

Tom McClure interviewed Thomas Foti on May 30, 2023, 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 Tom Foti for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on May 30th, 2023. Tom, 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.

Tom Foti: My name is Thomas Foti and I do give permission.

TM: Today, Tom Foti is joining us by phone from Little Rock, Arkansas. Tom has a master's degree in botany, specializing in plant ecology, from the University of Arkansas. He has a long career as an ecologist and research chief with the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. He is the co-author of "Arkansas and the Land" and numerous scientific technical and educational publications. And all along the way, he has been a lifelong advocate for the protection of wilderness areas and natural areas in various parts of the state of Arkansas. Tom played a major role in the protection of Big Lake Wilderness and the Big Lake

National Wildlife Refuge, and also in the protection of 36,000 acres of wilderness in the Buffalo National River. Tom, we have some questions for you to consider, but also we encourage you to include other things that you would like to say. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

TF: I became a serious conservationist in the mid 1960s, probably motivated most by images of defoliation in Vietnam during the Vietnam War, but expanding out from there to many other conservation issues. My mentor and best friend and second mother at that time was Jane Stern of Pine Bluff, and Jane really took me under her wing and helped to guide me into conservation work. Even at that time, in the mid 1960s, she was a member of The Wilderness Society. And we're talking about within a year of the time the Wilderness Act was passed. She really was in tune with conservation work all over Arkansas and all over the country. At that time in the mid 60s, The Wilderness Society was concentrating still on the huge wilderness areas in the West. There might have been a million acres in Bob Marshall Wilderness. But even at that time, they were beginning to think about wilderness in the East. And that was actually a fairly controversial topic, that many people thought that you could not have wilderness in the East where every acre had basically been impacted,

in some degree, by people. But the discussions moved on and eventually the consensus arose that there was wilderness in the East and The Wilderness Society should be working to help protect that. Sometime during that whole process, in, we'll say, the late '60s, Jane and I made contact with The Wilderness Society staff, particularly Ernie Dickerman, who was on the staff at that time, and he actually became, I think, the leading force within The Wilderness Society to designate areas of wilderness in the East. We communicated, contacted. Eventually, we met and talked and began to form our ideas about wilderness in Arkansas, and by the early 1970s, The Wilderness Society was heavily involved in trying to identify wilderness areas in the East. Staff people were coming throughout the East, but to Arkansas as well, to look at areas, to meet with citizens, to meet with agencies, and to start to define proposals for wilderness. There was such a big effort that they needed some local involvement in what was being done out here and they approached me about contracting with The Wilderness Society as a part-time, say, regional representative. In that role, I worked on wilderness proposals in Arkansas, Missouri, Mississippi, Alabama, and Louisiana, but I'll talk mostly about Arkansas. But also in the early '70s, the Buffalo National River was created, and as part of the legislation on Buffalo National River, the Park Service was required to evaluate potential wilderness areas within

the National River. And in that process, I was able to take part in helping to define the three wilderness areas on the National River proper, Lower Buffalo, Ponca Unit, and Upper Buffalo, and then eventually took part in evaluating the Upper Buffalo Wilderness on the National Forest that was adjacent to the National River. At that point, we didn't immediately evaluate the Leatherwood area on the National Forest, but I frequented that area and really enjoyed it, loved it, and was glad to see that it was eventually incorporated into the wilderness preservation system. As you mentioned, I also worked on the Big Lake Wilderness Proposal. I actually created the Big Lake Wilderness Proposal and advocated for it. I think it's a really special, and even today, not very understood area, maybe we can correct that before I pass. And those, I think, were the primary wilderness areas that I worked on, but I was really most committed to seeing wilderness created on the White River National Wildlife Refuge. I had been visiting the refuge, hunting, fishing, walking around, boating since I was preteen in the 1950s, and had seen how it had changed over that time with more intensive forest management and road development and so forth, and I really wanted to see a significant wilderness area dedicated there. At that time, the Department of Interior was required to evaluate all areas having wilderness quality of 5,000 acres or more and all roadless islands. And that became a real issue on the White

