

Southern by the Grace of God: Wilderness Framing in the Heart of Dixie

Bryan K. Walton

Abstract—Wilderness advocacy in Alabama is as unique as the cultural flavor of the South. This paper documents how the most recent wave of wilderness activism in Alabama, embodied in the Alabama Wilderness Alliance, Wild Alabama, and WildLaw, have sought to place themselves within the cultural roots and heritage of the American South. In this paper, the efforts and impacts of these organizations are examined. The author concludes that by separating themselves from the larger environmental movement, these groups have staked out their own course of action, with their own emphases, successfully framing the preservation of wild places as a cherished Southern tradition, as central to daily life as college football and prayer meetings.

So it is with the National Forests in Alabama, our wild rivers, our hunting lands. They are all in jeopardy. We call on every red-blooded son and daughter of the Southland to stand up and defend your heritage. Defy the Evil Shadow that is growing in lengths as the Cold Winter of Corporate Enslavement slips over the world (Marshall 1996).

The framing efforts of three prominent environmental organizations in Alabama are examined in this paper. The Alabama Wilderness Alliance (AWA), Wild Alabama, and WildLaw focus on efforts to preserve Alabama's remaining wild places. This paper examines their efforts to promote wilderness preservation through a variety of methods, some of which might be considered atypical. Rather than pursuing a more traditional approach to preservation, using scientific arguments, these organizations pursue a strategy built around the region's biological and cultural heritage. Furthermore, they have distanced themselves from the stereotypical notion of wilderness preservation as a hobby of the rich, eco-liberals or other privileged elite groups. By utilizing a powerful legacy of Southern populism, combined with rich cultural histories, these activists have created a concept of wilderness linked to cherished Southern traditions, as central to daily life as college football and prayer meetings.

Background

Citizens in Alabama have consistently shown that they are concerned about environmental quality. Bailey and others (1989) surveyed citizen attitudes and found that the public had high levels of concern over most environmental

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Bryan K. Walton is Graduate Student of Sociology, Department of Agricultural Economics and Rural Sociology, Auburn University, AL 36849 U.S.A., e-mail: bryan@bryansweb.com

issues. Bliss (1994) polled the public in the South about forest issues. He found that citizens of Alabama maintain strong concerns about the forests of the state. For example, he found that when dealing with public lands such as national forests, 86% of the respondents felt that clear-cutting should not be allowed (Bliss 1994). He says, "For over two decades of polling there has been this trend of growing environmentalism. If anybody in the '90s still thinks that Alabamians have been left behind in the environmental movement, that just isn't true" (Bouma 1994:9).

Alabama has a colorful legacy of independent-minded populism. One of the most interesting examples of this occurred during the American Civil War. Winston County is a hill county in the northwestern corner of the state. Containing the majority of what is now the Bankhead National Forest, it was a county with a high concentration of whites, and between 90% and 100% of them favored continued cooperation with the Union (Flynt 1989). A meeting on July 4, 1861, attended by more than 2,500 people, passed three resolutions that led to "The Free State of Winston." The central issue was reluctance on the part of hill farmers to fight for the right of large farmers in the lowlands to maintain a workforce of slaves (Weaver 1960). The conflicting interests of "the common man" and wealthy plantation owners, or their contemporary counterparts, are a constant refrain in Alabama politics.

Alabama is one of the most biologically diverse states in the United States. The Appalachian Mountain chain terminates in the Talladega National Forest. Along with this, there are the Tuskegee, Conecuh and William B. Bankhead National Forests. Roughly 68% of the state is forested land. However, only 5% of this, equal to about 643,000 acres (260,208 ha) is owned by the public. There are only three federally protected wilderness areas in the state. The Sipsey and Cheaha Wilderness areas combined equal 33,231 acres (13,448). The Dugger Mountain Wilderness area, 9,200 acres (3,723 ha), was designated by Congress in December of 1999. The presence of an emerging ecological conscience, when combined with the cultural richness of the region and the small amount of public lands in the state, has led to a growing concern over how the national forests in Alabama are managed. In a state with such few public lands, many people feel that it is undesirable to manage these forests for timber. Many practices considered unhealthy and unnecessary in the eyes of the public, such as clearcutting and herbicide spraying, have been used on public lands and are considered detrimental to wilderness preservation and forest-based recreation.

