ALABAMA FOREVER WILD PROGRAM DUE FOR REAUTHORIZATION IN 2012

Established by a hugely popular constitutional amendment in 1992, Alabama's Forever Wild (AFW) Program, has since its inception purchased lands for general recreation, nature preserves, and additional acreage for Wildlife Management Areas and state parks. AFW is funded by 10 percent of the interest earned from royalties on natural gas wells in state waters that creates the $3 billion Alabama Trust Fund and from matching funds (approximately $40 million) contributed by The Nature Conservancy and the US Fish and Wildlife Service.

The funding has been used to purchase over 200,000 acres of high value land (including the Walls of Jericho in Jackson County, mountaintop trails around Huntsville, eagle roosting areas around Guntersville and 35,000 acres of wetlands in the Mobile delta) for the benefit of the people of the state of Alabama. Much money has changed hands in those transactions and by all reports it has been an impeccably well-administered program.

In these days of severely constrained public budgets, longing eyes are falling on the Trust Fund—indeed the larger fund has already been used to patch holes in various budgets. Some voices are urging that the funds be redirected to pay farmers to keep farming; others want to use the Trust Fund for road building and maintenance programs, rather than continuing its current purpose of securing environmentally significant lands for the benefit and use of the public. (It is important to note that Forever Wild lands are opened to the public, which is not the case with many other forms of permanent land protection.)

One argument brought forth is that the program has succeeded already—that there is enough land secured for the public benefit already. A quick look at the percentages of public ownership in neighboring states (and this is the southeast, which presently has the lowest public ownership of land of any region nationally) shows that Alabama still has some work to do: Mississippi has permanently protected nearly 6% of its land. Tennessee, 7.2%. Georgia, 6.1%. Florida, more than 21%. Alabama? A little better than 4%.

The beautiful, protected lands also provide economic development benefits to the state through tourism and by attracting new residents and investment. All the roads in the world won't induce development if they don't take you someplace you want to be.

The Alabama Land Trust encourages readers of this newsletter to spread the word regarding this valuable program and to support its retention in its current form and head off programs being considered that would draw from the Trust Fund's principal for short-term uses that would diminish its ability to support the very uses for which it was constituted. The official expiration of Forever Wild isn't until October 1, 2012, but the wheels of governance grind slowly–if you want to preserve this program now is the time to begin working for its preservation.

For more information on the program, see: www.outdooralabama.com/public-lands/stateLands/foreverWild/. For more information on how to support Alabama Forever Wild's extension (and more of the articles this one is based on,) see: pinhotitrailalliance.org/foreverwild.html

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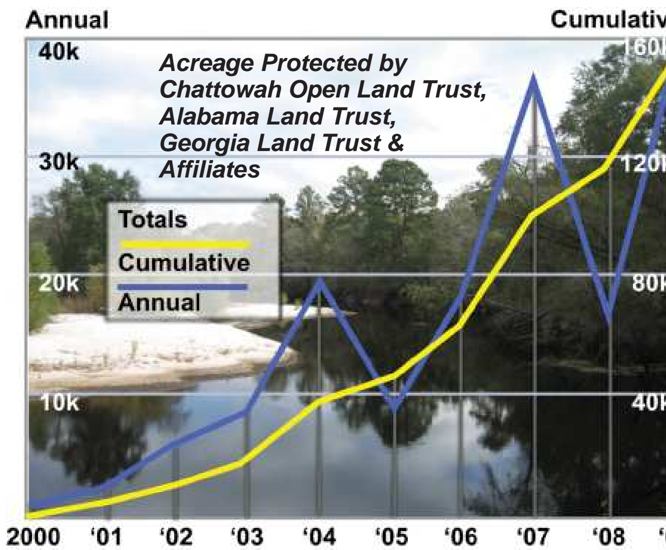
LAND PROTECTED TOPS 150,000 ACRES

In 2006 the Alabama Land Trust, Inc. and the Georgia Land Trust, Inc. drafted a strategic plan that included the ambitious goal of protecting 125,000 acres of land by the end of 2011. The goal seemed optimistic, but there was reason to believe it could be done.

From our beginnings in 1993 until 2000 we had recorded less than 2,000 acres in easements. We gathered momentum after that. By 2005, we had helped protect a touch over 40,000 acres, bolstered significantly by nearly 20,000 acres protected in 2004 and another 15,000 in 2005. If we maintained the pace set in those two years, we would make our goal.



As it turned out, our annual rate of land protection climbed to around 28,000 acres a year from 2006-2009. The average per year was boosted significantly by over 38,000 acres protected in 2009 alone. As a result, by the end of 2009 we topped 150,000 acres protected, more than 25,000 acres beyond our plan's 2011 goal.