River Refuge, that the place that I picked out as having the best wilderness potential was called "Big Island", about 20,000 acres along the White River, and found, to my chagrin, that the refuge manager had barged a bulldozer over to the island to create a road so it wouldn't qualify as wilderness. Eventually, we went through a proposal and hearings, and I got very frustrated. And for a long time, I just didn't even want to think about the White River Refuge anymore, but eventually reconnected and reconnected with staff as well. On the Buffalo, of course, we had a different social climate that we were dealing with, and I think the Park Service came up with a good set of proposals and we were able to move through with those. By that time, I'd say we're getting to the mid 1970s, and eventually the Eastern Wilderness Preservation Act was passed, I think, in 1975 that included a couple of areas in Arkansas, and then more were in the pipeline and passed like the ones on Buffalo National River. They were not in that original act, but came along very shortly thereafter. By the mid '70s, I was director of the Arkansas Ecology Center, and we were involved in essentially every conservation effort in Arkansas in the '70s. And I was so stressed and overwhelmed by the many conservation issues that we had, that I was not able to spend as much time working on wilderness proposals after the mid '70s, but have continued to love and cherish wilderness since then.

TM: Okay. The next question that we have or discussion topic is, would you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you personally and for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

TF: Of course, I love wilderness. I love the concept of wilderness. I think it is something that is needed to be communicated and felt throughout our society. That is areas where we don't dominate, where we don't even substantially change. I think they are wonderful mementos to our relationship to nature. Having said that, after I went through other stages in my career, I eventually became the plant community ecologist and eventually chief of research of the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and spent the next 25 years of my career in that role and dealt with a sort of different concept of protection, preservation of nature. Our role was to identify the most natural areas in Arkansas, the ones that best represented what Arkansas was like at the time of settlement, and to work to describe and protect those areas, including through acquisition. And as we began to acquire natural areas and dedicate natural areas, we began to see that, in time, some of these areas were changing in ways that we hadn't expected and really didn't want, that they were changing in ways that impaired the rationale for acquiring them in the first place. And so we instituted a policy at that point for every natural area in the system to

spell out in a document why we had identified and acquired that area. Secondly, we had to lay out what processes had formed the features that we were trying to protect. And thirdly, were those processes still in effect today? And if not, were there actions that we needed to take to, we often use the term "mimic", the natural processes and lay all that out in black and white and set up a process for reevaluating, periodically, what we were accomplishing, and if we're succeeding or failing, what we need to do differently. And as I went through that process over decades, I began to think back to wilderness areas and realized some of the conversations that I'd had with Ernie Dickerman back in the early '70s, which I said to Ernie, "As I read the Wilderness Act, it defines wilderness in terms of people. It talks about places where man is a visitor who does not remain, places that the impact of man is substantially unnoticeable," and what got to me was, "Places that offer prime opportunities for solitude." In other words, the Wilderness Act defined "wilderness" as what I'll call recreation areas or recreation areas, spiritual recreation areas. That's a good thing. I'm not criticizing that. But as I talked to Ernie back in those days, I said, "There needs to be more of at least a nod toward the natural features, natural processes of these areas. And are they continuing today or are these areas changing into something else in ways that we have no control over?" And he said, "Well, that's a good thing, but we could not

have passed the Wilderness Act if we had taken that sort of a scientific process." The language was what would convince Congress and the administration to do it, but we'll get to that at some point. To some extent, I think we have gotten to that, but I don't think we've gotten to that in our wilderness areas in a really effective way yet, that is an organized way of looking at each wilderness area and saying, "What are the natural features and processes of this area? Are they changing? How are they changing? Are there things that we can do that are appropriate in the context of the Wilderness Act to help to steward and guide these areas?" I know that many people consider that dangerous ground, that it's so easy for an agency to just twist that into doing something that they want to do or think they're mandated to do, but I think it's a very good thing to do that I would really love to see an organized effort of, let's say, the federal management agency over a wilderness area, partnering with state natural area programs and NatureServe and perhaps other entities to do an organized inventory of each natural area, each wilderness area as a natural area or as series' of natural areas within a larger wilderness area and what can be done there. I think that may be less important when you've got a million-acre wilderness area out west, but even there, as the managers of Yellowstone National Park have found out, that things change and they change in ways that in some

cases we think are impairing the natural system. And so this kind of process, I think, could be done in a way that would fit the particular natural area and its system. In the East, something that jumps out at me, and jumped out at me very early, was the frequency of fire in some of our natural systems, and that was certainly true in the Lower Buffalo Wilderness. And at first, there was to be no "prescribed" burning in those areas, but eventually the park service began to consider that. And even within Buffalo National River, you can see, looking at the species composition and the structure of the forest within the three wilderness areas there, that they vary in terms of how fire would have behaved there and been a part of those systems. It definitely was a much more important part of the system of the Lower Buffalo Wilderness area as opposed to the Ponca Unit. Ponca Unit, at least substantial portions of it, are much moisture than those of the Lower Buffalo, and they didn't, and shouldn't, burn as frequently. So I think what I'm getting at is that I would love to see, over time, a much more scientific and ecological approach to evaluating our wilderness areas and even "managing" those areas in various ways that might be fairly active or not. But that kind of grew out of my overall career path, I guess.

