

Tom McClure interviewed Joe Nix 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 Dr. Joe Nix 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. Joe, all I need you to do now is to state your name and indicate that you're willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and related material available to others.

Joe Nix: Okay. My name is Joe Nix, N-I-X. Let's see. And I am willing to let the Pryor Center let anyone they want to use the material that I might say in this interview.

TM: Okay. Thank you. Today, Dr. Joe Nix is joining us by phone from DeGray, Arkansas, or should it be Arkadelphia?

JN: No, DeGray.

TM: DeGray. I thought so. In DeGray, Arkansas, near Arkadelphia. Joe has a PhD in Nuclear Geochemistry from the University of Arkansas. He was a longtime chemistry professor at Ouachita Baptist University. He conducted a great deal of research on the Caddo River and Lake DeGray, which is nearby his home. Joe also was the second president of the Ozark Society and was a leader for many years in stream preservation and in wilderness protection. He was a leader in the effort to designate Caney Creek Wilderness in the Ouachita National Forest. Joe, we have some questions for you to consider today, but we also encourage you to include other things that we may not mention that you would like to say. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas?

JN: Well, I think we need to make sure we understand sort of the status of natural area preservation in Arkansas. The Buffalo River had dominated the conservation field there for some time, where the Ozark Society and others fought the building of two dams on the river. And that had been pretty well resolved thanks to Governor Orval Faubus and a letter he wrote to the Corps of Engineers and many, many other people who worked very hard

to get the Buffalo River into the National Park System. So I guess you'd say the environmental community was sort of riding a wave there of success, and then came along wilderness and slightly different issue, although related, but I guess you'd say the... Oh, heck, I'm losing my train of thought here. The fact that they had won the fight on the Buffalo certainly colored the field, but all of a sudden, the opponents in this was the U.S. Forest Service. They really did not care for the way we wanted wilderness to be and the way that other organizations nationwide wanted it to be, Sierra Club and Wilderness Society, and just a lot of support nationwide, and of course, statewide. In the first wave of wilderness protection, we had the Caney Creek Wilderness in Southwestern Arkansas, and the Upper Buffalo Wilderness upstream from Boxley. That was the general focus was there were some other relatively minor areas that were included in that, too, but those were the two big ones. The Forest Service had just nationwide opposed wilderness, and here it hit pretty hard. Alvis Owen was the superintendent of the Ouachita National Forest in which the Caney Creek Wilderness was located. And Alvis, I knew very well, his daughter had gone to Ouachita, and Alvis was a good friend of mine and everything, but we differed considerably on wilderness philosophy. And

anyway, we had corresponded a good bit backwards and forth. The issue on the Caney Creek area that seemed to be kind of the focus of some of the problem was that we wanted an area called Pryor Mountain, no, Porter Mountain, excuse me, which was on the southeastern side of the Caney Creek Wilderness. We wanted a sizable block of land to go in there as a kind of buffer for the main part of the wilderness area. And the Forest Service strongly opposed us including that in our proposal. Alvis called me one day and said, "Joe," said, "I think we need to talk." And so Alvis brought, I think, three of his staff people to my house in Arkadelphia, and a Saturday there we met and argued, I guess you'd have to say, about the importance of the buffer area and Porter Mountain. Alvis finally told me, he said, "Joe," he said that he had a message for me from the chief of the U.S. Forest Service, and that if we persisted with the Porter Mountain issue, then the U.S. Forest Service would not support the Wilderness Act, which had national scope. And I had to tell Alvis, I said, "Alvis, you know, we have stayed on top of this pretty well, and we have been told by Senator John McClellan that we should get it the way we think it should be with the Porter Mountain because he says it was going to pass." And Alvis got kind of provoked at me, I think, because he says, "Why didn't you tell

me that earlier this morning? And we could have avoided this session." Anyway, that happened and it did pass and the Caney Creek Wilderness went in with that ridge line on the southeast side of the main wilderness area there. It did pass with that in it, and we were somewhat relieved. Forest Service was not just real happy with us. But anyway, the Upper Buffalo, I don't know, there are probably other people who really had more to do with the Upper Buffalo. Of course, Harold and Margaret Hedges and Stewart Noland and his family and several others. As far as the Caney Creek Wilderness, the big supporters there were, first of all, Wellborn Jack of Shreveport in the Bio Chapter of the Ozark Society. Wellborn was one of the moving forces that helped us get that in. And that was a very important part of the thing. And I think if I'm not mistaken, Wellborn passed away just recently, so would not be able to get his interview. But anyway, he was a good conservationist, that's for sure. Gee, Tom, I don't know where to go from there, that...

TM: Well, we'll move on to the next question. Thank you for all that. Will you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value these areas have for you personally and generally for the people of Arkansas, both

now and in the future?

JN: Okay. First of all, I'm a big fan of Aldo Leopold and some of his philosophy in wilderness protection and natural area protection, just the idea that we need to have a few places on our public lands that we do not hit as hard in development and not really manage it for maximum timber production. And there just seemed to be fewer and fewer places for people to go where there was no development, and that to me became a real driving force for my support for the concept. I'm reminded of a phrase from, I think, from the Book of Isaiah that says, "Woe unto them that lay house down and field to field till there'd be no place to be left alone on the face of the earth." We were approaching that, and thank heavens we do have some of these wilderness areas now that have turned development away and are essentially natural areas. They are places that people can go and be alone and enjoy nature. As far as what it means to the state and to the country, of course, wilderness areas are scattered all over the country and it becomes a national issue. But in Arkansas, the Caney Creek Wilderness and the Upper Buffalo Wilderness and a few others along there that are really the outstanding areas that really will provide those places for people

to have recreation in areas that are not developed, and that's going to be more and more important as time goes on.