In achieving this milestone, we helped protect:

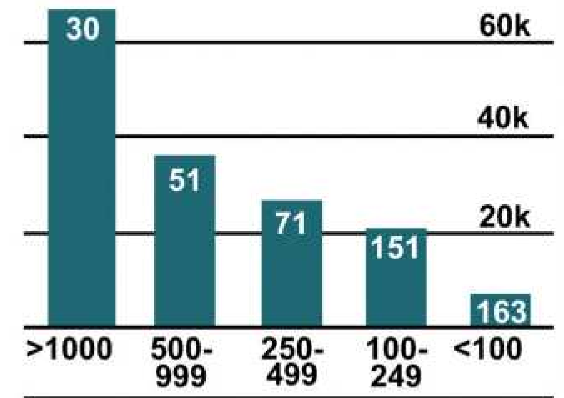
- Open space for recreational use or education of the general public—the McConaughey easement highlighted in this issue features what is essentially a privately maintained arboretum that is opened frequently for group tours;
- Productive soils. Our easements work to safeguard the productive uses of conserved lands. We map productive soils in our pre-conveyance documentation to assist ongoing stewardship and management of croplands and timberlands. A single southwest Georgia easement preserved 8,500 acres, of which roughly 85% was rated by the National Resource Conservation Service as Prime Soils or Soils of Statewide Importance
- Relatively natural habitat. We preserve to the greatest extent possible Special Natural Areas within protected properties. Sometimes this entails a simple widening of mandated buffers along streams or an elevated basal area to be maintained when silvicultural harvesting is undertaken; sometimes it is an outright commitment to preserving these areas intact, allowing only for peaceful enjoyment and stewardship for the benefit of the protected habitat.
- Water quality. We continued protection efforts that have conserved many miles of streamside buffers, riparian corridors and drainage areas in virtually every major watershed in Alabama and Georgia.

So, having advanced critical elements of our core mission and having rocketed right past our most recent quantifiable land protection goal, we are now looking at how to gauge our success in the near term future. Success at this scale creates a number of exciting new situations :

- Providing ongoing stewardship for protected properties, including visiting properties at least annually. With over 400 easements spanning over 500 miles, this is a particular challenge. We are making greater use of aerial monitoring this year in an effort to create greater efficiencies of scale and to provide the larger view necessitated by the scale of many of our easements (Thirty of our easements are over 1000 acres and more than 300 are greater than 250 acres.)
- Continuing to maintain, recruit and train the caliber of staff required to undertake all the components of our mission; donor development, conservation values research and documentation, field documentation, drafting and legal review of due diligence documents, monitoring, stewardship and administration. As we go to press, we have fourteen staff members.
- Refining our service delivery and Standard Operating Procedures to continue operating at the highest levels of land trust standards.
- Paying for all of this; more on that below.

In addition to our record year of land protection, we had a very good year in terms of fund raising and in contributions to our stewardship endowment. This is in part due to the generosity of our many supporters and this moment of celebrating a significant achievement is a very good time to offer our thanks to all of you who help make our ongoing success possible.

We look forward to continuing our progress in the future. We look forward to working with you and hope we can continue to count on your continued support in the future.



Bar height indicates total acreage within size category. Number of easements within categories shown within bar.

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John Summerford

John Summerford grew up in Falkville in north Alabama. His family worked a small farm and raised chickens, hogs and pigs. In addition to the farm chores, he was head checkout clerk at the family grocery store at age 8 and worked at the family's nursing home. Summerford quotes his father regarding all the hard work : "We get to put our feet under the table at night and eat."

His father had known hard work his whole life, growing up in Morgan County, Alabama in the 1930s. In addition to working his own small plot, he plowed other people's land and mowed fields for spending money. He then moved into hog farming, swapping hogs for school system leftovers to feed his herd. "It was a good system, but you can't do that anymore," Summerford notes.

Summerford left Falkville to attend medical school at the University of Alabama. Graduating in 1986, he set up practice in Tuscaloosa. At that time, an ongoing soybean "bubble" burst, and good land was available in Pickens and Sumter counties. Summerford purchased the first half of the easement property and added adjacent properties, eventually reaching the 1713 acres protected by the 2009 conservation easement conveyed to the Alabama Land Trust.

"The idea was to run to cattle on the property," Summerford says, and the family herd at one point numbered 350 Beefmaster purebreds. "When my father's health began to fail and he couldn't help with management of the property, it became more than I could handle along with my practice."

Like all husbandry, raising beef cattle is enormously time consuming. Summerford noted that winter, when the herd needs the most attention, is the hardest time. "At least it's not like dairy farming. With beef, you're monitoring calving, checking pregnancy and weaning schedules, and springtime is hectic, but at least you can take some Sundays off a lot of the year." Even with all that work, Summerford says managing cattle was his favorite aspect of owning land until its time constraints became overwhelming. He reports his children, Danner and J.T. share his love of the land but regrettably, "they're not beef people."

The Summerfords sold most of their cattle and now lease a good portion of the pasturelands on this Black Belt tract, while working to convert 800 acres to forest. "We harvested 200 acres to pay for planting that," Summerford said. "We are working with several programs, including a riparian buffer restoration project that helps cover the cost of planting hardwoods. Last year we toured the property with Alabama Wildlife and they advised us on widening our fire lanes, rounding their junction points so there aren't any corners on raising limb height in areas to assist turkeys in escaping predators."

Summerford has been devoted to wildlife management since his youth. winning 4-H and FFA Youth Conservationist of the Year and Wildlife Efficiency Awards in 1975. He continues this passion, following Quality Deer Management Association guidelines for deer management.

Summerford's forester also has him replacing Sawtooth oaks with Red and White Oaks, which produce acorns in the winter, when the mast is most beneficial. Summerford is pursuing Alabama Treasured Forest designation for his woodlands.

