

NATURAL SYNERGY

BY WENDY K. PROBST

SUSPENDED IN TIME AND NESTLED IN THE Allegheny Mountains of Southwest Virginia are a historic hotel and pristine natural lake. Nostalgia and nature converge at the Mountain Lake Conservancy (MLC) and Mountain Lake Hotel. The hotel, built of native sandstone in 1936, invokes visions of sharply dressed families picnicking, playing croquet, and dare I say, taking a few mambo lessons. The conservancy and hotel though are both a modern business and non-profit organization steeped in education, outdoor activities, and sustainability. The lake—one of only two natural lakes left in Virginia—is about 30 minutes west of Blacksburg; and the surrounding 2,600-acre property, located on Salt Pond Mountain, is only 10 minutes away from the Appalachian Trail at Wind Rock.



*View from Route 700–Mountain Lake Road of the valley surrounding Salt Pond Mountain;
Inset: hotel guests take a civilized paddle on Mountain Lake in the early 1900s*

From the Appalachian Trail Conservancy's (ATC) perspective, MLC is a well respected "Trail neighbor," and conservation partner. The property that MLC owns and manages serves as an excellent buffer to the A.T. corridor. "MLC is very active in the Giles County community and strives to ensure trails and outdoor recreation are accessible to locals as well as visitors to the area," says ATC's director of conservation Laura Belleville. "In this respect ATC and MLC have very common interests. We have combined efforts to promote outdoor recreation and trails, specifically, resulting in a louder voice and broader reach." For years ATC staff members have been invited to sit on MLC's advisory panel. "We have also explored ways to connect the A.T. and the services at Mountain Lake," adds Belleville. "More recently, the facilities at MLC have offered a perfect venue for partnership meetings, Trail to Every Classroom workshops, and a staff retreat."

"Mountain Lake provides a place for groups to escape the everyday world and reconnect in nature,"

says Emily Woodall, Mountain Lake Conservancy's managing director. Although the hotel is seasonal, MLC's Blueberry Ridge complex is open year round complete with a conference center and nine cabins with fully equipped kitchens. "It is the ideal place to escape from the office and daily routines in the workplace. Another plus is that we are a 'green' lodging facility and offer 'green' meetings and conferences." "The place is rich in history, peaceful, and tranquil; and just feels like you are staying at one of those resorts of yesteryear," says ATC's assistant director of development Amy McCormick. "[At our] staff retreat we were able to compete in the A.T.-mazing Race, a team building exercise, which was both fun and invigorating. It made me excited to tell all my friends and family, and come back for a stay."

Mountain Lake itself was first discovered in 1751. The original hotel was built in the late 1800s, and in 1930 the property was purchased by William Lewis Moody, who discovered the area as a hotel guest, and who decided to build what is now the current hotel.



The historic hotel (now famous as the set of *Dirty Dancing*) and conservancy work as a team to entertain and educate visitors and guests.



Clockwise from top right: participants in the popular Elderhostel program enjoy a birding excursion; local bluegrass bands are well paired with Virginia micro brews at the BrewRidge Music Festival in May; MLC managing director Emily Woodall on a morning bike ride to work; the resort's elevation ranges from 2,200 to 4,365 feet and the property boasts unique spruce bogs, native trout streams, and undisturbed forests.

Moody's daughter, Mary Moody Northern, inherited and managed the much beloved property and, upon her death in 1986, at Mrs. Northern's wishes, the Mary Moody Northern Endowment took over ownership and created the Mountain Lake Conservancy whose mission is based on Northern's "desire to forge bonds between people and nature in Mountain Lake's unique environment" as well as "provide environmental and cultural education to the public." "The [conservancy] works closely with the hotel to manage the use of the property in a sustainable manner, which includes the very resources that draw visitors to the mountaintop," says Woodall.

"My goal as conservancy director is to get people to focus on what the hotel is with the conservancy: A historic hotel, a variety of cottages, (and the location for the hit movie, *Dirty Dancing*) in addition to 22 miles of hiking and biking, and three mountaintop vistas, all surrounded by 11,035 acres of national forest," says Woodall. "I want people to come to Mountain Lake with the conservancy as their destination

and stay in the hotel for lodging." Her duties range from developing and managing environmental education, recreation, and cultural programs for guests and the community, to resource management initiatives for the property, to managing the MLC trail system and volunteer base, to operating the MLC Visitor's Center. "I enjoy working for MLC because I can connect with those who appreciate our ecosystem and understand it's worth and purpose," she says. "I'm in a position where I can make positive changes for our environment and lead others to do the same." And she walks the walk as well by often opting to bike 14 miles to and from work with MLC's recreation manager Jess Coker.