TM: Okay. The next question we have, and you've already told a story or two, but I'm just going to ask you to see if you can think of some more. Do you have 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?

JN: Oh, there's a lot of little stories I guess I could tell. But one that kind of sticks with me is actually in the Upper Buffalo Wilderness area, Whitaker Creek, up there. I took one of my students at Ouachita who worked in my research lab. He and I decided to do a two-or-three-day backpacking trip up in that area. And it was spring break and we went in up near Hawksbill Crag, and anyway, down into Whitaker Creek and pretty rough terrain, for us anyway. And anyway, the weather turned kind of sour and had a cold spell and it snowed. And we probably didn't have the best cold weather gear, but we got down near the mouth of Whitaker Creek and it had been overcast and snowed off and on all day. And we decided to stop and pitch camp, and we did and fix supper and went to bed, and we had a good tent. And

anyway, neither of us had a watch and I think we must have gone to bed about 1:00 in the afternoon. We had no idea what time it was and we went to bed and waited for it to get dark and waited and waited and waited. And finally it got dark, but it was a while. And that just shows, I think, kind of how you can lose contact with the world around you when you go into some of these wilderness areas. Does that fit?

TM: Yes, that was a good one. I like that one. I've had similar experiences, not quite like that, but that's okay.

JN: Yeah.

TM: Just with the next question, it's just to have you think about... 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?

JN: Well, of course, I don't think it would probably ever reach the extent of the Buffalo River. The Buffalo is a dominant part of wilderness in that part of the state, and Caney Creek and the southwestern part of the state and some other areas that are

scattered along the Buffalo and other places in Arkansas, but they are currently providing recreation opportunity, a kind of recreation opportunity that just isn't available everywhere. And I think they're going to be more and more important as time goes on. The thing I worry about is overuse of wilderness areas. More and more people are, I think, leaning toward enjoying that kind of experience, and I hope it doesn't get to where there's too many people in these areas. Yet they're public lands, they're just as much yours and mine as anybody else's, and we need to be vigilant and watch how the Forest Service and the National Park Service and others, how they manage those areas. Certainly they need to minimize the use of heavy equipment, modern timber management equipment and so on. That kind of thing should be left aside and let nature take its course.

TM: Okay. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about? Or is there anything that you would like to add to your earlier comments about Caney Creek or Upper Buffalo or any of the other wilderness areas that we currently-

JN: No, I-

TM: ... [inaudible 00:22:57]?

JN: ... I don't think so, but I do think we need to kind of send out a warning, if you will, that there will always be threats to wilderness. There will be other forest interest that will work its way in. And we must stand strong and say, "No, these are areas we leave along and see how nature takes it, how nature behaves." I don't think we really understand a lot about how nature behaves in such areas. Just a lot of things from vegetation patterns to wildlife. We must not say that the battle was won because it isn't yet.

TM: Okay. Well, I would like to... Do you have anything else that you would like to mention about anything that you've talked about? You mentioned Aldo Leopold or-

JN: Oh, sure.

TM: ... and some of the wilderness areas that you've had experience with, and feel free to comment on other-

JN: Oh, I-

TM: ... things that are kind of at the site, sort of-

JN: ... yeah.

TM: ... tangentially next to wilderness or linked to wilderness in some way.

JN: Yeah. Brower, who was head of the Sierra Club nationwide and very prominent in the... and gave a lecture at Ouachita University one time, and I was very impressed with some of the things he said. He was talking about a lot of the problems that we were having, drug problems and things like that are negative. And he said that he thought that these people needed escape-type recreation, and he said, "We need to strengthen that component." Of course, the question is, how do you balance it with overuse? But he felt very strongly that youth could benefit a great deal by going into the wilderness and recognizing what it is, and that their nature is getting its way. And I guess that's about it, Tom.

TM: Well, Joe, I'd really 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.

JN: Yeah.

TM: And I just wanted to mention that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point-

JN: Okay.

TM: ... and thank you again for being here and-

JN: You know, I just thought of one thing that-

TM: ... sure. Yeah.

JN: ... might... David Pryor was a good friend, and David used to come down from Little Rock and float the Caddo River, and I would usually make my canoes available for him and put him in and pick him up and so on. And he and one of his children, I guess, I don't remember which one, they put in one time at

Amity on the Caddo River. And I got them in the water and then I headed home, only to find out later that they had gone probably about two canoe lengths before they turned over and started out their float trip with being wet.

TM: That's no fun.

JN: I gave him a hard time. We've all been there.

TM: Yeah.

JN: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

TM: Well, that's an interesting story, and we often don't realize who enjoys these places-

JN: Oh yeah.

TM: ... and-

JN: David really enjoyed it.

TM: ... yeah.

JN: He enjoyed the Caddo.

TM: Well, thanks again, and I'm just going to close out now, unless you have something else that you'd like to-

JN: No, I-

TM: ... to bring up or...

JN: ... that's really all I can say is that I-

TM: Well-

JN: ... I think we need to be vigilant and monitor what's happening in these areas and not let them slip away from us. A lot of people put a lot of work into it, the local people, Arkansas and Louisiana, and even nationwide, the Wilderness Society and many other groups, some of the importance of wilderness and maybe they had slightly different reasons for doing it, but still they saw value in these places where people can be alone.

TM: Well, thank you again, and I will just say goodbye for now and-

JN: Okay.

TM: ... I'm sure we'll be talking soon.

JN: Well, thank you, Tom.

TM: You bet. Take care. Bye.

JN: Bye-bye.