He is also working to improve conditions for quail on the property and has spotted three wild coveys there. "I grew up hunting them and it is the most enjoyable thing. It's hard to improve things for them, but you are just trying to bring up their numbers."

Asked his least favorite aspect of land ownership, Summerford, obviously thinking on this winter's rainy spell, offered, "Cold, wet and muddy. I've pretty much given up driving on the properties until things dry out a bit. There's just not enough cable in the winch."

Summerford says his motivation for doing the conservation easements was in part passed on to him by his parents. "We were raised with great morals and ideals, part of which was that we should be stewards of the land. We need to be friends of the public and the land." He takes this notion very seriously and beyond the easement has set up trusts to govern the land at the time of his death. "Generations from now we will still maintain these uses of the land."

Slough and hardwoods leading to the Tombigbee

The Tombigbee Watershed

The Tombigbee River is one of the two major tributaries of the Mobile River system. Upstream of its confluence with the Black Warrior River, is referred to as the Upper Tombigbee River. Free flowing until the 1970s, it was noted for its high diversity of fishes and mollusks. In 1992 the Nature Conservancy listed the Upper Tombigbee among 87 rivers in the nation with 10 or more at-risk freshwater fish and mussel species.

French fur traders may have helped name the river, calling it the Tombeche (eventually twisted into Tombigbee by the English), their interpretation of a Choctaw word for "boxmaker." It was a great boon to the fur trade when local capacity to build boxes was created enabling improved transportation of pelts along the river.

Commerce along the river eventually lead to the creation of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway (TennTom.) First suggested as early as 1810, the idea resurfaced periodically until 1972 when Richard Nixon helped break ground on the project. Between then and the dedication of the TennTom in 1985, more earth was moved than in building the Panama Canal. At a final cost of $1.99 billion, it became the costliest project ever undertaken by the Corps of Engineers.

Although trade along the waterway has grown every year since its opening in 1985, expectations for economic benefit of the project have fallen far short. In 1997 (the last year for which there are complete statistics) the waterway transported 9.1 million tons of goods, far short of original projections of annual tonnages of more than 27 million tons.

Channelization in the Upper Tombigbee to serve the TennTom separated the river from its floodplains along much of its run, reducing ecological diversity and making the Mobile basin more vulnerable to invasive species. Conservation easements along the stretches of river that maintain more of their original natural qualities gain that much more value for their ability to protect areas where shoals of mussels and other remnants of the original biologic diversity still find refuge.

John Summerford's Tombigbee Properties, LLC is the latest in a series of easements held by the Alabama Land Trust (ALT) in the Upper Tombigbee River watershed. Summerford's property lies within an area identified by the Alabama Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy as a location of "greatest conservation need." The property has about a mile and a half of frontage along the river and the easement protects significant upland drainage areas featuring over five miles of creeks feeding to large cypress slough before reaching the river.

Since 2003, ALT has helped put in place nine easements in the Tombigbee watershed totaling over 7,200 acres, providing significant protection to the water quality and remaining habitat in the river.

Phyllis Weaver

Phyllis Weaver's 2009 conservation easement along Choccolocco Creek near Oxford, Alabama, was another important part of achieving the ongoing Choccolocco Creek Conservation Corridor. It also helped her preserve her half-century relationship with her land.

The property near Mrs. Weaver's house features an old family plot that still has gravestones of members of the Mattison family. "Many stones had been taken over time and only three remain, including the most recent one from 1832 that marks Otis Mattison's resting place and notes that he was struck by lightning." A member of the Mattison family asked to visit the site and "I was happy to show it to her. She showed up in leather boots and all decked out for trekking. She was very surprised to find out it was my side yard. She was very happy with what we'd done with it."

Phyllis and her late husband Frank, bought their land along Choccolocco Creek near Oxford from Frank's Uncle Elbert who owned the land "from here all the way across where Highway 21 runs and it wasn't built yet. We purchased the first hundred acres for $50 an acre."

Phyllis, a native of Illinois, met Frank when he was in dental school at Washington University in St. Louis. They returned to Frank's home in the Oxford area, where his father was a doctor. Phyllis was Frank's dental assistant and ran the office.

"Frank had the love of the land," she says. "He would work the farm every day until noon, and then he would come in to do his dentistry from noon until five."

"At one point we raised corn and wheat and had some pigs, on the theory they would clean up some of the aftermath of that cultivation. In the mid-50s, our county agent, Sut Matthews, said you ought to just make it pasture and now we use it primarily to raise cattle."

Mrs. Weaver is happy she followed Sut's recommendation, "It requires no fertilization, the cows and the manure spreader take care of that. It usually stays good and moist, although the creek doesn't flood as bad as it used to. It grows a lot of clover, which helps keep nitrogen in. And we don't get broom sedge."

"The cows won't cross the creek," Phyllis says, "but they can smell an open gate. Just leave one open and off they go." They have turned up at the nearby Walmart parking lot on several occasions. "Fortunately, they remember where they came from and how they got out, so usually they'll just go back they way they came with enough encouragement. I spend a lot of time riding fences."