Central Actors

This atmosphere of public concern provides the context for the emergence of the three groups that are the central focus

of this paper: the AWA, Wild Alabama and WildLaw. Lamar Marshall, an engineer by training, had a past that involved designing paper mills and nuclear power plants. A longtime resident of the area housing the Bankhead National Forest, Lamar Marshall grew tired of his favorite places being clearcut. In 1991, the USDA Forest Service (USFS) outraged many local residents when it clearcut Indian Tomb Hollow, a sacred Native American site in the Bankhead National Forest. Together with members of the Blue Clan of the Echota Cherokee, Lamar Marshall formed a grassroots forest-watch organization called The Bankhead Monitor.

Simultaneously, the AWA and WildLaw were in their early stages of development. The lead attorney for WildLaw, Ray Vaughan, was beginning his environmental law practice in Alabama. A former assistant state attorney general for Alabama, Vaughan converted his private practice in 1997 into a nonprofit law firm known as WildLaw. In 1991, Vaughan represented the Alabama Conservancy in a suit seeking to reduce the dioxin flowing into state rivers from pulp and paper mills. It was during this suit that he met Ned Mudd.

Mudd, the creative energy behind the AWA and also the Chair of the Board of the Biodiversity Legal Foundation, was representing a single plaintiff in that dioxin suit. They decided to pool their talents and have been working together since. Originally, Mudd practiced family law in Birmingham. But in his spare time, he was producing a video of a baby gorilla at the Birmingham Zoo. Believing that the Birmingham Zoo was mistreating the gorilla, he waged a media campaign for better treatment for it, and this led him into the environmental arena.

Within a year, the three individuals had joined forces and have since emerged as three of the most active environmentalists in Alabama, and arguably in the region. These wilderness advocates, along with their respective organizations, have turned the management of Alabama's public lands upside down. Their style is irreverent and engaging, deeply critical and funny, but also multifaceted and increasingly effective.

From the beginning, these wilderness advocates have endured a strained relationship with the Forest Service, the timber industry and even other environmental organizations. The Forest Service and the advocates have fought incessantly. With the belief that the national forests in Alabama are some of the most "traditionally" managed forests in the country, with their emphasis on production of timber for harvest, clearcutting and herbicide spraying to eradicate indigenous hardwood species, the two sides have become polarized. In 1991, Lamar Marshall was given a warning by a Forest Service ranger for passing out newsletters at the entrance to the Sipsey Wilderness (Lowe 1991). James Ramey, former district ranger of the Bankhead National Forest, has taken a disparaging view of his critics:

The Bankhead Monitor represents the opinion of its editors and they represent a special interest. And a lot of their objectives right now are in opposition to Forest Service management. . . . Most of the information I've found in it is either incorrect or a half-truth (Lowe 1992).

At times, the criticisms have turned personal, with scathing attacks on Forest Service employees in the form of cartoons and satire in the publications of the wilderness groups. However, there is more to these relationships than personal

attacks. Fundamental issues are at stake, regarding whether the public forests in the state will continue to be primarily seen as sources of timber, or whether the new emphasis upon preservation and recreation will supplant it in the future.

This emphasis upon preservation and recreation is a growing force to be reckoned with in Alabama and is reflected in the growing popularity and success of the wilderness advocates. The Bankhead Monitor has grown from a small grassroots organization in 1991, to one that now has more than 1000 members and a glossy magazine printing about 10,000 copies with each new issue (Marshall 1999). This growth in circulation is occurring rapidly, with a 43% increase in the past 10 months. The organization has a 1999 budget of \$300,000, a 100% increase in the last five years. In 1997, The Bankhead Monitor changed the name of both the organization and its similarly named publication to Wild Alabama to reflect not only its growth and statewide presence, but its emphasis upon the importance of wild places and a wild Alabama. Lamar Marshall has also evolved from being an angry redneck woodsman (Wapner 1996) to a participant at the 1998 National Wilderness Conference in Seattle. He was a keynote speaker at the conference of 450 people sponsored by such groups as The Wilderness Society, Sierra Club, National Audubon Society and the World Wildlife Fund.

