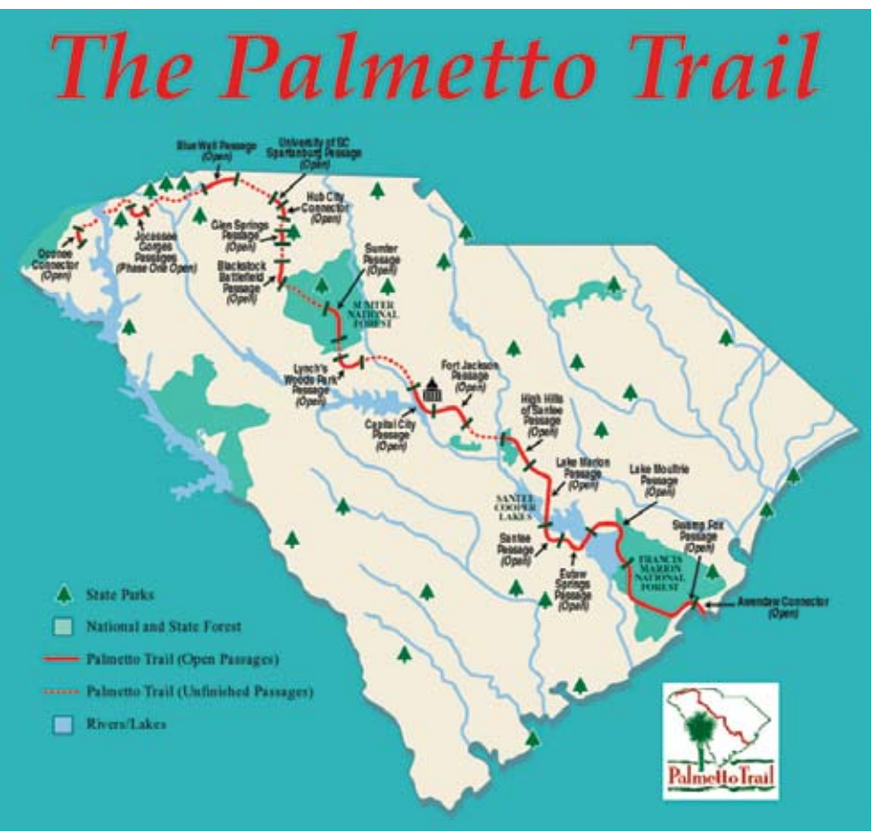

This map by the Palmetto Conservation Foundation shows the route by which the Palmetto Trail traverses South Carolina.