

Happy 20th Birthday, Friends of Panthertown!

Welcome to 2025, friends. This year officially marks 20 years of Friends of Panthertown existing as an organization. 20 years of stewardship on the trails of Panthertown; protecting and maintaining the special place that many in WNC are able to call their backyard. Currently, Friends of Panthertown has a staff of three, a full board of directors, and a strong partnership with the U.S. Forest Service. This organization didn't always look like this, though! Let's take a look back through time to see the evolution of Friends of Panthertown.

In 2005, a group of conservationists and trails enthusiasts came together with the intention to protect and maintain the trails in Panthertown. Their initial mission is still prominent in this organization today. Here are the names of Friends of Panthertown's founding board of directors:

- David Bates (executive director of JMCA)
- Nina Elliott (FoP coordinator)
- Mike Purdy
- Margo Purdy
- Dan Pittillo
- Burt Kornegay
- Bill Jacobs
- Dan Ackorage
- Brenda Council
- William McKee
- Barry Carter
- Shirley Carter
- Mike Kettles

This group initially fell under the "Jackson Macon County Alliance" before deciding to branch off and form their own 501(c)3 non-profit in 2010. They began to maintain the trails under a U.S. Forest Service agreement and in 2014, they put out the first blazes on the trails. The different colors represent the different designated uses of each trail.

Green: Hike Only

Pink: Hike and Bike Only

Purple: Hike and Horse Only

Orange: Hike, Bike, and Horse

In 2017, Friends of Panthertown partnered with Mainspring Conservation Trust to raise funds together and purchase 15.92 acres of property located adjacent to the Salt Rock Gap trailhead entrance. Friends of Panthertown then funded and built a small parking area on the newly acquired land.

In 2019, the conserved land and new parking area were transferred to the U.S. Forest Service to be officially protected and maintained as part of Panthertown Valley.

In 2020, Friends of Panthertown hired their first Trail Stewardship Coordinator to oversee our conservation and stewardship programs, and to provide Leave No Trace education and trainings.

In 2022, Friends of Panthertown hired a Trail Stewardship Assistant to increase the capacity of their outreach and in 2023 the staff moved into their office space in downtown Sylva.

Friends of Panthertown has had a lot of growth since our start in 2005, and we could not do this work without the support of our community partners, our hard-working volunteers, and our generous donors. Thank you, friends, for supporting our mission of conservation and sustainable recreation. Here's to our continued work in 2025!