The State of the Environment

North Carolina / 2019

What is "The State of the Environment?"

A healthy natural and human environment both sustains and depends upon having a vibrant economy, strong civil institutions, and a healthy, well-educated populace. This report examines the state of the environment by tracking and analyzing over one hundred data sets that capture various dimensions of well-being for North Carolina's communities and ecosystems.

The 2019 State of the Environment report, and its backing technical document, are available at ncconservationnetwork.org/soe.

A Visual Summary

To understand North Carolina's trends, we grouped the data into six categories and 15 subcategories and assigned a grade to each.

1. **Land & Water**
2. **Our People**
3. **Our Social Fabric**
4. **Our Economy**
5. **Infrastructure**
6. **Energy & Waste**

Good
Mixed
Weak

There are three big themes.

Beyond the broad trends, the report identifies three themes for a closer look.

- **Curbing greenhouse gas emissions**
- **Racial equity**
- **Resilience**

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What are the categories and their grades?

Each category's grade is an averaged representation of all the subcategory grades. The subcategory grades provide details on successes and shortfalls within the larger categories.
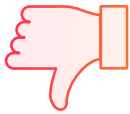
Grade.   Category.

Land & Water:
Land & habitats = Mixed, Coast = Mixed, Water = Mixed, Agriculture = Mixed, Air = Mixed

North Carolina's inland landscapes and the coast are threatened by development and climate change. Many populations of birds and fish are in slow decline. Water quality shows mixed trends. Row crop agriculture is conserving soil and water, but animal agriculture needs to be a better neighbor.

Mixed

Our People:
Health = Weak, Education = Mixed

Public health indicators show substantial racial and ethnic disparities, and key indicators are heading in the wrong direction. Children are at risk, and too many North Carolinians lack reliable access to healthy food. Trends in education are more mixed, but net, we see inadequate progress on health and education.

Weak

Our Social Fabric:
Community = Good, Governance = Not enough data

North Carolinians benefit from a strong ethic of community, with thriving arts and public service sectors. Data on state and local governance is too limited for us to evaluate this year.

Good

Our Economy:
Economy = Good

At the top of the business cycle, North Carolina's economy isn't working equally well for everyone, but most people are better off than they were a decade ago, in the heart of the Great Recession. We lack data on the answers to questions we'd most like to answer from a sustainability perspective: how big are sustainable business sectors as a part of the state economy, and how fast are they growing?

Good

Infrastructure:
Housing = Weak, Transportation = Mixed, Land use patterns = Weak

Affordable housing is in short supply across the state, not just in the booming Piedmont cities. Transportation shows mixed trends—but, too often, new construction is driving sprawl into greenfields, increasing costs, locking in future greenhouse gas emissions, and damaging commuters' health.

Weak

Energy & Waste:
Energy = Mixed, Waste = Weak

Grouped together because they deal with flows of energy and matter, these goals and indicators signal looming problems. Renewable energy has enjoyed years of rapid growth from a low baseline. Yet, to avoid climate disruption, the transition to a clean energy economy needs to speed up in depth and breadth. Waste generation continues to grow, with heavy clouds on the horizon for recycling and materials management.

Mixed

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