

LOCAL

Conserved land along French Broad River to be restored as wetlands, muskie habitat

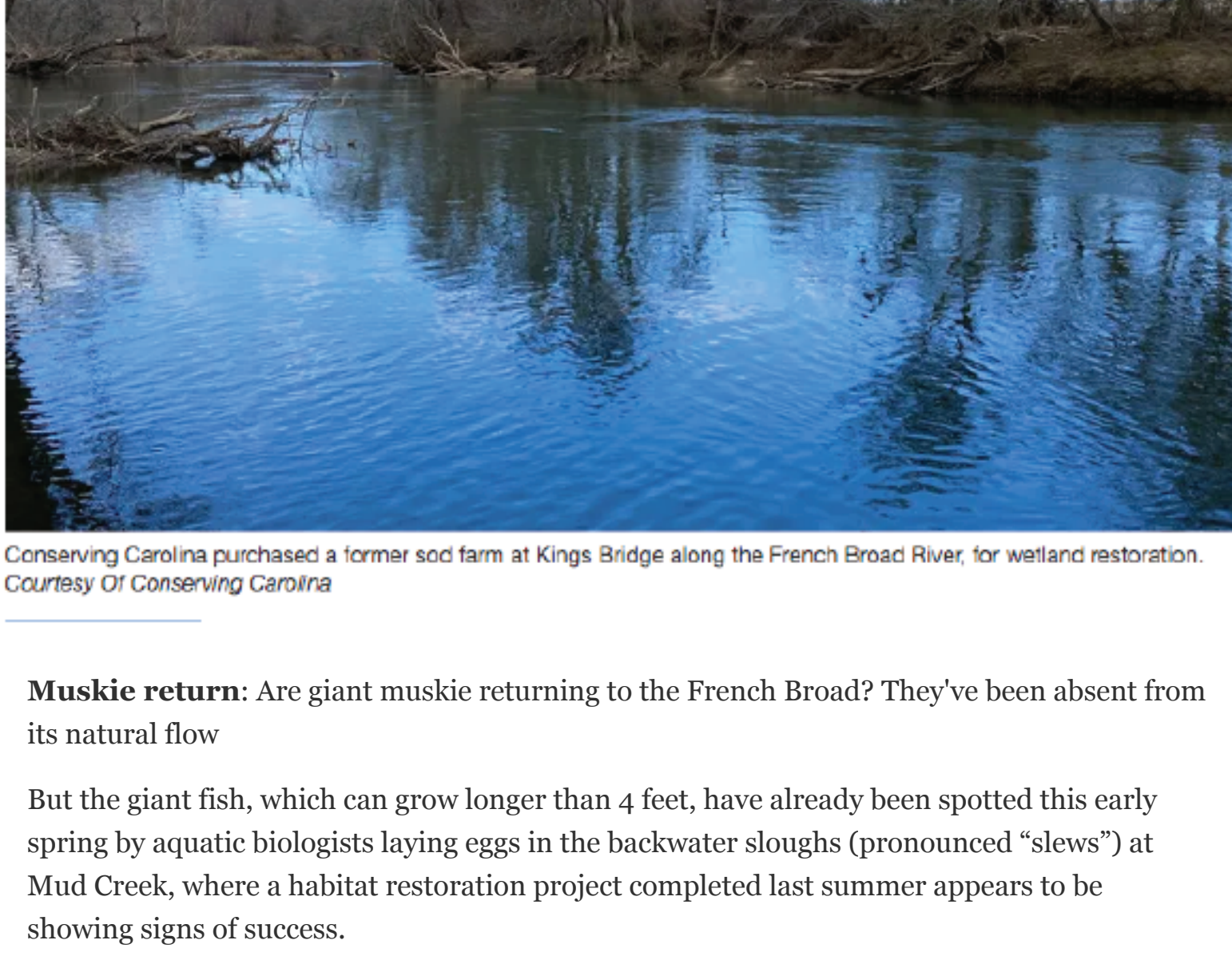
Karen Chávez Asheville Citizen Times

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Muskie are moving back to their rightful place in the French Broad River after a home-makeover of sorts at Mud Creek last year.