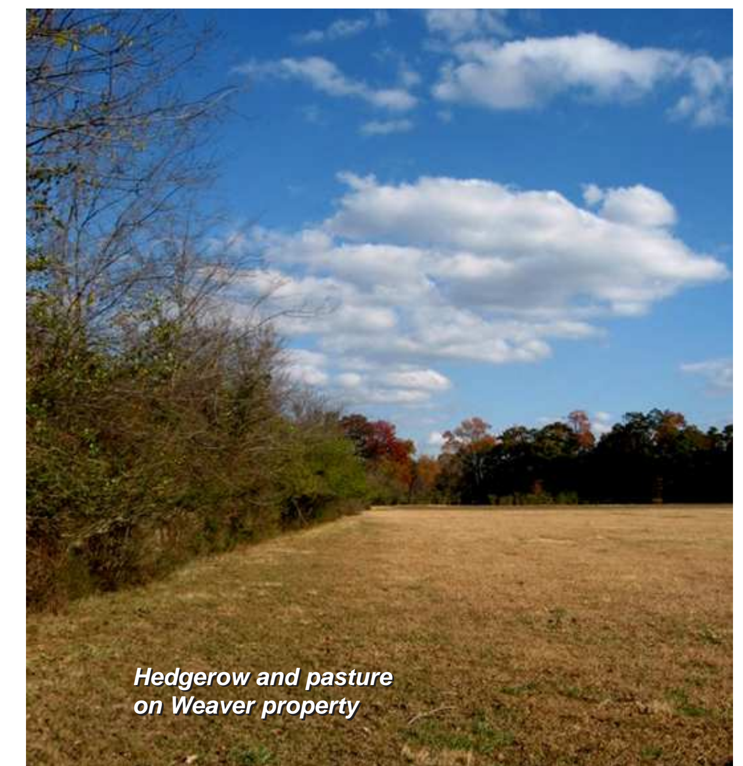
"I know the place will always be taken good care of. I'm planning on living forever and Mike Jones, who works with me, will continue to keep an eye on things." Mike first joined Phyllis in managing the farm when he was called in to remove a snake that had occupied a commode on the property. Mike had grown up on a farm and asked if he could just ride the property a bit. That was about 12 years ago and he now manages the property and keeps extensive computer records regarding the herd and its management. "Of course, I still keep my hand-written ledger," Phyllis says.

Mrs. Weaver loves her livestock and pets. She is devoted to the 150+ cattle she raises, which are now entirely black angus. "They have nice little calves—about 25 pounds—which means that they don't have many problems having them. I used to raise Charlois cows. They are beautiful animals but have enormous calves. Every birth means you've got a cow in trouble." She recalls with affection a Charlois bull "that sat on his haunches just like a dog. People would call me up and tell me that my bull had problems—he was sitting like a dog. He just liked to sit that way. Out of season he was as gentle as he could be. I used to just lean against his back."

Phyllis says that a great many of her herd are almost like pets and that her bullikins go to market "whole." She says they feed up as well as castrated animals and "that way, I don't have to feel so sorry for them."

She also has a small herds of pygmy goats, cats (including Sheba, who occupies a perch atop a small rug on the stove—"I have to ask her permission to cook"), and Miss Kitty, a hen who was brooding in a planter (Puss and Boots, two new chicks have just hatched) by Phyllis's front door. "She just picked out the spot and of course we don't disturb her." Miss Kitty purred when stroked by Mrs. Weaver.

"I've worked so hard on this place and loved it for so long, too. Frank and I first moved out here in 1950. I mixed the mud and Frank laid the block for our cabin out here. We hand dug our swimming pool. It's a shame we don't always appreciate the beauty God gives us because we're all so busy commercializing it."



Hedgerow and pasture on Weaver property

The Choccolocco Creek Conservation Corridor (CCCC)

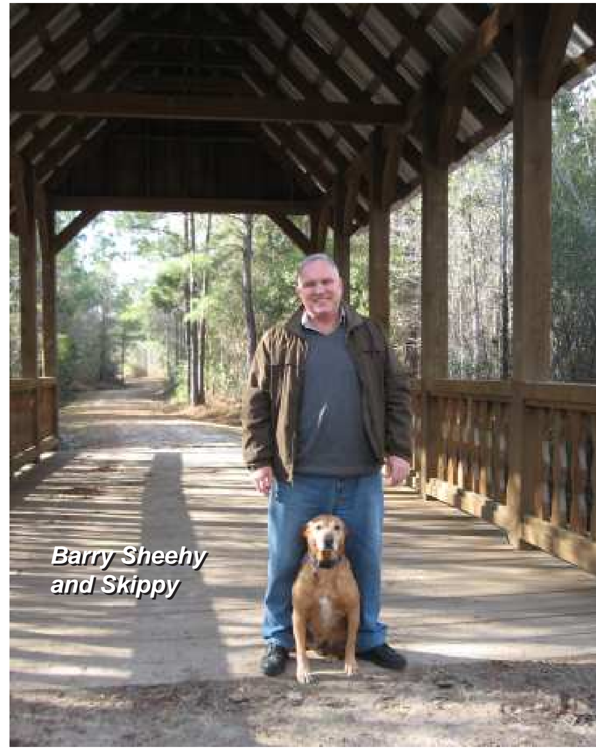
In its upper reaches, Choccolocco Creek supports 70 fish species and is the most diverse Coosa tributary in Alabama for gastropods. The Coosa River basin is the largest and most biologically diverse subwatershed of the Mobile River basin in terms of overall number of fishes, mussels and aquatic snails and has been noted by the Alabama Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy (CWCS) plan for needed conservation and targeted the Choccolocco Creek watershed as a priority area for conservation action. The conservation of this unique fauna is dependent upon clean, relatively silt-free, flowing waters.