TM: Okay. The next question is, do you have any special stories that you would like to tell about your experiences or the experiences of others regarding efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

TF: I've got a lot of stories. Some of them could be poignant about taking a friend who was contemplating suicide into Leatherwood area and hoping that the wilderness spirit would rescue him, but it failed. I also had some very concerning, in some cases, infuriating contact with federal agencies over wilderness areas, not just in White River refuge that I already mentioned, but also in the National Forest Wilderness areas later on. But a kind of a fun story to tell, I think, is, in the early '70s, I think, a few of us took Ernie Dickerman in a couple of canoes down the Lower Buffalo River to let him experience the Lower Buffalo Wilderness. And he really enjoyed it and appreciated it, and you could tell there were things about it that he didn't quite understand. He had a Sierra Club cup, stainless steel cup, and he would dip it over the side into the river and sip the water. And I would say, "Ernie, I don't know that you really need to be drinking the water out of the Buffalo." But then as we floated on down, we wound up coming around a bend and here was a woman standing on the shore with a long skirt on and nothing else, no shoes, no top, and a park ranger was standing there, just kind of looking at her, not being involved at all. And as we passed, she said, "Have you seen a group of people along the river?" And we

said, "Well, we've seen a few people." She said, "I think you would know this group if you saw it." Well, we hadn't seen it. So we kept going on down and eventually we come to a big gravel bar and here are at least a couple of hundred people with their tents. And all these people had to walk in. This was being treated as wilderness at that time. And many of them had no clothes on and some were committing acts that were fairly embarrassing to us, but we just kind of smiled and tried to slip on through quietly. This was the Rainbow Family, and the Rainbow Family was not like the rainbow LGB, et cetera, today. The Rainbow Family was a loosely-knit group of individuals who would get together once a year for a big wild party, orgy, sexual adventure, whatever, and they had chosen the Lower Buffalo River that year. It was a sight that I've never forgotten, and all I also noticed after we floated on downstream that Ernie Dickerman no longer dipped his Sierra Club cup over the side and sipped the water.

TM: Well, moving to the next question. That was a good story. Moving to the next question, and it's just simply to ask you if you would like to add anything else, but would you like to add anything else that you think needs to be emphasized about the history of wilderness protection in Arkansas?

TF: I don't think there's much that I could add. I do think that, in Arkansas, we call ourselves "The Natural State", and we should recognize and take pride in our wilderness areas and our other, particularly public, lands in the state that we can manage for their natural values. Over 10% of Arkansas is in public land, and we collectively have the opportunity to recognize the natural values, protect the natural values of that land. And wilderness areas fit into that overall thing. There's parks and there's wildlife refuges and management areas. Too often, when I see an advertisement about Arkansas as "The Natural State", it's somebody skiing on a manmade reservoir, and that always kind of gives me the heebie-jeebies. But I really think that we have a feeling about the value of nature in Arkansas, and we need to keep integrating our wilderness and natural area concepts and areas into that.

TM: Well, thank you, Tom. Those are the four questions that we had to get through, but I wanted to also ask you before we finish, is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about? Or would you like to add anything to your earlier comments?

TF: Not that I can think of right now. I kind of wove a whole lot of stuff in there and I hope it made sense.

TM: Well, yes. And I would like to thank you on behalf of the Pryor Center and the Ozark Society for being here today and telling us what happened decades ago that led to the wilderness areas that we now have here in Arkansas. Yeah, go ahead.

TF: Tom, before we get off, kind of as an aside.

TM: This is all recorded, you know?

TF: Okay. I just want to say that, as I was thinking about this interview, I began looking through my files, and I've got files on Buffalo National River and White River Refuge and Big Lake and the Ozark Society, some wilderness related and some not. Are there archives somewhere that I can place those?

TM: I'm sure there are, Tom, and I would need to talk to some other people to find the best place for them.

TF: Okay, please do that.

TM: Let's talk later, and we'll certainly address that.

TF: Okay.

TM: Thank you for considering passing those on so they can be used by the public.

TF: Okay.

TM: One other thing I wanted to mention is that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point. And I just want to thank you again and say goodbye for now.

TF: Okay. Thank you.

TM: Talk later. Thanks.

TF: Bye.