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OPINION

A proposal to rebuild part of I-40 in NC presents a significant problem | Opinion

By Ben Prater

Updated February 12, 2025 10:17 AM | 



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Interstate 40 will reopen through the Pigeon River Gorge on March 1, restoring the main highway connection between North Carolina and Tennessee for the first time since damage from remnants of Hurricane Helene shut it down.

By Richard Stradling | Kevin Keister



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Harmon Den is one of many exits along busy Interstate 40 in western North Carolina's Pigeon River Gorge, but some features make it unique. Wildlife passages and fencing offer a safe crossing underneath the highway for elk, bears, deer and a great deal more wildlife in search of food, making it a critical habitat for animals off roads where human and animal paths intersect.

The habitat and the interstate that cuts through it were largely demolished in late September by Hurricane Helene. The newly repaired present a once-in-a-generation opportunity to explore new solutions for people and wildlife.

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stretch of highway by the first week in January, but was thwarted when another damaged section of highway sloughed off just before Christmas.

Options to repair the highway after Helene include a proposal to build steep retaining walls along I-40, which would only create more barriers preventing wildlife from moving across their habitat and into the path of oncoming traffic where the b



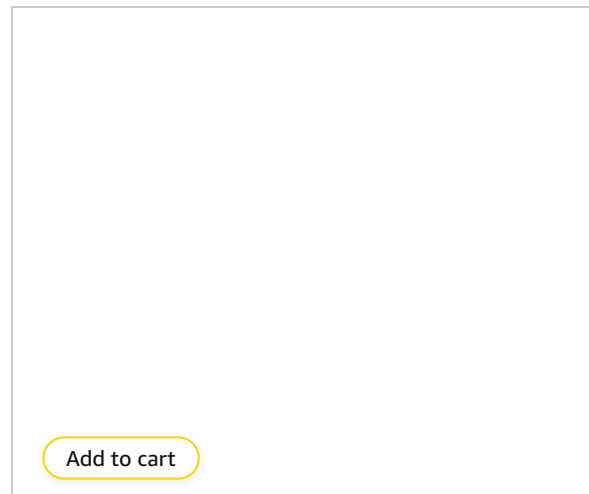
Rebuilding must take into account the opportunity for wildlife and motorists. There are sustainable solutions willing to collaborate and be creative. With thoughtful crossings can be created or improved without disrupting one of the busiest highways in the state.

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Now is the time to think long-term and take advantage of the situation. There are a few key areas along the interstate that are ripe to make this vision a reality.



An area known as the “double tunnel” which serves as a de facto land bridge is a critical connection that was interrupted. Locations like Snowbird Creek are in desperate need of new larger culverts and fencing to support safe crossings and fish passage. There are other opportunities along this corridor, as well as advocates working hard to make them a reality.



Every project needs its leaders. The Safe Passage coalition is a large group of people and organizations, including Defenders of Wildlife, working toward a common vision to protect wildlife and ensure the safety of motorists.

Together, we believe that it’s possible to balance the need to make the necessary repairs to I-40. That balance between safe crossings and features built at minimal incorporation of a massive retaining wall would only throw off the delicate balance of disturbance and reducing safe passage options on this vulnerable stretch of interstate. It’s a common



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We must, of course, acknowledge the resources it will take to accomplish this work. Thankfully, our state and federal governments are working to provide billions of dollars to the region impacted by Helene. These resources are badly needed. Our elected officials must move swiftly to appropriate these funds and ensure that

wildlife, increased connectivity and crossings are considered and promoted. There may never be a better moment than right now.

Ben Prater supervises and directs Defenders of Wildlife's efforts to protect imperiled wildlife and their habitats in the Southeast.

This story was originally published February 12, 2025 at 5:00 AM.

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