

Tom McClure interviewed Stewart Noland on April 16, 2024, at the Pryor Center 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 Stewart Noland for the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Oral and Visual History Project. The interview is being conducted in Fayetteville, Arkansas on April 16th, 2024. Stewart, 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.

Stewart Noland: My name is Stewart Noland and I hereby grant that permission.

TM: Stewart is with us live today at the Pryor Center on the Square in Fayetteville. And I'd like to tell you just a little bit about him. Stewart was raised in Fayetteville, Arkansas, and he is a retired civil engineer living now in Little Rock. Stewart has a Bachelor of Science and Civil Engineering degree and a Master's of Science in Civil Engineering degree from the University of Arkansas. Stewart is married to Debbie Ross Noland, has two children, Ross and Claire, and four

grandchildren. Stewart is a longtime member of The Ozark Society and the Arkansas Canoe Club. Stewart, welcome and thanks for being with us today.

SN: You bet.

TM: We have some questions for you to consider, but we also want you to 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?

SN: Yes, Tom, I will. I think as I get started here, I would like to mention a couple of things from a historic perspective, and that is after many, many years of deliberation, the Wilderness Act on a national level was passed in 1964. We got our wilderness in Arkansas in '84, but on the national level, it was passed in '64. And then in a related move, the Wild and Scenic River Act on a national level was passed in 1968, and Arkansas's bill for Wild and Scenic Rivers was passed in 1992. And so that provides a little bit of a historical perspective about both of those movements. Now, in respect to my involvement and efforts to protect wilderness areas in Arkansas, I remember back in the late '70s is really when the push really began to establish wilderness areas in Arkansas. And a lot of these other interviews I'm sure have documented a lot of those activities, but what I did specifically was to

attend public hearings. I attended outings. We wrote letters of support, not only for wilderness in Arkansas, but also for wilderness in Oklahoma and Missouri. And I did most of that as a member of The Ozark Society. The one public hearing in particular that comes to mind as the bill became closer to being passed was one that was held in Little Rock. And I remember attending that, thinking that it was just going to be a bunch of people like me that were interested from a recreational standpoint in establishing wilderness. And I couldn't believe the number of different people there. There were clergy there. There were people that probably had never visited a wilderness area there. It just amazed me at the number of people that turned out at that hearing. And if I remember correctly, I think David Brower from the National Sierra Club also attended and I had a chance to visit and meet him just for a few minutes. But that was typically my involvement at that point in time.

TM: Thank you, Stewart. Question number two is, would you please describe how you feel about protecting wilderness areas personally and what value you think these areas may have for the people of Arkansas, both now and in the future?

SN: Well, just like Wild and Scenic Rivers, I think it's very, very important. I think it helps to define our civilization and how we show honor and

respect for our natural resources, whether they be land-based or river-based. In respect to wilderness areas, they have some values that are very important. First and perhaps most important is solitude. You can go in the middle of a wilderness area and truly, truly be by yourself. It provides opportunities for recreation, whether it's just hiking, camping, rock climbing, whatever it may be, or river running in certain wilderness areas. It provides opportunity for scientific study in areas that are relatively untrammelled by man. Fish and wildlife can thrive in wilderness areas. And I think it's important just to have wild areas, just to protect wild areas over time. And I think the value of our wilderness areas will only increase over time, and the wisdom will be even more apparent in the future in having established wilderness areas in Arkansas.

TM: Well, thank you, Stewart. Question number three has to do with stories and just wanted to ask if 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.

SN: Tom, I remember one thing in particular that I did that just is something I don't think I'll ever forget. We attended, two or three of us drove from Little Rock. I hadn't been in Little Rock very long, but we drove to a public hearing on this matter that the Forest Service had

called in Deer, Arkansas. And it was specifically intended to be loaded with folks that were opposed to wilderness designation. And so a whole bunch of us showed up that were in support. And there weren't any problems with it, but one thing that I thought was so neat was that we broke into smaller groups. There were statements that were made in public when everybody was in the same room, but we broke into small groups and actually went into classrooms. The hearing was held at the Deer school, I think, on a Saturday when they weren't in session. And it was interesting in that our group, there were six or eight of us in there, and there were about an equal number of people that were advocating for wilderness versus those that had questions about it or perhaps were opposed to wilderness. And as we dug down, we figured out that everybody in there wanted the same thing, and that was to leave it alone. They didn't want the trees cut. We didn't want the trees cut in wilderness areas. I mean, obviously there's places in the national forest where it's fine to cut trees and harvest them and regrow them and everything. But what we came out of that meeting realizing is that we all wanted the same thing. And of course, eventually, and we were right on top of the Hurricane Wilderness there at Deer. And eventually it was protected. And I hope that those guys and ladies that were there that day, I hope they felt the same way in the end that we felt about it. It was a good thing. And that was really

an eye-opener for me, is that we all wanted really the same thing. Now, a couple other things that I'd like to point out is that there are three wilderness areas in Arkansas that share a wild and scenic river. And to me, these ... I mean, I like all of our wilderness areas, but these I think are the crown jewel, but just because of that fact. And that's Richland Creek, Hurricane Creek, and the Upper Buffalo above the National River. And all three of those rivers have the highest designation that you can get from a wild and scenic river in that they are designated as wild. And so I enjoy going into all three of those places as much as I enjoy going into any wild and scenic river or any wilderness area in Arkansas. Now, further down the Buffalo, it's not a wild and scenic river, it's a Buffalo National River. The Ponca Wilderness area also encompasses a portion of the river, as does the Lower Buffalo and Leatherwood Wilderness on down toward the mouth. Those things I think are really the crown jewels, in my view, of both our wilderness and our wild and scenic river system, simply because they both share a designation. Now, the other thing that I think from an experience standpoint that is very important to mention is that like the Wild and Scenic River Act, the Wilderness Act in the end enjoyed bipartisan support. And I think that's very important point to make. There were people from both sides of the aisle that supported

this, the Wilderness Bill, and I think that's very, very important to recognize.

TM: Thank you, Stewart. Next question. Number four, 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 that they should consider?

SN: Well, there was a big effort before the National Wilderness Bill passed in '64 to protect certain areas. And I think they were called primitive areas or perhaps different designations, and principally in the West, but also in the Eastern forest as well. So there were efforts that people made to protect these areas that allowed us to then include those in the 1984 Act in Arkansas. And also there was wilderness designation going on around us in Oklahoma and Missouri. And so I think we really need to recognize the efforts of those who came before us and helping to preserve those areas before they were defined as actual wilderness. And also, I think it's important that we have wilderness in both national forests in Arkansas. And a lot of people don't realize the big lake wilderness in Northeast Arkansas is actually on land that's managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. So we have wilderness there, we have wilderness in the Ozarks, and we have

wilderness designated in the Ouachita National Forest. And I think that's something that we can be proud of.

TM: Thank you, Stewart, for going through that. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I have not asked about?

SN: Well, I just might reemphasize that I think this wilderness, we've had it for some 40 years now, and I think the value of it is going to increase dramatically over time. I know that I've noticed changes in usage patterns in the wilderness. It's getting a lot of notoriety and people are starting to really recognize the value of it. And I think that will only increase over time.

TM: Would you like to add to any of your earlier comments or mention anything else at this point?

SN: No, I think that's it.

TM: Okay. Well, Stewart, I would just like to thank you again for being here and on behalf of the Pryor Center and The Ozark Society, and to be here to share with us your perspective and your memories of wilderness protection efforts here in Arkansas. And I'd like to also mention that the Pryor Center will be providing you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. So thanks again, and I'll say goodbye for now.