WildLaw also has flourished in recent years, reflecting the success of this group in the courtroom as a not-for-profit legal firm. WildLaw brought in \$80,020 in 1997. In its second year, 1998, the firm brought in \$278,142, a 348% percent increase (WildLaw, 1999). This growth in support has allowed for recent expansion and an increase in the number of cases handled by the firm. It has added two attorneys in its main office, and in the fall of 1999, it opened branches in North Carolina and Minnesota. WildLaw has also attracted prominent national wilderness advocates to sit on the WildLaw board, including Dave Foreman, founder of Earth First! and the Wildlands Project; Reed Noss, conservation biologist and editor of *Conservation Biology*, the journal of the Society for Conservation Biology; and James Redfield, author of the best seller, *The Celestine Prophecy*.

The AWA also has become increasingly effective and has set an ambitious agenda of increasing wilderness areas in Alabama by 940% before the year 2000. The AWA is pushing legislation in the Alabama Legislature that will enable the creation of protected wilderness on the state level. The Alabama State Wilderness Bill, written by the AWA, has been introduced into the State House by Representative Jack Page and is making its way to the full House for a vote.

Sociologists have applied the concept of *frames* to social movement activity to understand how the ideas and meanings of individual participants become joined with movement ideologies. By using the concept of framing, we can see in the following section how these organizations are presenting issues and problems in order to galvanize their supporters, discourage their opponents, and generate public sympathy for their work.

Frames

David Snow and others (Snow and Benford 1988; 1992; Snow and others 1986) have built upon the work of Erving Goffman (1974) to understand how people come to see

injustices present in society and to determine what they can do about such problems. These authors have applied the idea of *frames* to social movements to understand how the ideas and meanings of individual participants become joined with movement ideologies.

Social movement framing is a vital link between the visions, ideas and understanding of social movement actors and those various individuals, organizations and agencies that they seek to attract and influence. As Snow and Benford (1988) state, the creation of frames refers to how social movements

assign meaning to and interpret, relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists (Snow and Benford 1998).

Snow and others (1986) argue that the success of a social movement depends on the presence of an impressive and powerful master frame. Obviously not all frames succeed, and movements can learn from both the failings of other movements and their efforts to frame issues. By utilizing optimal frames, the likelihood of movement success can increase due to a greater potential that the frame will resonate with those that the movement seeks to influence (Snow and others 1986; Snow and Benford 1988). I will discuss two sets of frames in this paper. The first consists of two frames pertaining to the relationship between wilderness and those who seek to preserve wilderness. The second set looks at two frames regarding reasons for wilderness preservation.

Diagnostic, Prognostic, and Motivational Frames

To achieve a higher degree of frame resonance and to ensure success of the social movement, Snow and Benford (1988) argue that there are three main framing tasks for any social movement: 1) realizing that something is wrong and needs to be changed and identifying the blame for the problem, what is called diagnostic framing; 2) creating a solution for changing that wrong, what they call prognostic framing; and 3) successfully recruiting others to join in fighting the wrong, what the authors describe as motivational framing (Snow and Benford 1988). In this section, I will analyze how these wilderness advocates have challenged the traditional concepts of wilderness and in so doing, are fulfilling the three tasks laid out Snow and Benford.

Diagnostic Framing—The various framing tasks laid out by Snow and Benford (1988) have been employed by these wilderness advocates in preserving wild places in Alabama. To them, the problem is clear: There is little wilderness in Alabama, and the few remaining wild places are being destroyed at an alarming pace. Increasingly, they are fighting an agency (the Forest Service) in Alabama that is seen by them and their supporters as out of touch with the interests of the citizens of the state. To them, the agency seems determined to destroy the few wild places remaining for the common folk of the state. Because of this, the Forest Service is viewed as a threat to the cultural heritage of the citizens of Alabama. Other citizen environmental groups in Alabama seem incapable of effectively opposing the Forest

Service due to their adherence to more traditional and elitist approaches to wilderness preservation. The wilderness advocates in this study believe that neither the Forest Service nor the other environmental groups in Alabama are effective advocates for wilderness. Rather than mimicking these two entities, the wilderness advocates of the AWA, Wild Alabama and WildLaw are challenging them both through a radically different framing of wilderness issues in Alabama.

