

**Tom McClure interviewed Mike Curran on April 10, 2024, in Fayetteville, Arkansas.**

Tom McClure: The interview we are conducting today is a part of a joint project between the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society to document some of the history of the protection of wilderness areas in Arkansas during the last 50 years. I am Tom McClure interviewing Mike Curran for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on April 10th, 2024. Mike, all I need you to do now is to state your name and indicate that you are willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and related material available to others.

Mike Curran: My name is Mike Curran, and I do give permission to the Pryor Center to utilize this material for public use.

TM: Thanks, Mike. A couple of things about Mike. Mike was born in Glendale, California. He is a graduate of landscape architecture at California Polytechnic University. He was a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. Mike's entire career was as an employee with the US Forest Service. He was a district ranger in Buffalo, Wyoming, and also in Gunnison, Colorado. He worked for five years for the US Department of

Agriculture in Washington, DC, and then served for nine years here in Arkansas as the supervisor of the Ouachita National Forest. Mike, welcome, and thank you for being with us today.

MC: Thank you.

TM: We have some questions for you to consider, but we also encourage you to include other things beyond the four questions that you would like to say at any time. Our first question is will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

MC: Let me preface my statements by going into my background a little bit more. I grew up on the coast of California, basically in the wilderness. I grew up in the woods, and that was my life. My father was a lifelong employee of the US Forest Service, and I followed in his footsteps and spent my entire career with the Forest Service. With that background, I showed an interest in landscape architecture, and as indicated, I graduated from Cal Poly. From there, I was employed by the Forest Service. And one of my first stops was the San Juan National Forest in Colorado, where I helped administer and protect the Weminuche Wilderness Area there. Following that assignment, I was designated district ranger in Wyoming on the [unclear] Ranger

District, and I administered the Cloud Peak Wilderness area. And from there, I accepted a further assignment to another ranger district as district ranger and administered the Oh-Be-Joyful and the West Elk Wilderness area. After my time in the Loeb Fellowship Program at Harvard, I went into the Washington DC office and worked there for five years. The last year of my assignment there, I was on detail to Senator Bumpers' office. And I have a few items I want to quote from the ledger that I had when I went to work for Senator Bumpers. "First day, 9:15 in the morning, August 14th, 1984, Susan Reef outlined priority legislation and related work. Two main priorities include the Arkansas Wilderness Legislation and an oil and gas leasing bill." The next entry indicated I worked late with Bill Massey and the Senator as a compromise was reached to include 91,000 acres of the original 117,000 acres, which the Senator supported. At about that point in time, Senator Bumpers called all the staff into his office. He was very happy that they'd just reached this agreement. And since I'd only been working about a month, I had made contact with people supporting the Wilderness bill, one of them being Tom McClure. And I asked how it went with Blue Hole, which was of interest to many in Arkansas. And the Senator says, "Oh, my gosh." He says, "We weren't able to do

anything for Blue Hole." With my newfound knowledge of the working on the Hill, you go through legis training. With that newfound knowledge, I said, "Well, why don't we enter verbiage into the record that establishes that as meeting wilderness standards, and I can put together a map that delineates the area for you." And, he agreed to it. And the next thing we did was stated early in the order to draft new boundaries for Arkansas, wilderness only. "Started early," I'm reading from the journal, "Started early in order to draft new boundaries for Arkansas Wilderness on maps first in the official record. Proceed over to Andy Roesener's office in the House Annex to work on the maps. Worked on the maps until time for the meeting of the full committee of the House Interior and Insular Affairs. They reported out the substitute Arkansas Wilderness bill. That afternoon, I worked with Tom McClure of Arkansas on some additional report language, which would protect the Blue Hole area in the deleted portion of the wilderness proposal and the East Fork Drainage Hurricane Creek." And then a further entry, "September 27th, delivered Blue Hole report language to Andy Roesener. And from there on the report was never contested and the language was put into the bill that asked that the area be managed as if it were a wilderness area, and it'd be retained as

non-motorized." Shortly after that, I was assigned the supervisor job by the Ouachita National Forest. I recall coming to Hot Springs, Arkansas, several months ahead of my family as my son was scheduled to graduate from high school in DC there. And during the weekends when I was here alone, I spent all of those weekends visiting the wilderness areas, knowing full well that once I got here with the work that was going on with the clearcutting controversy, that I wouldn't have much time to get knowledgeable with those areas. So that was my first introduction to wilderness on the ground in Arkansas. And I've always been a strong supporter of it and the management of it, and I was proud to have those wilderness areas in Arkansas.

TM: Well, thank you, Mike, and thanks for the detail there and the history of all that. Question number two is will you please describe how you personally feel about protecting wilderness areas and what value these areas have for you personally? And as a second part of the question, what value do you think these areas in Arkansas have, both short-term and long-term, for the people of Arkansas?

MC: Well, I feel strongly about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas, and I visit them often now that I'm retired. And I think

it's imperative that we not only keep and protect the wilderness areas we have in Arkansas, but that we add to those areas, where appropriate, and it makes them a big part of the future of this land.

TM: Okay. Question number three has to do with stories. Do you have any special stories — you've already told one or two, but you may have more — that you would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

MC: Well, I didn't know you were going to go through the item by item, so I've already related the Blue Hole story, and I don't have any other stories like that to tell. I was proud to be associated with Blue Hole and was able to, in my lesser capacity there, to be able to do something important. Once I arrived here in Arkansas, I again touched base with you, Tom, and Bill Pell, and you were able to take me out and visit the Blue Hole area, which was a real joy to me.

TM: Well, it's a beautiful area, and thank you for all your recounting of that story. Question number four is would you like to add anything else that you think needs to be emphasized about the

history of wilderness protection in Arkansas that you think the public should know or consider?

MC: I haven't got much more to add. I think it's extremely important that endeavors such as this, this interview, capture the past history. It's so important. And other than that, I continue to volunteer in the Flatside Wilderness on a monthly basis, going in there, helping maintain the trails. I carry along an old, single-handed crosscut saw that I used to remove the larger trees in the wilderness area. To me, as an old retiree, that was a super enjoyment.

TM: Well, thank you for helping take care of Flatside. And if you had-

MC: I might add, once I did get to Arkansas and got together with Supervisor Lynn Neff on the Ozark and so that we both could agree to establish a steering committee for wilderness, and that turned out to be a good move, in my mind. The issue of wilderness or no wilderness was put aside, and the intent being to do what we could to protect and better manage the wilderness areas we have. I'll wrap with that.

TM: Okay. Well, thank you. And thank you, I remember those days well, and I appreciate what you did to encourage people to all

work together. So, well, I just wanted to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today to share with us your perspective and your memories about wilderness protection in Arkansas. And also, I wanted to mention that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So thank you again, and I'll say goodbye for now.

MC: Goodbye, Tom.

TM: Thanks again, Mike.

MC: Hopefully, we're not behind the curve by mentioning your name several times because you were so important to this process.

TM: That can get you in trouble.