

Chapter 12
ANALYSIS OF TWO COUNTIES

This section of the report was provided by KDFWR as a means of examining in more detail three existing Nature Tourism opportunities found within the 16-County Elk Restoration Zone that would enhance the development of Elk and Wildlife Viewing in Southeastern Kentucky. It is suggested that a similar analysis be done for each of the sixteen counties but include the studies to include both tourism and infrastructure strengths and needs. See Introduction – RECOMMENDATION #4.

**NATURE TOURISM OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE COUNTIES OF LETCHER AND HARLAN**

There are three high profile access projects in existence in the region that have an appeal to outdoor recreationists and theme travel participants. The Kingdom Come Scenic Parkway, a driving tour promoting the historical aspects of the local communities, the Pine Mountain Trail, a newly designated linear State Park dedicated to foot travel only, and the Little Shepherd Trail providing vehicular, mountain bike and foot travel access.

KINGDOM COME SCENIC PARKWAY

The parkway winds between the rugged Pine and Black Mountains and is officially designated a scenic parkway for automobile recreation between Pineville & Whitesburg, Ky on US Hwy 119.

Kentucky is known for coal. Movies have been made about coal mining here in the mountains. The coalfields of Southeastern Kentucky were once the most productive in the world. Thousands of families streamed into the shadows of Black Mountain between the World Wars to mine coal. Few spoke English but many made this valley their home.

The heart of the Kingdom Come Scenic Parkway is the pioneer village of Cumberland, and the historic coal camps of Benham and Lynch. Today the mines in Benham and Lynch no longer produce coal. Many impressive coal camp buildings are preserved and most are tourist attractions. The Kentucky Coal Museum was once the coal camp commissary for Benham.

Pine Mountain is the outdoor recreationist's dream. Kingdom Come State Park offers miles of trails and numerous mountain-top views. Visitors can access the Little Shepherd Trail on top of Pine Mountain.

PINE MOUNTAIN TRAIL

The Pine Mountain Trail has the potential to dramatically enhance nature tourism in the near future. It is located on the border between Kentucky and Virginia. Open to non-motorized traffic, the trail is currently under construction with approximately 28 miles already on the ground. Ultimately, the trail will be nearly 120 miles long and will run from the Breaks Interstate Park to Cumberland Gap National Park

LITTLE SHEPHERD TRAIL

The park is an access point for the **Little Shepherd Trail**, a 38-mile narrow road on top of Pine Mountain. The Trail, or Kentucky Highway 1679, clings to the southern edge of Pine Mountain's crest from the intersection of US 421 at this location to US 119 south of Whitesburg. This serpentine route twists through numerous refreshing overlooks and

A SIGNIFICANT REGIONAL NATURAL RESOURCE**(A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE)**

The following information from the KYDT Pine Mountain Task Force is included here because it casts a vision of the thoughts and feelings of the local communities where this study is taking place. It demonstrates a dialogue that has defined in its context the meaning of a land ethic. Where the intrinsic values of the land are held in high esteem for the betterment of the community as a whole. It is essential to understand these underlying concepts in order to understand why Nature Tourism is such a high priority to the public in general.

ENVIRONMENTAL ACHIEVEMENT**Crossing Pine Mountain****An Adventure in Environmental Stewardship**

Crossing Pine Mountain on a paved road began in the 1920s with the building of US 119 across the dominant feature of Letcher County's landscape. The two-lane serpentine road meandered for 7.7 miles from Oven Fork to Whitesburg, built atop twisted logging trails that rose more than 1,700 feet in elevation before winding down the other side. Narrow driving lanes, numerous switchbacks, steep grades, and sheer drops from virtually non-existent shoulders made crossing Pine Mountain a risky experience, especially when traffic started including school buses, coal trucks, tractor-trailers, RVs, and horse trailers.

Part of the country's Defense Highway Network, US 119 is also in the Appalachian Development Highway System. Changing traffic demands over the years rendered the roadway substandard and dangerous. On the other hand, crossing Pine Mountain on this Kentucky Scenic Byway is an adventure that brings people into direct contact with the beauty and majesty of the natural environment. Travelers may take a short walking detour to Bad Branch Falls, a secluded and undeveloped sixty-foot natural waterfall near the top of the mountain. They may choose a longer hike along Little Shepherd Trail, which runs 17.073 miles from the mountaintop's ridge to the Harlan County line.

Bad Branch Nature Preserve (2,444 acres) is home to the Presley House Branch watershed, said to be the most pristine water in the state, as well as Kentucky's only known nesting pair of common ravens (*Corvus corax*). A stop at the Pine Mountain Wildlife Management Area (5,018 acres) offers views of black bear, wild turkey, elk, deer, and Cerulean warblers. Pine Mountain is home to 93 species of rare plants and animals, including three federally listed species and four species of cave beetles, considered endemic (found worldwide only in this area). Birds such as hawks and owls, protected by international treaty, are found in abundance.

Pine Mountain Trail State Park, created by the 2002 General Assembly, calls for a shelter near US 119. In addition, the public will have access to the park through KY 932 at Bad Branch State Nature Preserve and from the northern end of Little Shepherd Trail.

To guard the environment while improving the roadway presented such formidable engineering challenges that it was studied off and on for nearly 40 years. In the year 2000, the community rose up in outrage when a school bus driver was killed in a crash on the mountain. On October 2 of that year, Kentucky Transportation Cabinet staff met with the citizens of Letcher County.

Out of this meeting the Pine Mountain Task Force was created, and a remarkable partnership emerged from what seemed at first to be an insurmountable problem of citizen anger and distrust. The Task Force brought all the stakeholders to the table.

More than half of the members are community residents. Other partners on the team include officials from eight environmental groups: Kentucky Cabinet for Environmental and Public Protection, Department of Fish and Wildlife, Kentucky Division of Forestry, Kentucky Heritage Council, Kentucky Heritage Land Conservation Fund, Kentucky State Nature Preserves, Sierra Club, and the Kentucky Nature Conservancy.

After seven months of in-depth study and intense debate, the task force made two recommendations to the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet:

1. Relocate US 119 through a 9,350-foot tunnel that would accommodate “through” traffic without compromising the natural environment, and
2. Approve a program of spot improvements to the existing roadway designed to preserve and protect the natural beauty of the mountain so that, as a Kentucky Scenic Byway, it can be enjoyed and experienced for generations.

To protect, conserve, restore, and enhance the natural and human environment on Pine Mountain, KYTC did the following:

- Banned any fill in the Presley House Branch watershed, located in Bad Branch State Nature Preserve, the most pristine water in Kentucky.
- Opted for a long-term solution to the traffic flow issues (a tunnel through the mountain) in order to protect the wildlife management area, nature preserve, hiking trails, state park, and wild river located within the project area.
- Restored about 3,000 feet of linear stream at three locations: Presley House Branch in the Wildlife Management Area, and Shell Creek and Isaac Creek, both within the property of the Pine Mountain Settlement School.
- Created scenic overlooks with excess excavation.
- Specify the use of special native stone at scenic overlooks.
- Purchased 200+/- acres of property during right-of-way acquisition that will go to the natural preserve, the Department of Fish & Wildlife, and the Department of Parks. Pine Creek runs through the acreage purchased for the Bad Branch State Nature Preserve.
- Rebuilt the entrance to Little Shepherd Trail, making the parking area larger and the entrance safer and easier to access.
- Used a special seed mix on shoulders and benches as recommended by Fish & Wildlife and the Bad Branch Nature Preserves Commission.

The project was completed in 2004.

Similar studies need to be completed for each of the counties within the 16-county elk restoration area. See Introduction – RECOMMENDATION #4.