Prognostic and Motivational Framing: Populist and Elitist Wilderness Frames—With the problem identified, these wilderness advocates have sought to instill in the public conscience the idea that wilderness belongs to everyone. While the history of wilderness preservation may not be filled with such images, such an idea does have precedent.

Robert Gottlieb (1993), in the first chapter of his history of the American environmental movement, analyzes the social view of wilderness in the American psyche. He examines the role of Bob Marshall who, working in various capacities for the Forest Service, argued that wilderness belonged to all people. He believed that, while elites may have the greatest opportunity for a wilderness experience, “people cannot live generation after generation in the city without serious retrogression, physical, moral and mental, and the time will come when the most destitute of the city population will be able to get a vacation in the forest” (Marshall 1925).

Bob Marshall, a founder of The Wilderness Society, sought to inject this populist idea of wilderness into the approach and perspective of that group. Other influential actors within The Wilderness Society, however, feared that Marshall’s emphasis on a “wilderness for the people” might undermine the idea of preservation. Gottlieb cites Olaus Murie, a major player in The Wilderness Society, as evidence of an elitist view of wilderness. Murie wrote, “wilderness is for those who appreciate” and that if the masses were brought into the backcountry without really understanding it, “there would be an insistent and effective demand for more and more facilities, and we would find ourselves losing our wilderness and having these areas reduced to the commonplace” (Gottlieb 1993).

The struggle over framing wilderness as an expression of elite versus populist values is reflected in the historical split between the preservationist and the “hook-and-bullet” crowds. William Hornaday, the executive director of the New York Zoological Society, referred to the latter as those who “sordidly shoot for the frying pan” (Gottlieb 1993). Other factors are the inability of many environmentalists to successfully reach out to the working class — especially those working with natural resources. The struggles of Earth First! in the late 1980s and early 1990s to build coalitions with loggers have been well documented (Scarce 1990; Zakin 1993). Whatever the reasons, the idea of wilderness as reserved for economic and intellectual elites has remained a prevalent frame in the environmental arena. A recent issue of *Outside* magazine (1999), describes The Wilderness Society in the following terms: “Hemorrhaging funds and members for most of the decade, this group became a sad-eyed poster child for the bloated nationals: too dependent on the whimsy of foundations, too removed from Main Street USA, and too entrenched in its image as a group of eighties-style elitists pushing an unpeopled wilderness agenda.”

The AWA, Wild Alabama and WildLaw represent the antithesis of the elitist view of wilderness, establishing a strongly populist (verging on a prototypically “redneck”) stance reflecting the rights of common Alabamians to enjoy the wilderness. While these wilderness advocates do express concerns about overuse of wilderness areas, they are quick to point out that the solution is not less people, but more wilderness (Woolf 1998). These wilderness advocates characterize the Forest Service and some environmental groups as fundamentally elitist in restricting access to forest land to either the forest products industry or to small numbers of urban elites who can afford to enjoy the small parcels of wilderness allowed to remain.

Increasingly, the wilderness advocates in this study are presenting themselves as in sync with the conservative political and cultural climate of Alabama and the South. Recognizing that the Deep South is one of the most culturally, socially and politically conservative regions of the country, these activists have realized that any preservation efforts that put them in the mold of “environmental radicals” will threaten their success. Separating themselves from all stereotypical notions of environmentalists, these activists are gun lovers and heavy consumers of beer and hard liquor, and they remain willing to flirt with things not considered politically correct (Lamar Marshall professes to being a member of the John Birch Society). As such, one is likely to find them considering an Earth Day celebration in a strip club, entering a restaurant carrying several handguns (with permits), or playing music with members of the Allman Brothers Band. By placing themselves squarely within this conservative realm, they can argue that the Forest Service and the forest products industry are the real radicals.

Prognostic and Motivational Framing: Cultural Heritage and Science-Frames—Wilderness advocates utilizing science-based frameworks seek to protect wild places when science informs them that such action is needed. Much of our current wilderness preservation debate is driven by such science. Because feelings and emotion are missing, or at least secondary, in this framework, both the Forest Service and many environmental groups can argue they are backed by modern science. Roderick Nash (1982) argues that before the onset of modern science, the preservation of the natural world was based on aesthetic and sentimental feelings, rather than scientific logic and reasoning. Concern over the management and preservation of wild places in Alabama in the past has been driven by such science-based frames. An emphasis on science does not, however, provide the necessary motivation for mass support for preservation. In Alabama, the wilderness advocates who are the focus of this study have reconnected wilderness preservation with its aesthetic and sentimental feelings, linked to physical landscape and socio-historical space.