MLC holds true to its mission through its educational programs and by working closely with local and state organizations, as well as two major universities in the area to manage its lands and engage and instruct people of all ages about the biological and geological traits unique to the area.

The most popular and successful program that



Mountain Lake is one of two natural lakes in the state and has been called “the Silver Gem of the Alleghenies.” It is fed entirely by springs and ground water from the surrounding mountaintop and basin and, when at “full pond,” is 47 acres in surface area. Currently at 23 acres, the lake is a little less than half full.

MLC hosts is part of Elderhostel. “Elderhostel is the world’s leading educational travel organization for adults,” explains Woodall. “Each program includes lectures by local experts, field trips and excursions, and accommodations and meals.” Among the varied outdoor themes of the program—now running for more than 15 years—are: canoeing and kayaking, birding, hiking, the New River, Appalachian culture, and even astronomy.

From a hydro geological perspective Mountain Lake is fascinating. At 4,000 feet above sea level, the lake sits on a basin that consists of four different types of rock. Water has been flowing into this basin for nearly 10,000 years, and the lake today is fed solely by ground water and springs. The conservancy nurtures a strong relationship with Virginia Tech and serves as a host for their Freshwater Ecology classes. “Professors and students have been studying Mountain Lake for more than 40 years to learn more about how it was formed, why the levels fluctuate, and the diverse lake ecosystem,” says Woodall. “In 2008 our lake reached the lowest level ever recorded and was literally a small puddle at the north end. During this low level period, many of our fish died and the ecosystem drastically changed. Because of

our recent heavy winter, our lake is on the rise.” The University of Virginia also runs a nearby field station one mile from the lake called the Biological Station, which utilizes MLC’s entire property for research.

Area school students are also in the mix of groups who take part in MLC environmental education. Woodall says they are especially proud of one current program: “We are working with New River Valley Community Services—they bring underprivileged kids to Mountain Lake and we organize programs for them that focus on team building to improve self-esteem, anger management, and communication. We incorporate an environmental education component to the program [as well] that focuses on habitat exploration by using the Mountain Lake environment as a classroom.” “ATC also invited MLC staff to the first Trail To Every Classroom (TTEC) workshop in an effort to expand partnerships related to youth education,” says ATC’s Laura Belleville. “Today we partner to host local events, including a family-focused National Trails Day; and MLC continues to support TTEC workshops.”

The MLC property is largely composed of hardwood forests, which MLC manages in a sustainable manner with help from the Virginia Department of

Forestry; together, they are currently working on a forest management plan that will protect the diversity of native flora and fauna populations. Sadly, Mountain Lake has been affected by the woolly adelgid, an exotic species that feeds on the sap of the eastern hemlock—a prominent and well loved tree in the area. “Luckily, we have been working with Virginia Tech to treat our trees to kill off the adelgid,” says Woodall. “Unfortunately, some of our trees have died around the lakebed—some more than 400 years old.” They are also partners with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. “They work with us on managing our deer population,” she says. “The emphasis of Virginia’s deer management program has switched from establishing and expanding deer herds to controlling their growth.”

A.T. Hikers are encouraged to take advantage of Mountain Lake’s close proximity. The hotel offers a

shuttle to and from the Trail for hotel guests as well as a reduced rate for their stay; an enticing temporary reprieve from the rigors of long distance Trail hiking. And Woodall suggests that it is a “great place for families to stay who want to visit their loved one who is hiking the Trail.” She enthusiastically points out that the proximity also serves as a gateway for hotel guests to discover the A.T.

If you are fortunate enough to enjoy a stay at Mountain Lake—whether for business or pleasure—and you take part in an educational hike of the property, or maybe play a civilized game of croquet followed by a wild paddle down the nearby New River, you may just have the time of your life, and you’ll owe it all to the Mountain Lake Conservancy, whose well-paired and continued collaborative work with other organizations like ATC proves that it really does “take two to tango.”



Clockwise from top left: in 2008, the lake reached the lowest level ever recorded; damp but happy hikers: MLC offers miles of hiking and biking on its 2,600 acres; Wind Rock on the A.T. is a mere 10-minute drive from Mountain Lake, and serves as a gateway for hotel guests to discover the Trail.