Mrs. Weaver is glad she worked with the Alabama Land Trust to protect the land. "When the land near mine was developed for large scale commercial, the assumption was I'd want to sell mine, too. I came home once and part of my hedge was gone where someone had removed it to help show my property."

When first approached by the Land Trust about a conservation easement in the CCCC she reports, "I gave them a flat 'no.' But then other people who owned land around here and worked with the land trust told me they were even willing to purchase development rights. Katherine [Eddins—Alabama Land Trust Executive Director] called again and asked if I wouldn't talk to her, just as a Christmas present."

Mrs. Weaver says "Robert Downing down at the feed and seed helped me make my decision to sell the development rights on the property. I was at his store one day and he asked me if I knew that my land was the last piece of undeveloped land in the area. He said, if it was developed, there'd be nothing like that for kids to see and know about the farming life. So I was ready to talk to Katherine."

Mrs. Weaver is one of twelve property owners who have placed conservation easements on land within the CCCC program area, including six sales of development rights. The twelve easements have protected more than 10.4 miles of streambank and 780 acres of land within the floodplain, including 198 acres in 2009.



Barry Sheehy

Barry Sheehy has an odd habit; he purchases land, protects it and gives it away. Sheehy, who moved to these parts from Montreal around 17 years ago, lived for a while on an island near Savannah, but several stormy seasons convinced him it might be advisable to move to higher ground. He purchased land in Effingham County in 2003.

"My wife, Chris, loves to ride horses, so we wanted to have land where we could be close to them. Chris loves them; I clean the tack," Sheehy says, although he does confess to enjoy riding on the property's well-maintained trails, including one that carefully circumvents an Indian mound on the property. Period maps from around 1817 note the mound's presence.

Shortly after the Sheehys purchased the land, Barry contacted the Georgia Land Trust and began the process of conveying a conservation easement on a portion of the roughly 280 acres he had purchased. "I just wanted to keep a significant piece of land in Effingham County from undergoing development. The area was just so stressed and I wanted to ensure there would be some greenspace."

The land features extensive bottomlands associated with Black Creek, a tributary of the Savannah River. The hardwoods and other vegetation along the creek are protected from any future logging. This benefits water quality in an area that provide water to nearby Savannah and is vital to drainage and flood control in the area.

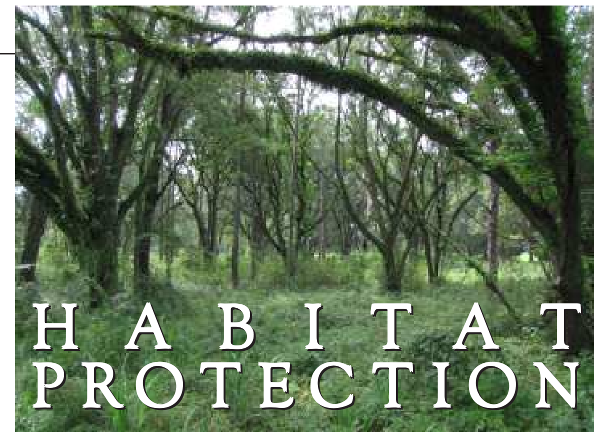
Sheehy has a great fascination with history, particularly of the American Civil War. He notes that during his 20 years serving in the Canadian Army, he developed a great interest in all history upon moving here discovered the powerful draw of the history of this area. Working with a loosely organized group of associates (they call themselves the Children's Crusade, Sheehy noting that "we're not young, but we're foolish,") The author of several books, Sheehy will soon publish the first two of a four part series on Savannah during the Civil War.

One of the books, "Brokers, Bankers and Bay Lane," studies the economics of the slave trade is an offshoot of Sheehy's work as an econometrician. What sounds like a purely academic pursuit is actually integral to Sheehy's business which helps businesses assess opportunities and risks in business planning. "I wondered about the slave trade and how big it was." The other book, "Savannah in Black, White and Gray," looks at surviving ante-bellum structures in the Savannah area. Sheehy notes that over 400 survive, giving Savannah the largest collection of such structures in the nation. Sheehy and his publishing partners will donate proceeds of the books toward preserving the area's history. "You can sell anything with Civil War in the title to Savannah's historically-oriented visitors,"

Sheehy points out other aspects of Civil War history, noting that trenches from the era of the battles are still evident. Sheehy published an article in Georgia Historical Quarterly entitled "Forgotten Battles" that details some of these encounters, such as the Battles of Monteith Swamp and Cuyler's Plantation. He quotes a Union soldier saying of the Confederates' capacity to dig in, "Give a Rebel a coffee cup and 10 minutes and he can disappear."