The cultural heritage framework, unlike the science-based framework, views the human histories and cultures woven into the fabric of wild places as vital and essential for the successful preservation of wild places. Wilderness preservation is presented as being essential as a means of honoring memories and traditions, of parents and grandparents, as well as ancestors of the more distant past. As such, the cultural heritage framework uses a strong emotional element, rather than a faith in science, that draws people to support the need for wilderness preservation. The success of

the cultural heritage frame lies in its clear diagnostic frame: Environmental injustices are being perpetrated by governmental and corporate actors, and these injustices are directed at the citizenry—not against a tiny endangered organism such as the snail darter. Despite Alabama’s emerging ecological consciousness, concern over endangered species remains an eco-liberal elitist preoccupation unlikely to win widespread public support. Instead, these wilderness advocates have created an alternative frame oriented around reverence for the past and a love of place where our forbearers roamed.

These wilderness advocates believe that the Forest Service represents a serious threat to wilderness because the agency values forest land primarily as a source of timber. As such, the Forest Service endangers the idea of the forest as a keeper of cultural heritage and tradition. As Lamar Marshall has stated,

the image promoted by the US Forest Service and the timber industry is one that equates National Forests primarily as sources of timber production with a secondary recreational use by the public. . . . We want to replace the idea of National Forests as sources of boards with one of a Cultural Heritage area, a representative of Original America, Ancestral or Cultural Landscape, etc. (Marshall 1997).

When wilderness is characterized as a thoroughly Southern cultural tradition, threats posed by the Forest Service to wilderness and wild areas are characterized as attacks on the Southern history and way of life. As such, the Forest Service has been positioned as an outsider within the state, as a metaphorical agency of Yankee carpetbaggers.

The emphasis of these wilderness advocates on populist wilderness and cultural heritage frameworks, while present since their early days, has increased in the past several years and may have contributed to the growth in their support from a diversity of sources, ranging from local Cherokee Indians to E.O. Wilson, the Harvard biologist. Advertising space in *Wild Alabama* is filled by everything from sporting equipment and barbeque to lingerie stores and dentists. Similarly, WildLaw is finding support for its legal efforts coming not only from small individual donors, but from corporations such as Patagonia. The Alabama Wilderness Alliance’s support extends from Dave Foreman and The Wildlands Project, all the way to State Representative Jack Page, home-grown deer hunter pushing the AWA’s State Wilderness Bill through the legislature.

Impact of Wilderness Groups on Forest Service Policy

If the populist wilderness and cultural heritage frameworks guide the efforts of these wilderness advocates in their preservation efforts, what have been the results? An analysis of their efforts to preserve wild places around the state reveals much success, often backed by the force of law.

As stated earlier, Wild Alabama (then The Bankhead Monitor) emerged in a conflict mode, visibly outraged over a Forest Service clearcut of Indian Tomb Hollow, a sacred site in the Bankhead National Forest. From this beginning, the relationship between these organizations and the Forest Service has remained strained. Wild Alabama’s publications, *Wild Alabama* and previously, *The Bankhead Monitor*, have

at times included rough treatment of district rangers and forest supervisors in Alabama. Lamar Marshall argues that the lampooning is necessary. He says that if someone is going to destroy the forest, his cultural heritage, then Wild Alabama is going to destroy that person's reputation (Marshall 1998a). It should not be construed that these groups are content to work only in this fashion. In a letter to Elizabeth Estill, the Southern Regional Forester of the Forest Service, WildLaw attorney Ray Vaughan wrote,

Please do not think that our actions or words are personal attacks upon you or your staff. We may sometimes speak harshly about what we dislike about Forest Service actions, but what we are doing is not a job or a career to us; it is our life's passion. We love these forests; I have been using the Alabama Forests for 30 years. So long as the Forest Service continues to treat the wild places we love and revere as resources to be micro-managed and manipulated endlessly, we will be at odds and often in direct conflict. Still, that does not mean that we cannot be cordial and friendly in person, as we understand that you have a job to do with many demands, some often conflicting. But the demands on us are not conflicting, and our vision and purpose are clear (Vaughan 1998).

