

Southern Appalachian Creature Feature Podcasts

Appalachian Elktoe Conservation

Greetings and welcome to the Southern Appalachian Creature Feature.

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act, and to celebrate, we're taking a closer look at some of the endangered species found in the Southern Appalachians.

In a building at a state fish hatchery in Marion, North Carolina are a series of tubs with an elaborate piping network leading in and out. Within these tubs the North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission is working to rear some of North Carolina's most endangered freshwater mussels in captivity, including the Appalachian elktoe mussel.

The Appalachian elktoe is a two-shelled mollusk, like an oyster or clam, however it lives on the bottom of a handful of rivers in the French Broad and Little Tennessee River basins. Freshwater mussels are important to humans for a pair of reasons. First of all, they're indicator species. That is to say, they need clean, healthy habitat, so if biologists see mussel populations declining, it indicates a bigger problem with the health of the river. Secondly, mussels are filter feeders – taking in river water, filtering out bacteria, algae, and returning clean water to the stream. They literally clean the water for us.

Historically the elktoe has suffered from poor water quality and dam construction. Even today there is a mysterious die-off in the Little Tennessee River which remains unexplained. Recent gains in elktoe populations have been marred by a mysterious die-off in the Little Tennessee River and widespread mussel deaths in Yancey County's Cane River.

For WNCW and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, this is Gary Peeples.