The Sheehys' first easement was recorded in 2004 and the second in 2006. The first property was then donated to Effingham County and discussions are under way with the Effingham County school board to donate the second property for use as an educational center. "I am extremely excited about the school board's acquisition of this property," says Randy Shearouse, superintendent of Effingham County schools. "As our county continues to grow, our students will have an outdoor refuge in which to engage in many worthwhile learning activities. Mr. Sheehy is so generous in giving a gift that will keep on giving back to our students in Effingham County." The facility, when up and running, will be called the Lisnacullen Conservation Center, named in honor of the Sheehy's farm.

Sheehy says his favorite part of owning the land is just walking on it "and not having to ask anyone's permission." He reports sighting all manner of wildlife around the property, including coyotes, bobcats, rattle-snakes, a flourishing deer herd and numerous owls and hawks. And he adds what might be his credo regarding his relationship with the woods, "Our first response should not be just to cut it down."



Habitat Protection

"Destruction, degradation, and fragmentation of habitat is the driving force behind today's decline in species and biodiversity."

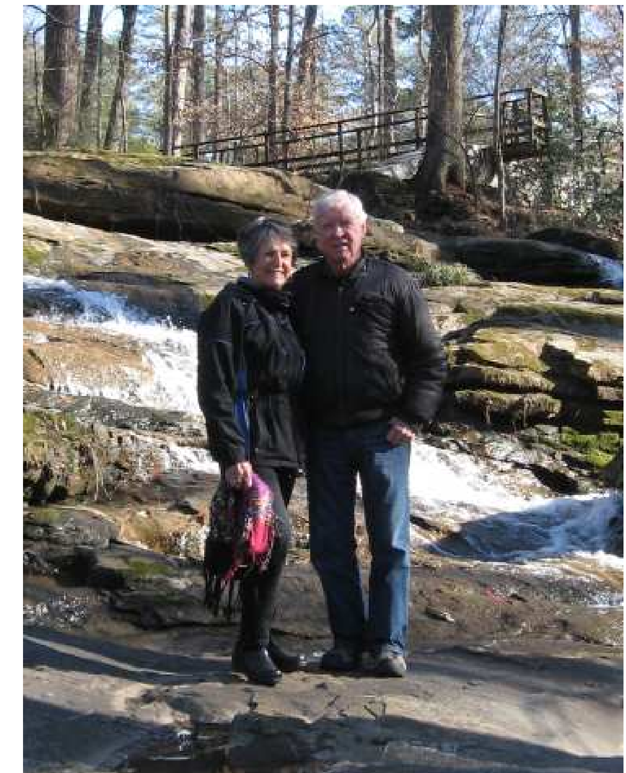
Natural succession is the "more or less predictable and orderly changes in the composition or structure of an ecological community." Succession, once thought to have a predictable arc toward climax (or stable) states, is now seen more as a sequence of responses toward the next disequilibrium. There are still "climax" communities—rain forests, longleaf pine forests, tundra—but regrettably more and more we see vestiges of their disturbed remnants. Or we see barrens, often where once there was verdant land.

Natural disturbances often play a role—occasionally profound—in keeping things off balance. Beyond natural impacts, however, the hand of man—"anthropogenic disturbances"—is causing a disturbance incomparable to what can be seen in the natural world, a new final stage of succession; an ecological wasteland. Parking lots, strip malls, and interstates are ecologically effectively dead.

The quote at the head of this article gets at the core of this issue. Man's use of the land is ever more fragmenting, degrading and destroying habitat suitable to all manner of flora and fauna. The quote comes from the US Fish and Wildlife Service web site, which has focused on those areas most important as habitat in a number of State Wildlife Action Plans (SWAPs), including in Alabama and Georgia.

Conservation easements are an invaluable tool in achieving the core purposes of the SWAPs, as well as a key conservation purpose in the IRS's code section 170(h): "the protection of relatively natural habitat for fish, wildlife, plants, or similar ecosystems." Almost all of our easements benefit locally important habitat and we make an effort to target areas identified as particular opportunities within our SWAPs. (Every state and territory has a SWAP; you can find them at www.wildlifeactionplans.org.)

Beyond localized benefit, as we protect more land, particularly along rivers and streams helping create protected corridors for wildlife, we have more opportunities to connect protected properties and extend the range of adjacent protected properties. Isolated easements become nuclei, and—in our hopeful vision—more protected areas accrete to them and eventually connect with other protected land.



Dan and Mary Emma McConaughey

Dan and Mary Emma McConaughey have recently granted a conservation easement to the Georgia Land Trust on their home place and the surrounding 4 ½ acres situated in Druid Hills near Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. Outstanding features include a 120 foot cascading waterfall and the historic site of Durand Mill circa 1830.

They spent three years "reading Frank Lloyd Wright" and working on the house's plan to ensure that the house they eventually built would blend into the property and would not excessively disturb the site. Only three trees were removed to build the home. The house built of cypress, stone and glass in classic Wrightian fashion, invites the outside in and the inside out through large windows. Large viewing decks offer dramatic vistas of Peavine Creek as it cascades across the property. The interior of the house is built from one fallen wormy chestnut tree which had been preserved under water and which they brought down from the north Georgia mountains.

The McConaugheys constructed two-thirds of a mile of low impact nature trails and bridges through the property so that it may be enjoyed from many vantage points.. The trails are lined with fallen limbs and the many varieties of trees and indigenous wildflowers are labeled. The property is an Audubon Society Bird Sanctuary and the Society likes brush piles preserved for the benefit of the many avian species that enjoy the property. The nature preserve is also habitat to many wild animals including raccoons, rabbits, otters, and a pair of wood ducks.

