

# Gifts expand Jones Gap park by more than 500 acres

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Jones Gap State Park now includes Grassy Top Mountain with the donation this week of 305 acres from an Upstate conservation group.

The gift, from Greenville-based Naturaland Trust and worth \$1.8 million, is contiguous to another patch of 200 acres a second conservation group, The Nature Conservancy, also plans to donate to Jones Gap.

"You have all this wonderful property that's now protected and open to public access," said Frank Holleman, president of The Naturaland Conservancy.

At 3,268 feet, Grassy Top Mountain is just 300 feet shy of the state's tallest peak, Sasfras Mountain, said Erin Knight, co-director of the land trust program for Upstate Forever. The 305-acre tract from where it rises lies along the North Carolina border and is just east of Jones Gap State Park in Greenville County. The park is 40 miles north of Anderson.

The Grassy Mountain tract includes the headwa-

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ters of Tankersley Branch River, which winds south and then east into land owned by The Nature Conservancy.

"The elevation is one of the most special things about Grassy Mountain," Knight said. "When you get to the top, you can see forever."

Upstate Forever works with landowners to place permanent development restrictions, known as easements, on properties that have a public benefit. Property owners benefit in two ways — tax breaks for the lost value on their land and the knowledge that it will never be subdivided or converted into a strip mall.

Naturaland asked Upstate Forever to oversee an easement on the Grassy Mountain tract, Holleman said.

"This ensures the use

would never change and to make sure they never sell it," Knight said. "We will go up annually and monitor it and make sure it's used appropriately."

The Naturaland Trust bought Grassy Mountain and the surrounding acreage in the early 1980s as part of a wider effort to preserve the state's Blue Ridge Mountains, Holleman said.

The timing of Naturaland's gift of Grassy Mountain to the state this week is part of a wide-ranging agreement among five entities — Naturaland, the South Carolina Conservation Bank, the United Methodist Church, The Nature Conservancy and Upstate Forever — to protect hundreds of acres, some of it still in private hands, from development in the region.

In a related conservation deal three years ago, the nearly 1,900-acre Asbury Hills Methodist camp near Caesar's Head received a \$3.75 million grant from the state's Conservation Bank to restrict development there. The fair market value for the property, state records show, was

\$12.6 million, so the grant was compensation for that lost value, Holleman said.

The bank required a matching donation for the Asbury Hills grant, Holleman said. The Naturaland Trust didn't have \$1.8 million to donate to the state bank, but it did have the equivalent in land — the Grassy Mountain tract — to give to Jones Gap.

"We bring a lot of expertise to these transactions," Holleman said. "We know the mountains. We know the legal rules. We know possible sources of funding. And we have relationships with all the private owners, governing agencies and nonprofits that work in this field."

The Naturaland Trust was founded 35 years ago by Tommy Wyche, a prominent Greenville attorney. Wyche's son, Brad, founded Upstate Forever, and Wyche is an honorary board member of the South Carolina branch of The Nature Conservancy.

"This is really the culmination of one of the visions of Tommy Wyche, our founder, to protect the Methodist camp and the Jones Gap area," Holleman said.