Creating New Economies Fund
Grant Program
2001 to 2011

Resourceful Communities
People. Places. Opportunities.

THE CONSERVATION FUND
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cover page from top to bottom
Smoky Mountain Native Plants Association; Bountiful Cities Project; Western Carolina University
above
Concerned Citizens of Tillery
Resourceful Communities is a program of The Conservation Fund, a national nonprofit started in 1985 with a unique mission: to promote both conservation and sustainable economic development. Through its emphasis on protecting working lands (forests, farms, ranches and waterfronts), educating conservation leaders, working with communities and investing in innovative strategies, the Fund proves time and again that land conservation and environmental protection can work hand-in-hand with economic development and job creation to build vital, resilient communities.

Resourceful Communities started in 1991 to serve North Carolina’s most socially and economically distressed rural communities. We are a resource for a grassroots network that developed out of our trainings and projects. This network started small but has grown to include more than 250 organizations. We work with these grassroots partners to implement and advocate for the “triple bottom line” of sustainable economic development, social justice and environmental stewardship. And we help them access resources and learn techniques to advance nontraditional, asset-based solutions to age-old problems such as poverty, racism and resource loss.

We carry out our work through four primary program areas:

Capacity Building: We provide direct technical assistance, skills-building workshops and small grants through the Creating New Economies Fund.

Policy & Advocacy: We support grassroots leaders in policy initiatives and educate decision-makers about policies needed to advance sustainable economic development.

Movement Building: We provide education and networking opportunities to help our partners advance their work.

Innovation & Demonstration: We help our grassroots partners create collaborative efforts and leverage resources to implement innovative projects such as conservation-based affordable housing and community forestry.
In 2001, with generous support from The Ford Foundation, we established the Creating New Economies Fund grant program, which provides resources to community groups for innovative projects that might otherwise go unfunded. Though the grant amount is small (up to $15,000), we have watched community groups effect great change with only a bit of seed money. All projects must integrate the “triple bottom line” of sustainable economic development, environmental stewardship and social justice, ensuring meaningful and substantive change in communities.

Although there were other small grant programs before CNEF, many community groups and organizations lacked the access or experience needed to obtain those funds. Resourceful Communities wanted to create a program that would:

**Build Grassroots Organizational Capacity:** We provide support to applicants throughout the life of a project and beyond — from planning the project, writing and applying for the grant and helping to secure additional funds, to implementing the project and providing ongoing assistance to advance these creative initiatives.

**Support Triple Bottom Line Work:** Many funding sources focus on only one aspect of the triple bottom line, making it difficult to fit broad-based projects into narrow guidelines. CNEF allows communities to implement innovative and nontraditional projects that address multiple issues to create sustainable change.

**Encourage Seed Projects:** Because other small grant programs frequently require long and laborious grant applications, we developed the CNEF application process to be simple and approachable so that even groups with little or no grant-writing experience can apply.

**Assist Community Partners in Leveraging Other Funds:** To grow the innovative work started with CNEF funds, we help grantees connect with other funders. This increases our partners’ access to resources and takes many forms: introducing grantees and funders, individual grant-writing assistance, attending meetings with grantees, providing letters of support, offering skills-building workshops to partners and providing information about the accomplishments of grantees.

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Harnett Voices, a community organization in North Carolina’s Sandhills area, received its first grant through CNEF in 2010. The funds are supporting a youth leadership program that empowers teens to take a more active role in their communities. Through community gardening, youth-led community health assessments and nutrition workshops, and food-related entrepreneurship projects, young people are improving the overall health of their community.

Spaulding-Monroe Alumni Association is working to revitalize a former African-American school in Bladen County into a community center that would serve the needs of local rural and African-American families. The group first received funding in 2005 through a fiscal partner organization to develop a plan for adaptive reuse of the 34,000-square-foot school building that had been donated to the organization. In 2009, the alumni group received its first-ever direct grant that paid for staff and increased programming efforts in the building.