"We enjoy having nature loving groups tour our property," Mary Emma said and she named a list of visitors to the property, including the Druid Hills Tour of Homes and Gardens, the Georgia Conservancy (the McConaugheys helped found the organization in the 1960s), the Decatur Garden Tour, numerous local garden clubs, bird watching groups, and various school groups, including a history class from nearby Emory that studied the history of the old mill on the property.

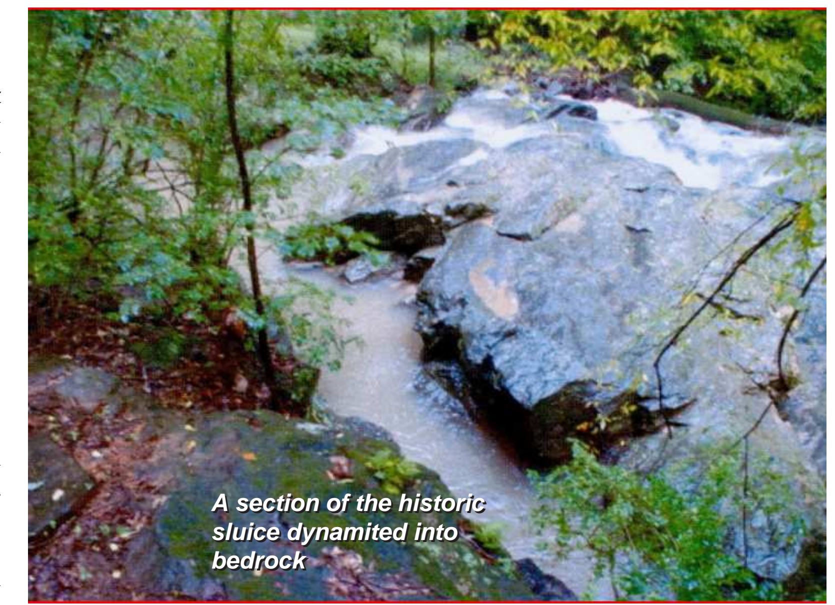
Part of the drama of the property's setting stems from a historic sluice dynamited into bedrock to channel Peavine Creek to power Durand Mill, originally constructed in the 1830s. The spring fed creek originates about a mile and a half upstream in Decatur. The mill used the power of the creek first to mill flour and later to turn furniture.

The creek runs even in the driest weather. Interestingly, the property is very near a divide in hydrology between the Atlantic and the Gulf of Mexico. The creek flows into the Chattahoochee River and on into the Gulf; a short distance to the east and it would have drained to the Atlantic.

The McConaugheys enjoy the day to day process of cleaning out the invasives that had overwhelmed the property at the time that they purchased it. "The beauty of pulling up ivy, honeysuckle and privet," Dan notes, "is that after you do clear the land the wildflowers miraculously come up. Each slope has different wildflowers after you clear out the invasives." The McConaugheys then named a few of the native species that beautify their property: rue anemone, wild geranium, lady slippers, trillium, hearts-a-busting, and spiderwort. They pride themselves on the strides they've made bringing back the natural ground cover, "preserving the good and fighting the invasives without poison," says Dan.

The McConaugheys love of nature manifested itself early on in many outdoor adventures with their children, Memmi, Dan, Jr., and Warner. Dan recalls the whole family piling into their Volkswagen bug and heading for the north Georgia mountains and hiking the Appalachian Trail for four days in the rain. Looking back the family cherishes the experience.

The McConaugheys mulled over their decision to protect the property for several years. "As Atlanta grew and we realized that an astounding number of acres are lost each day to development, we decided to proceed with the conservation easement." Mary Emma and Dan agree, "Our nature preserve has become more valuable and precious to us as the years have passed. We are so happy to be able to preserve it from development for future generations. We hope others will protect their property as well."



WADE AND ROSEMARY STRICKLAND

Dr. Wade Strickland's relationship with the Satilla River imbues every part of his life. He says of the river, "I learned to swim in it, learned to fish in it, I was baptized in it, and my father taught me to hunt along it." His 2009 easement on over 880 acres has helped protect over three and a half miles of riverfront and over 500 acres of bottomland hardwoods, swamps and sloughs along the river.

Dr. Strickland also met his wife Rosemary along the Satilla, although for a time the river prevented their meeting. Dr. Strickland notes that growing up, his family's activities tended to be upstream of the old family grounds where the Sticklands' home now is as well as a lodge that is used for charitable and other events in which the family is involved. Rosemary's family's was downstream and it took a bit for the two to meet. Fortunately their paths crossed and their children and grandchildren are enjoying some of what they experienced growing up along the blackwaters and sugar sand beaches of the Satilla.

Strickland's family goes back in the area as far as Dr. Strickland's great, great, great, grandfather, Levi, the first of the family to arrive in the area from the Carolinas. Parts of the protected property were owned by his part of the family in the past, although he notes much of it "went out to the other side of the family" in the interim.

Dr. Strickland, a cardiologist who says he was always, "drawn to medicine," was also drawn to owning land and began purchasing the easement-protected tract in Brantley County, Georgia in 2002. Rosemary says of Dr. Strickland that he has a simple philosophy regarding land, "He only wants to own what touches his."