And the toothy, trophy-sized fish could be getting even more room to roam the river with a recent land conservation by environmental nonprofit Conserving Carolina, which might benefit muskie, other plant and wildlife and even humans with recreation opportunities.

Muskellunge, Western North Carolina natives, have been missing from the natural reproduction cycle of the river for more than 100 years due to pollution and habitat loss, said Scott Loftis, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission mountain aquatic habitat coordinator.



Conserving Carolina purchased a former sod farm at Kings Bridge along the French Broad River, for wetland restoration. Courtesy Of Conserving Carolina

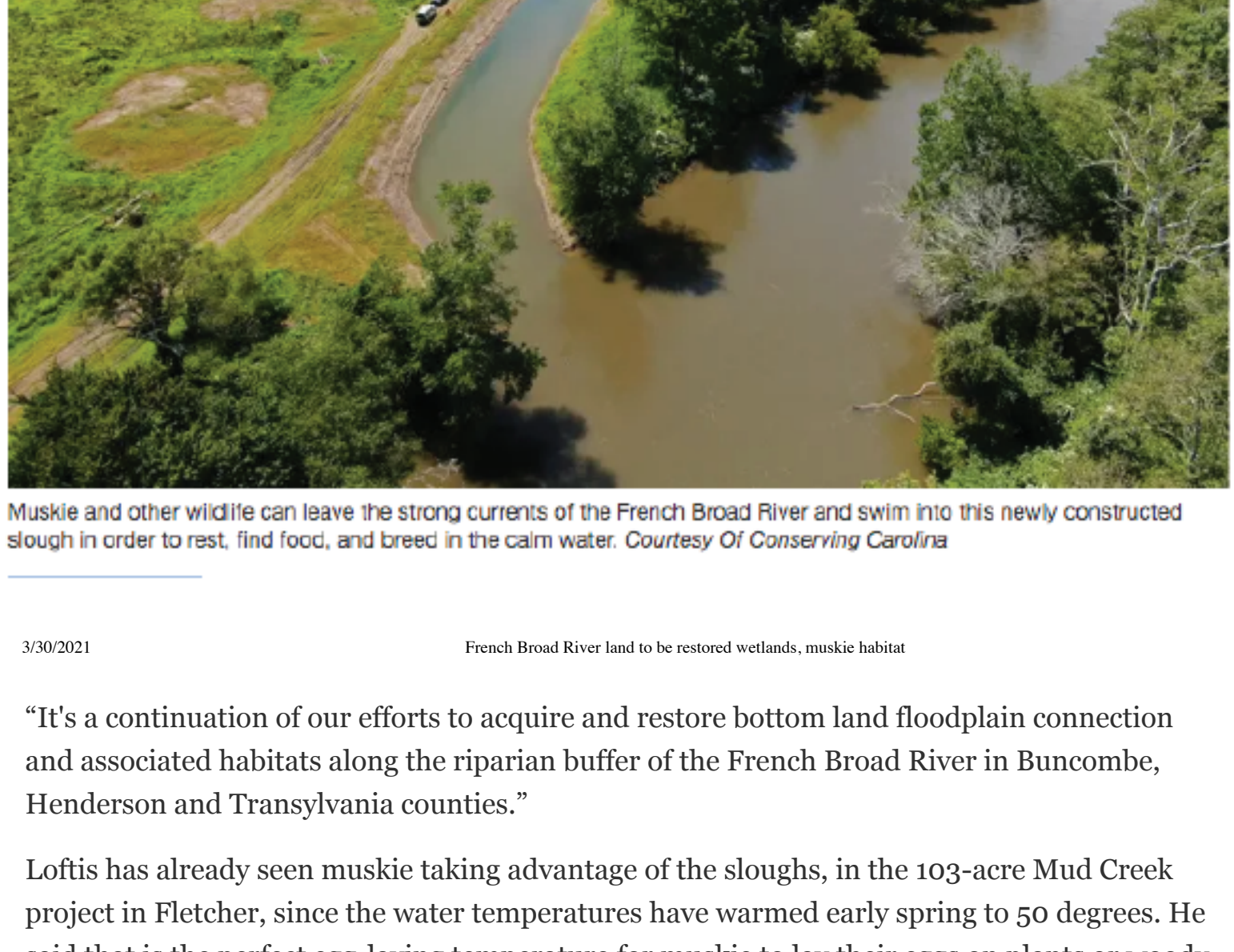
Muskie return: Are giant muskie returning to the French Broad? They've been absent from its natural flow