This approach has resulted in frequently strained relationships between these groups and the Forest Service. In an interview the Estill, she said that the reality regarding the agency's relationship with these groups is that there are some damaged relationships at the local level. Because of this, litigation often becomes the only form of interaction. It is here, in the litigation phase, that these wilderness advocates have had considerable success.

In 1999, all timber sales on the National Forests of Alabama were shut down. A criminal investigation discovered "irregularities" in timber sales in a portion of the Talladega National Forest. As a result, officials stopped awarding timber sales in all districts of Alabama as they looked for more "irregularities." Furthermore, there were two resignations in the wake of the investigation, involving the Forest Supervisor and a District Ranger. Regarding the shut down of all timber sales in Alabama, the wilderness advocates released a press release asserting that "WildLaw and its Executive Director Ray Vaughan have worked on protecting the National Forests in Alabama since the mid-1980s; since the early 1990s, that work has been on behalf of Wild Alabama and the Alabama Wilderness Alliance....Since 1995, legal work by WildLaw and Wild Alabama have halted timber sales on more than 55,000 acres of public lands in the National Forests in Alabama" (Vaughan 1999).

The emphasis on legal confrontation between these wilderness advocates and the Forest Service reflects a conscious choice made by these wilderness advocates, a decision to adopt an approach closer to the "No Compromise in Defense of Mother Earth" stance of Earth First! activists than to the strategy of compromise adopted by mainstream environmental groups. This more confrontational approach is consistent with the more emotionally charged cultural heritage and populist frames developed by these advocates. Policy dialogue is not their game; instead they have adopted the All-American motto, "Sue the Bastards."

Conclusions

The adoption of both cultural heritage and populist wilderness frameworks has had significant impact upon the popularity of the AWA, Wild Alabama and WildLaw, both inside and outside the environmental community. Adoption of these frames has led to a shift away from emphasis on the scientific approach to preservation efforts, and toward a focus on culturally and socially significant relationships to wild places. As Lamar Marshall stated in his speech to the 1998 National Wilderness Conference, "I don't believe we will ever save much wilderness on the merit of it being a priceless biological reserve, even though it is. The American public at large just doesn't care about tiny living organisms vanishing. But they care that the mountain about to be razed is where their ancestors lived, died, and maybe are buried" (Marshall 1998b).

These wilderness advocates are increasingly concentrating their efforts on saving wild places through emphasis on the region's cultural heritage, blended with the idea that wilderness is a cherished part of the Southern way of life. This blend of frameworks (with its emotional appeal) is backed up by science and (especially) law. Rather than focus solely on these secondary tools for influencing public opinion and policy (biological reserve and legal frameworks), these organizations use them to support the core emotional, cultural, historical, and personal claims made on behalf of their preservation efforts. Far from being starry-eyed idealists, they match their vision to a proven ability to successfully play legal hardball, with the USDA Forest Service when needed.

Given the success of these wilderness advocates in Alabama, it remains to be seen whether the framing efforts of these organizations are the precursors to a trend among environmental groups regionally and nationwide. Lamar Marshall has argued the merits of such a path in at least two speeches to other environmentalists: the 1997 meeting of the Southern Appalachian Forest Coalition (a coalition of 16 environmental groups in the southeastern United States) and the 1998 National Wilderness Conference. As this research is only a case study of one set of organizations, a broader study looking for the existence of populist wilderness and cultural heritage frames among other environmental groups working on preservation of wild places would give a better understanding of the power of this approach.

Meanwhile, it seems that the populist wilderness and cultural heritage frameworks are working with the citizenry in Alabama. During an interview with Lamar Marshall at the Wild Alabama Trading Post in Wren, Alabama, there was a constant flow of people in and out of the store. Some of these people were looking at maps, trying to find an old burial ground in the Bankhead National Forest, hoping to find a buried loved one. Others just wanted to get some camping supplies. But one woman who works at an area poultry processing plant told him as she walked out the door, "You know I will always give you my support." Defending wild places is supposed to be the pastime of the rich, upper class. Apparently, someone forgot to inform this woman that this is not her struggle.

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