Hollister REACH, a small organization representing underserved African-American and Native American landowners in Halifax County, received its first CNEF investment in 2002. A seed grant funded the group’s efforts to address issues related to failing septic tanks through the use of alternative wastewater treatment systems. The grant enabled education and outreach that resulted in an inventory of inadequate plumbing facilities, support from county commissioners, the creation of a special sewer district (the first for an African-American community in Halifax County), and more than $600,000 leveraged in engineering, planning and implementation grants.

ReCYCLEry is a group in Carrboro that encourages bicycle use for transportation and recreation. The ReCYCLEry teaches people how to repair and maintain bicycles, salvages used bicycles and ensures that anyone who needs a bicycle can earn one through community service. CNEF funds, a first-time investment, were used to help previously unserved low-income residents and youth own and maintain bicycles for improved transportation.

Elkland Art Center in Ashe County is dedicated to strengthening the community through art, education and community celebrations. The group’s work is focused on educating the public about the importance of the environment and sustainable development, especially in this rapidly growing area. The art center’s first grant in 2005 supported construction of a puppet caravan (an educational outreach tool) and the first Liberty Day Parade and Circus, held on July 4. Since then, the puppet caravan has taken the group across the state, and the Annual Liberty parade draws hundreds of visitors each year as well as the interest of other small mountain communities.
Roanoke River Partners developed and built a network of 15 camping platforms along tributaries of the Roanoke River. This trail system helps preserve the river and promotes ecotourism businesses, such as guide services, outfitters, bed and breakfasts and restaurants. The group is restoring the Hamilton Rosenwald School as an ecotourism visitor center and community facility, and together, these improvements generate $400,000 in economic benefits to the region each year.

Asheville Green Opportunities is dedicated to building a strong and just green economy in western North Carolina through green-collar job training, community education and green microenterprises. The group serves individuals with barriers to employment through a combination of service-learning projects, life-skills training, support services, community college coursework and on-the-job training and apprenticeships, providing everything members need to launch successful green-collar careers and give back to the community.

Jackson County Green Energy Park captures methane gas from a closed county landfill to fuel a series of entrepreneurial ventures, including artisan studios, nursery operations and a biodiesel refinery. The park uses clean, renewable energy resources to support economic development, promote environmental protection and offer educational opportunities.

Stecoah Valley Cultural Arts Center serves the people of Graham County, where it strives to preserve and promote the southern Appalachian mountain culture. Housed in a community-restored school building, the group provides many programs, including educational classes for young and old, an arts and crafts gallery, heritage entertainment and rental of a commercial kitchen.

Uptown Business and Professional Association used CNEF grant money to develop the Trail of Flames tour, which highlights the historic fire of 1922 in New Bern that devastated 40 blocks of the African-American section of the city. The tour focuses on African-American history and culture with a goal of revitalizing a very depressed area by providing entrepreneurial opportunities and business redevelopment related to the tour.

CNEF funds support locally rooted economic development projects that build on the assets of a community — its people, culture, history and natural resources. The jobs are tied to the land, the culture and the skills of community residents and thus cannot be outsourced. Small businesses reinvest their profits in the community to strengthen the local economy, protect resources and promote civic engagement.
Sustainable agriculture, such as organic farming, niche crops and value-added products, is helping small and under-resourced farms stay in business, while improving the health of residents through better nutrition and reduced pollution and protecting the environment, rural landscape and quality of life in rural places. In urban areas, these efforts are increasing access to healthy, local foods.

CNEF has funded a number of community-driven sustainable agriculture efforts, which strengthen “local food systems” and enable small-scale farmers to derive economic benefits from their land and sustain their farms for future generations.

CNEF Focus Area: Sustainable Agriculture

New River Organic Growers is a nonprofit farmers cooperative in western North Carolina’s high country. The group provides fresh produce and humanely raised meats; supports member farms by pooling resources for marketing, transport and bulk purchasing of farming supplies; and educates the general public about the benefits of sustainable, local farming. CNEF funds support the cooperative’s marketing efforts, transportation services and aid for low-income farmers seeking organic certification.