But the giant fish, which can grow longer than 4 feet, have already been spotted this early spring by aquatic biologists laying eggs in the backwater sloughs (pronounced “slews”) at Mud Creek, where a habitat restoration project completed last summer appears to be showing signs of success.

Conserving Carolina, a Hendersonville-based nonprofit land trust, which worked with the wildlife Commission and other partners in the Mud Creek project, is hoping to see the muskie range broaden with the recent purchase of an 87-acre former sod farm at Kings Bridge, which crosses the French Broad River on N.C. 191 in Mills River.

“It’s another strategic acquisition by Conserving Carolina, that it’s just upstream of the Mud Creek project,” Loftis said.

“It’s a continuation of our efforts to acquire and restore bottom land floodplain connection and associated habitats along the riparian buffer of the French Broad River in Buncombe, Henderson and Transylvania counties.”



Muskie and other wildlife can leave the strong currents of the French Broad River and swim into this newly constructed slough in order to rest, find food, and breed in the calm water. Courtesy Of Conserving Carolina

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Loftis has already seen muskie taking advantage of the sloughs, in the 103-acre Mud Creek project in Fletcher, since the water temperatures have warmed early spring to 50 degrees. He said that is the perfect egg-laying temperature for muskie to lay their eggs on plants or woody debris and for the fry to hatch in slow-moving, nutrient-rich water of the sloughs.

The commission has been stocking muskie raised at the Table Rock Fish Hatchery in Burke County for the past 50 years, but the fish haven’t been naturally spawning in the river, in the watershed, or getting there on their own, biologists say.

“Muskellunge play an important part in the French Broad as a top predator that is considered native to the drainage and a popular sportfish that many anglers enjoy targeting,” said Amanda Bushon, fisheries biologist with the commission’s Division of Inland Fisheries.

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They need the slow-moving, protected wetlands to lay their eggs, but the riverbanks have been bermed, or built up over the past century with dirt, stone, concrete or other materials, giving the water little chance to “escape” onto the floodplain, as it would have done 100 years ago, Loftis said.

Another infusion of natural habitat, with help from humans

Tom Fanslow, land protection director for Conserving Carolina, said the group is always looking to purchase or protect land suitable for conservation but needs the help of grants, partners and individual donors to make them happen.

The purchase of the Kings Bridge property in December for \$440,000 got a huge boost from Loti Woods and Dale Weiler, conservation philanthropists who live in Tryon.

A Citizen Times article about the Mud Creek restoration project last fall piqued their interest, Fanslow said.

“People saw the wonderful article regarding the mouth of Mud Creek. I gave a tour at Kings Bridge, they saw the potential of what could happen at the property, and the connectivity of what was done upstream and they liked that,” Fanslow said in a statement.



Dale Weiler And Loti Woods, conservation philanthropists, at their home in Tryon. The couple assisted Conserving Carolina in purchasing the Kings Bridge property. Courtesy Of Rose Jenkins Lane

“By funding projects like these, people get at least as much financial return that they would in a money market account, with the bonus of social responsibility. They put money in and see results in the environment around them.”

