

**Tom McClure interviewed Kenneth Lee Smith 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 Ken Smith 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. Ken, 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.

Ken Smith: Thank you, Tom. My name is Ken Smith and I certainly give wholehearted approval to the Pryor Center for using this interview and any materials that are provided for this purpose and other purposes.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Ken. Ken is joining us today in person here at the Pryor Center on The Square in Fayetteville. Ken was born in Downey, California and grew up in Hot Springs, Arkansas. Ken has a BS degree in biology and chemistry from Southern Arkansas University and an MS degree in biology from Arkansas

State University. Ken has worked and did work for the Nature Conservancy as program director from 1978 through 1981. Then from 1981 to 1989, he was the chief of research for the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission. From 1989 to '93, Ken served in the office of the governor of Arkansas as assistant for natural resources. He was deputy director of the US Fish and Wildlife Service from 1993 to 1995. And then, at the US Department of Interior, he was deputy chief of staff, assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks from 1996 to 2001. Then, back in Arkansas, Ken was the vice president and director for Audubon Arkansas from 2001 to 2010. Ken was then policy director for the Advanced Energy Association from 2011 to 2017. From 2000 to 2003, Ken has been the chairman for parks and recreation for the city of Goshen, Arkansas. Once again, Ken, welcome and thank you for being here today.

KS: Thank you, Tom. This is a great opportunity and honor to those like you and many others who led the state in the fight for wilderness many, many years ago.

TM: Well, thanks, Ken. We have some questions for you to consider today, but we also want to encourage you to kind of color outside the lines a little bit and include other things that are

outside the four questions that you would like to say as well. Our first question is, will you please describe your involvement in efforts to protect wilderness areas here in Arkansas?

KS: Tom, my involvement was largely involved with the gathering of information about the wilderness areas. The proposed wilderness areas, those areas that were identified through the RARE II process beginning in 1977. And I remember my first experience with learning about the proposed wilderness areas and the RARE II process and earlier processes was when I began working with the Nature Conservancy as a program coordinator, program director. And there I led a small team of biologists, zoologists, ecologists, botanists, data managers. And though we were encouraged to not become involved in so called political events to stay true to the science, nevertheless, we had a great group of people who were very involved in protection of wild places. And I'm sure each of us felt compelled to one degree or the other to assist in providing information. And so we had great people on my staff like Richard Davis and Bill Pell, two of the particular ones I remember, who were very involved and whose name will pop up in later accounts about the effort to protect wilderness. After serving for about two years as program director for the Nature Conservancies Program in Arkansas, it was taken

over by the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission, where I became chief of research. And I think during that time was when the efforts really became very involved in a much more systematic way of looking at the RARE II maps, identifying potential outstanding features of those areas to provide the biological, the ecological, the scientific basis for why we need to protect such large, beautiful areas, such as those that were identified through the RARE II process. And so with basically the directive coming from our director at the time, Harold Grimmett, he gave permission to his staff to begin looking at the maps and try to provide that scientific voice, that basis for why these areas need to be protected. And when I talk about this, it sounds a little abstract, but being more specific, it was, what are the rare plants that should inhabit or do inhabit these areas? What are those special animal species like these incredible endemic salamanders that are found only in the Ouachita Mountains and were found and known to occur in several of the proposed wilderness areas. The old growth, oak-hickory forest, that we read about in this early settlement of Arkansas, were any of these natural communities still extent? And so we had some information, but a lot of this information, Tom, actually, we had to go out in the field. And so as small teams or individually, most

often individually, our biologists would go into areas like Hurricane Creek or Richland Creek or Black Fork Mountain, just naming a few that come to mind, to do research, to take photographs, to describe the things that we were seeing, the natural communities, the geological features. I will tell you, much of my work involved in these wilderness areas was from that perspective, trying to get information together and provide it to those who were writing up the rationale and were prepared to go to Congress to speak on behalf of wilderness areas. And that's a lot of the work that I remember doing during those early years from, let's just say 1979 through the actual passing of the Arkansas Wilderness Act in 1984, was that gathering of information and documenting it.