Like many families in the area, the Stricklands were "timber men." They would harvest the rich stands along the river, raft them up and float them down to Burnt Ford, "about 25 miles as the crow flies, although who knows how far by river, it's just so serpentine." Strickland's grandfather still used oxen to haul timber as tractors had not yet arrived.

His father almost moved away from timber, becoming the principal of the school in nearby Waynesville. Eventually he was contacted by the Timber Protection Organization, which enlisted him to become the Forest Ranger for the area and he returned to timber.

As part of his ranger duties, he maintained a rudimentary telephone system on the ranger station property. Armed with this experience, when the local telephone exchange of 50 telephones came on the market, Strickland reports his father said, "What the heck," and borrowed $7,000 to purchase it from "the old fellow who had owned it and had gone broke running it."

The system stayed small enough that it ran through a single switchboard "monitored" by Strickland's mother until the 1950s, when the federal government provided funding for Electrical Membership Corporations and other rural wiring upgrades. Strickland Communications grew to 6000 subscribers and now includes satellite television service to nine counties.

Rosemary notes, "When we were poor Dad was a fisherman. Now, we own a lot of the places where we used to have our fish fries." This relationship with the land and the Satilla helped lead the Stricklands to put the conservation easement on the property. "We were determined to do it."

Dr. Strickland says that one of his great joys of the property is hunting on it, including regular quail hunts, "the high point of the year." He and Rosemary also love "just seeing the beauty of it." The easement will ensure they and future generations of Stricklands will continue to know the beauty of the Satilla.

The Satilla seen from Strickland property

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GEORGE JETER

Jeter and grandchildren Brantley and Stewart with a championship cypress in protected bottomlands along the Ocmulgee

Land owning in the Jeter family goes back just a little ways. The family first arrived at Port Royal, Virginia before 1700. The generations in between have been landowners, as Jeter says, "leapfrogging from one frontier to the next."

When Columbus was founded in the 1830s, the Jeters had already arrived in the area. George's family leapfrogged over to Enterprise, Alabama, which features a Boll Weevil monument, erected in honor of the pest that hastened the local economy's transition from cotton to much more profitable peanuts.

Jeter grew up an avid hunter and says the appeal of land to him goes back to the days when he'd grab his single shot .410 or .22 and take his bike up the road and go hunting. Although he no longer hunts, saying he "takes no great pleasure in killing," he still loves the woods and the animals. His greatest pleasure in owning the land he says is having "free range" to roam the land and notes that it is ever more difficult to have that access to land without owning some.

Jeter, who worked as CFO for AFLAC reports, "I've been retired since 1985, but I still pretty much work full-time" as a consultant to the company and various charitable organizations. Before AFLAC, Jeter worked as an IRS agent, eventually in charge of all operations north of Atlanta. "I think my pleasing personality came from those days," Jeter says.

Being active with various charitable organizations, Jeter notes Columbus has "per capita probably the highest percentage of charities anywhere. I've always thought that people who've been fortunate should share." One volunteer project Jeter helped bring to fruition was a 50-year lease of Department of Defense land on West Point Lake for use as a Boy Scout camp. "I had to get the Secretary of Army to sign it—he was the only person who could sign a lease that long."

Jeter's son Jim, an engineer at Warner Robins AFB, lives in Bonaire and with the help of some neighbors looks after the property. Daughter Leslie, a nurse anesthetist who lives in Atlanta, is more of city girl. Property maintenance has been a bit more of a chore during this year's cold, wet winter. Significant portions of the property have stayed underwater for a while, in part because every let up in the rain, seemingly triggers another release from the Lake Jackson reservoir upstream on the Ocmulgee.

Jim is also a hunter, and manages the property in accordance with QDMA principles. Ample food plots are in place on the property, although Jeter notes, "We may have to start over after the floods this year." George's home off Lake Oliver near Columbus has been covered up with deer this winter, possibly driven from their normal foraging range. "They've eaten things that you didn't know a deer would eat."

A goodly portion of the easement property was logged prior to Jeter's purchase of the property, and he intends to try to restore longleaf pine to some of the upland areas. The balance of the property is used for hunting and to provide habitat. Among the animals that find habitat on the property are a pair of nesting eagles ("I worry about my Shih Tzu when we're up there,") a den of coyotes ("you should hear 'em when the train comes through,") black bears, bobcats and "ducks by the thousands." Jim noted with the property's periodic flooding you could almost hunt deer and duck from the same spot at different points in the year.

There is also a beaver pond near the lodge on the property. The pond stays wet even in the driest weather as the area's topography area feeds water down off surrounding hills toward the pond. There is also a strong artesian well. A well bored to serve the lodge produces around 2000 gallons an hour, flowing so freely it needed to be capped.

Jeter pointed out that one nice piece of land management on the property was the use of hardened stream crossings rather than culverts and more engineered solutions. "You can't fight water," Jeter says, "but the crossings are there, even when they're submerged. You just have to have faith and plunge in."

Asked what is his least favorite aspect of owning land is, Jeter replies, "You don't own land; it owns you." Of course, his family's known that for a few hundred years.

The property's lodge dusted with snow during one of 2010's snowfalls.