Pisgah View Community Peace Garden is in a low-income neighborhood in West Asheville. The garden engages economically disadvantaged community members, including young people, convicted felons and homeless individuals, in raising crops. The garden has provided organic produce at affordable prices and educated urban residents about organic gardening, composting, recycling and self-sufficiency.

Conetoe Family Life Center

SEEDS, a nonprofit community garden in Durham, North Carolina, used CNEF grant money for its Durham Inner-City Gardeners program. At-risk youth from low-income families earn a stipend, learn organic gardening methods, build entrepreneurial skills through the marketing and sales of crops raised in the community garden, and participate in life-skills building workshops. In 2009, participants sold more than 500 pounds of sustainably grown food, 92 flower bouquets and 60 pounds of honey at the Durham Farmers Market, generating nearly $11,000 to support the program.

Stone Circles used CNEF funds to establish its Ground Up! program, which engages young people from predominantly low-income communities in Alamance and Orange counties in advancing local food systems, food justice and farming. Participants grow and prepare food, learn about food systems and community wellness, develop an understanding about their identity and roles as consumers and become advocates for a more just food system.

Sandhills Family Heritage Association is a community-based organization that provides programs and services to build economic self-sufficiency and preserve the natural and cultural heritage of African-American families in the state’s Sandhills region. The group used CNEF funds to establish a farmers and crafters market and to continue educating African-American landowners about land-based income.

SEEDS

Ammie Jenkins, Sandhills Family Heritage Association

© NC Willing Workers - My Sister’s Farm

© SEEDS

Investing in Sustainable Agriculture

Conetoe Family Life Center

Ammie Jenkins,
Cameron Heights Community Action Project is a small African-American neighborhood organization located just outside the Raeford, North Carolina, city limits. Organizing to address issues related to lack of municipal services, Cameron Heights used CNEF funds for their neighborhood revitalization efforts. Funds were used to clear overgrown lots and remove dilapidated structures, which created health hazards and had become magnets for crime and illegal dumping.

Toxic Free NC is a statewide organization that advocates against pesticide pollution. The group used CNEF funds to form its Community Leadership Council, a group of grassroots leaders from across the state who work locally to reduce pesticide pollution. Toxic Free provides capacity-building support and organizing assistance to members as they pursue local projects and advocacy. This supports members’ leadership in state-level initiatives for environmental health and justice, ultimately strengthening Toxic Free NC’s impact in rural and minority communities.

Student Action with Farmworkers, based in Durham, brings students and farmworkers together to learn about each other’s lives, share resources and skills, improve conditions for farmworkers and build diverse coalitions working for social change. CNEF funds support the group’s From the Ground Up program which educates and mobilizes supporters to take part in farmworker-led efforts for access to higher education, increased wages and a safe workplace.

Shiloh Community Association is a group dedicated to the preservation of the Shiloh Community, which was established before 1870 and originally located where the Biltmore Estate is today. The community was moved in the 1880s to south Asheville and remains the oldest intact historical African-American community in the city. Shiloh received CNEF funds to organize and grow the community services it provides, including: health, education and residential programs for young residents; growth of its community garden; and working toward quality housing in the community.

Burnsville Land Community is a diverse group of mobile home owners in Burnsville, a fast-growing mountain community. Faced with the sale of the mobile home park, neighbors united with the goal of buying the park and implementing a community land trust model to ensure the security and affordability of their residences. Two CNEF grants enabled the group to explore the community land trust model, secure an appraisal for the property, plan the legal ownership and develop a land use plan.

Community organizing and civic engagement are critical to providing the “social infrastructure” needed to address challenges rooted in poverty, social injustice and environmental degradation. CNEF investments in demonstration projects that focus on educating, organizing and engaging community members in triple bottom line solutions result in lasting and sustainable change.
Episcopal Farmworker Ministry focuses on the needs of migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families. Operating in Sampson County, the group serves 10,000 to 15,000 farmworkers each year. CNEF funds have supported the group’s farmworker community garden and farmers market, transportation program and specialized English language classes to increase understanding about dangerous pesticide and chemical use associated with farm work.