TM: Okay. Thank you, Ken. Our next question is, will you please describe how you feel personally about protecting wilderness areas in Arkansas and what value do these areas have for you personally? And also, what value do they have for the people of Arkansas as a whole, both now and in the future?

KS: Yeah, I'm sure your responses so far have been from the importance of solitude and wild places and beautiful landscapes, and I have all those feelings about wilderness areas as much or

at least as equal to what probably other participants in this wonderful program have described to you. Maybe I also bring to it maybe another perspective here that really means a lot to me, and that is the protection and the establishment of large landscapes for biological diversity. And then the perfect example that comes to mind, and to me, has to do over in the Ouachitas and where there's the Caney Creek Wilderness area. A large area unto itself, it was established, I believe, many years earlier, perhaps in the '60s, if I remember it, and the upper Buffalo Wilderness area, but a large landscape and a very important location that eventually we were able to add other parcels to through state action, such as the Cossatot River State Park-Natural Area, and then the acquisition of Brushy Creek Natural Area, all those part of the upper Cossatot River watershed. And so, Tom, to me, I think about these wilderness areas in that regard, how will these areas promote protection of large landscapes, of intact aquatic ecosystems, of corridors for wildlife, for large mammals such as black bear, even perhaps the eastern cougar, but even smaller species, like these incredible endemic salamanders and also fishes that we find in the interior highlands, particularly in the Ouachitas and the Ozarks? That these species are able to move, they're able to evolve and they

have the land and the resources for doing so that promotes the continuation of evolution and the development of natural ecosystems. So that, to me, looking at the landscape and looking at it in that perspective, is a fundamental reason for why we need wilderness areas. I think, to me, it's not only that these areas promote habitat for plant and animal species, but they give us reference points for what Arkansas may have looked like, could have looked like prior to European settlement. It provides to me, I go in these areas and I'm thinking immediately, not just what I'm seeing, how lovely it is, but a sense of wonder what these will be like a hundred years from now. Will the oaks, the hickories, the pines, with more maturity, what will they look like then? What will natural events like fire or weather or now we have climate change, what will be the impact of the natural environment on these areas? So they're, in my mind, the reference points for what perhaps natural landscape should look like that we're wanting to restore, work by the Heritage Commission, work by the Nature Conservancy, work in Northwest Arkansas, by the land trust. I mean, much of their work has to do with restoring the landscape of areas that they're trying to protect outside of these wilderness areas. You need reference points for those. So that's what these wilderness

areas, in my mind, what is one of the fundamental reasons for them even existing. And I'll go back to, it's just the pure unblemished joy of seeing wild places. I mean, it just strikes a core in someone like myself. And so Tom, I could wax for hours on these points and elaborate in different ways, but I think hopefully I provided the gist of why these areas, their importance and what they have meant to me and continue to mean.

TM: Yeah. Well, thanks for those insights, Ken. Question number three is about stories. 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 in Arkansas?

KS: Well, Tom, other than just multiple trips that either myself made to areas, Hurricane Creek, Richland Creek, places in the Ouachita, gathering information. I think some of my favorite memories, perhaps stories, are of those times with you. And the trip that I think you and me, and I want to say Bill Coleman made up to Jefferson City, was it?

TM: I'm not sure. I remember one with Jay Vestal.

KS: It may have been Jay Vestal.

TM: Yeah, yeah, in a truck.

KS: In a truck. All three of us in the front seat. And I forgot what we were... It was a fun trip, great folks we were meeting from Missouri and elsewhere, but then we had a little joy juice that we were sipping on the way back, back to Arkansas. And that is one of my favorite memories when I was being asked to think about this. I think about the field trips that we took to East Fork, because it was one of those kind of on the edge. The Forest Service, if I remember, Tom, East Fork was not on their list, their internal list, and they were very much in overt opposition to it, and of course, Flatside as well. But I remember, I think, going up there with you and others and Senator Bumpers and around the Blue Hole and talking about this area. And this is one of the areas I remember exploring by myself and remember finding these upland wetland areas, kind of these natural benches coming steep hillside in these Ozark Mountains, and it would kind of flatten out for some distance. And within these flattened areas, you would find lowland hardwoods, water oak, willow oak, not necessarily cypress, but these upland wetlands that were full of amphibians. And these were the first time we'd ever seen these type of aquatic ecosystems, and East Fork had several of these. And so an area that the Forest Service had not