The wildlife commission received a grant from the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation that will match private contributions received by Conserving Carolina for the project, said Conserving Carolina executive director Kieran Roe.

“Conserving Carolina pre-acquired the tract in 2020 and hopes to convey it to the wildlife commission in the next few months,” Roe said.

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Woods and Weiler stepped in to help the nonprofit with the rest of the funds needed to close the land purchase.

“We have worked on land conservation projects with Conserving Carolina in the past helping them to buy a bog with a bridge loan,” Woods said. “We thought that’s a great way to do conservation work and use some money that we had in a money market that was making nothing.”

When the group was working on raising funds for the Kings Bridge tract, they called the couple to see if they could help out again with a bridge loan, to be repaid with interest.

“You can’t have wildlife without habitat. This project really encompasses both wildlife and bringing the habitat back in order to allow various wildlife to flourish,” said Weiler, a wildlife sculptor who works in stone.



Buttercups bloom at the Mouth of Mud Creek restoration site this spring. Courtesy Of Conserving Carolina

“While one of the main targets for this was for the muskellunge, they are also creating habitat for pollinators, migratory birds, for turtles, salamanders and various amphibians. It’s really the full package, which really excites us.”

The couple encouraged other folks who might have funds making little to no interest right now to consider using it to benefit conservation projects.

Others who supported the Kings Bridge project were Mary Fanslow, Randy Hall and Annie Keck-Hall, Tom and Susan McHugh, and Fred and Lauren Weed.

‘Ribbons of green space’ for wildlife and humans

David Lee, natural resources manager with Conserving Carolina, said once the Kings Bridge property is transferred to the wildlife commission, it will be that agency’s decision on how to manage the land.

“Floodplain property along the French Broad River is really important. This is a very similar site to Mud Creek in that it was heavily modified for agriculture use. We see an opportunity to conserve floodplain habitat along the French Broad,” Lee said.

Related: Could a bacteria-chomping mussel be the answer to E. coli in the French Broad River?

“It also seems like a great site for a boat access or a public trail since it’s very accessible off N.C. 191. We’re excited about that and look forward to working with the commission.”

Scott Loftis, a biologist with the Wildlife Resources Commission is also an avid fisherman. He caught this muskie in the French Broad River near the Mouth of Mud Creek about two years ago. Courtesy Of Conserving Carolina

The Kings Bridge property is along the official state paddle trail on the French Broad River, opening up possibilities for paddlers, other boaters, anglers and construction of walking paths or greenways.

Restoring wetlands, ephemeral pools and reconnecting floodplains to the river, cut off by roads and berms, will help not only aquatic life, but associated native vegetation that provides habitat for pollinators, birds, bats and other small and large mammals, reptiles and amphibians, Loftis said.

In addition to muskie, biologists have already documented many wildlife species at the Mud Creek property including otter, white-tailed deer, migratory bird species and waterfowl.

“The intensity and the frequency of flood flows seem to be on the increase in the last few years and so former land uses perhaps are not as viable because of that. Restoring properties to natural functions is the overarching goal of acquisition – to allow the river the space to flood and for energy to dissipate,” Loftis said.

Related: NC Wildlife Commission warning: Invasive, pipe-clogging zebra mussel found in moss balls

By allowing rivers to revert back to their natural process during floods to seep out and connect to the floodplain, those waters in low-lying wetland areas can then do their job of filtering sediments and pollutants out of the water, he said, which helps restore water quality and wildlife habitat.

That natural process had been disturbed by humans through agricultural and development along the river over the past 200 years.

“Allowing that natural process to occur is what the river is telling us it wants to do. It wants to flood. And and there’s a lot of terrestrial and aquatic benefits to such activities,” Loftis said.

“Riparian areas are often referred to as green ribbons on the landscape. They improve the quality of life for humans and animals. It’s a cascading effect of ecological benefits.”

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