North Carolina Folklife Institute supports projects that recognize, document and present traditional culture in North Carolina. CNEF funds have been used to expand the group’s Blue Ridge National Heritage Area Traditional Artist Directory, which showcases more than 240 artists and artist groups in the mountains, and to provide promotional materials for area artists. A 2010 CNEF grant, focused on eastern North Carolina, identified and documented more than 50 artists practicing cultural traditions that include crafts, music, foods and more.

Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center was first funded through CNEF to support a youth-led community asset mapping project that helped identify island traditions. This project strengthened the Heritage Center, which seeks to preserve and promote the traditional island way of life (fishing, boatbuilding and other entrepreneurial efforts). The museum also provides economic opportunities for longtime residents by promoting land- and water-based jobs and businesses that have sustained the community for generations.

Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Park in Scotland Neck provides conservation-oriented programs for wildlife professionals and educational opportunities for students and families. The park and adjoining Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Eco-Center are home to more than 180 species of birds, the world’s largest collection of waterfowl. Most recently, CNEF funded the Youth Conservation Training Corps, which provides ecotourism-related work opportunities, including on-the-job training as field guides, administrative assistants and general laborers.

Clay County Communities Revitalization Association received CNEF funds to support the Nelson Heritage Park project, a cultural heritage tourism destination in downtown Hayesville. Visitors will experience life in western North Carolina from the 17th century to roughly the turn of the 20th century. Donated period buildings and other antique items have been relocated and/or constructed on-site. Unique to this project is its inclusion of Cherokee history and culture in the site improvements and program offerings, leading to a growing partnership with the Eastern Band of the Cherokee Indians.

Sylvan Heights Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center on Harker’s Island was first funded through CNEF to support a youth-led community asset mapping project that helped identify island traditions. This project strengthened the Heritage Center, which seeks to preserve and promote the traditional island way of life (fishing, boatbuilding and other entrepreneurial efforts). The museum also provides economic opportunities for longtime residents by promoting land- and water-based jobs and businesses that have sustained the community for generations.

Creativity and innovation flow freely when communities design projects to meet their unique social, economic and environmental challenges. Over the past five years, our partners have created some truly innovative projects that build on local strengths and serve as models for community-driven initiatives.
Since the Creating New Economies Fund program started in 2001, Resourceful Communities has awarded more than $2 million in grants. Though the grant awards are small, averaging $8,000 to $10,000 each, recipients have made tremendous impacts. More than 50,000 people in small towns and crossroads communities across North Carolina have benefited.

Much of CNEF’s impact comes from the way the program is designed. Applicants attend CNEF grant-writing sessions, which are provided free throughout the state. Partners receive ongoing support from Resourceful Communities staff, from the application process through the life of the grant. Technical assistance is provided even for those who do not receive a grant. Applicants also receive grant-writing assistance for other grants and are introduced to other, sometimes larger, funders.

For some applicants, a CNEF grant is the first the organization has received, making it a true “seed” grant. This allows the funded project to grow, and recipients are able to leverage the funds into other grants. To date recipients leveraged an impressive amount, more than $22 million.

The CNEF process also provides a platform for applicants and other partners to build new partnerships. Small grassroots groups have been introduced to resource organizations that provide support through technical assistance and funding. Grassroots partners, who would otherwise not have met, have entered into partnerships to create greater impact.

One of the greatest impacts of CNEF is its emphasis on the triple bottom line. Because CNEF projects are required to create benefits toward a healthier environment, sustainable economic development and social justice, true change is being effected.

Economic impacts include more than 425 new jobs. Social impacts include the active involvement of more than 50,000 people across North Carolina. Environmental impacts include more than 400 acres of family farm operations strengthened.

In addition to successful and innovative projects, the CNEF program has broad and far-reaching impacts, including:

- Increasing the capacity of partners;
- Leveraging $12 in new investments for every $1 CNEF invests in partners;
- Building strong relationships among diverse interest groups;
- Educating decision-makers and funders about supporting sustainable rural communities; and
- Creating a statewide movement of people and communities committed to the triple bottom line.