really cared that much about, as a wilderness, yet had these nuggets of just incredible diversity that made the reason for protecting that area is so important. And that, in my mind, is kind of together with those trips with the Senator and later often with Ed Bethune and with you and others looking in these areas and just enjoying the moment, having our picnic lunches, sharing our picnic lunches with each other, sitting around talking about maybe things other than wilderness, maybe just things that were happening in DC or in Arkansas's capital, but it was just that setting, that setting that allowed that kind of conversation. And I think those are some of my favorite memories of going to those areas. And as I said again, trips with you, meeting with the Ed Bethune at some junction of a couple of roads with you and Lissa Thompson and sitting down with him and kind of bringing him up to date on where things were. He was such a busy person, traveling around from one community to the next and trying to figure out where he's going to be and trying to schedule that meeting. I remember you and Lissa doing that at least on one of the trips that I attended with you. So those are just some of the memories. It's been 40 something years. I've forgotten a lot of this, unfortunately, but I guess

those must have really been fun events for me to still remember though those few times that Tom, I'm glad to say, involved you.

TM: I remember some of them too. Well, thank you, Ken, and that did bring back some memories. Question number four is just kind of a recap question. 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?

KS: What comes to mind, Tom, is probably not necessarily unique among important events and causes and happenings in Arkansas and in the country as a whole is that most of the work and most of the work on behalf of Arkansas Wilderness was by a handful of dedicated Arkansans. It was widely supported by many, but the hard day in and day out work, in my mind, I remember people like you, like Lissa Thompson, like Don Hamilton, like Bill Coleman, like the Stewarts, Dana and Bill Stewart, and Stewart Noland and Alice Andrews. My list might seem long, but when you look at the sheer number though, and compared to the rest of the state, it's a small number. And the work was done by this small group of dedicated Arkansans who what they had in common was determination, they had persistence and passion.

And I think it always takes that core in order to get anything done. It takes people like yourself and Don Hamilton and Lissa and many others, Alice, that drive this issue forward because I remember it being difficult. We had outright opposition from Jim Crouch, Forest Supervisor of the Ozark National Forest, David Orr of the Ouachita National Forest, Congressman Beryl Anthony, he was listening hard and took his orders or, I won't say orders, but his instructions from the Forest Service and he was a very tough individual. He kind of finally came along. He was in favor of some of the areas, but two of the areas that were very important, East Fork and Flatside, he was very much opposed to those, if I remember correctly. And so you had a bureaucracy that we were having to go up against and we didn't really get that much help from state government other than through efforts like the Arkansas Natural Heritage Commission and you had to be on the side, your involvement had to be, we were providing science and information. We couldn't provide the other things that we were feeling, passion and advocacy. And so, that was difficult for individuals like myself. And we had to find that passion and advocacy from those others that had started with the RARE II process, worked RARE II to a list of proposed areas, and then to the final nine that went forward to Congress

that became the Arkansas Wilderness Act of 1984, so I think that's the thing that I want to emphasize in this story.

TM: Okay. Well, thanks, Ken. Is there anything else that you would like to mention that I haven't asked about?

KS: No, I don't think so, Tom. I mean, I'm going to be really interested in hearing what Joe Nix and Alice and Tom McKinney and others have to say in all of this, that this is going to be a fun thing to read about and to listen to when it becomes available.

TM: Well, thank you. Is there anything else that you would like to add to any of your earlier comments or are you okay with closing out at this point?

KS: Anything else I'd have to say now would be just repetition, I'm afraid. And so Tom, I'm good. Thank you for this opportunity.

TM: You bet. Thank you for being here, Ken. I would like 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 and your stories about wilderness protection in Arkansas. I also want to mention that the Pryor Center will provide you with a copy of this audio recording at some point in the future. And thank you again, and I'll say goodbye for now.