

Action

PUBLIC ISSUE INFORMATION FOR ALABAMA CITIZENS

FROM THE EDITOR

Ecotourism

Tourism, one of the largest industries in Alabama, has been identified globally as one of the few industries that can actually have a positive impact on the planet. This will not occur automatically or by chance, but through **ecotourism**, local communities and the surrounding environment can be enhanced and protected.

The Alabama Cooperative Extension System's Community Resource Development unit publishes "Action" once each quarter. The goal of the CRD unit is to help people solve community problems, take advantage of opportunities and build on their assets. To accomplish this, the CRD unit provides educational and technical assistance in economic development, leadership development, strategic planning, environmental education, community health and public policy education. "Action" is a tool we use to link community groups to Extension's resources. This issue represents links between Extension and Auburn University's Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures, the Alabama Museum of Natural History and the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel.

Extension's involvement and links to others involved in **ecotourism** is the focus of this Winter 2006 issue of "Action." J. Thomas Chesnutt, Extension tourism specialist, is the coordinator for this issue. Other contributors are Doug Phillips (Discovering Alabama — Alabama Museum of Natural History), David Rouse and LaDon Swann (AU Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures), and Grey Brennan (Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel).

The next issue of "Action," Spring 2006, will highlight **indoor air quality**. As efforts are made to increase the energy efficiency of homes, concerns are raised as infiltration of outside air is decreased and indoor air contaminants increase. For more information on these topics or suggestions for additional topics, contact the editor at (334) 844-3517, fax (334) 844-9022, or e-mail chesnjt@auburn.edu.

J. Thomas Chesnutt
Editor

Extension Tourism Specialist

Ecotourism in Alabama

Ecotourism, a component of sustainable tourism, is catching the attention of many professionals and community leaders throughout the United States. According to the World Tourism Organization (WTO), "Sustainable tourism development meets the needs of the present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing the opportunity for the future. It is envisaged as leading to management of all resources in such a way that economic, social and aesthetic needs can be fulfilled, while maintaining cultural integrity, essential ecological processes, biological diversity and life support systems."

Most international definitions of ecotourism involve indigenous peoples. For example, according to the eighth session of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, "ecotourism is sustainable tourism, which follows clear processes that ... acknowledges indigenous peoples communities' rights to say 'no' to tourism development — and to be fully informed, effective and active participants in the development of tourism activities ... and promotes processes for indigenous peoples and local communities to control and maintain their resources." To be able to apply to all areas of the country, most in the United States would define ecotourism as "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people" (The International Tourism Society).

- Minimize impact.
- Build environmental and cultural awareness and respect.
- Provide positive experiences for both visitors and hosts.

- Provide direct financial benefits for conservation.
- Provide financial benefits and empowerment for local people.
- Raise sensitivity to the local political, environmental and social climate.
- Support human rights.

Although similar, there is a definite distinction between ecotourism and nature-based tourism. Nature-based tourism is just travel to natural places, while ecotourism provides local cultural, environmental and economic benefits.

The potential market for ecotourism is significant. According to the WTO, ecotourism is the fastest growing market in the tourism industry. Worldwide, ecotourism is experiencing a 5 percent annual growth rate and it represents 6 percent of the world gross domestic product. The Travel Industry Association of America estimates that 36 percent of all American travelers (55.1 million) can be classified as sustainable tourists.

Two significant ecotourism projects in which Extension is involved are the Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail and the Outdoor Alabama Partnership. The Alabama Agri-Tourism Trail has been outlined in detail in previous issues of "Action." The Outdoor Alabama Partnership is a developing effort designed to promote existing outdoor recreation opportunities, with an emphasis on ecotourism, to both travelers to Alabama and to residents of the state, and to assist communities in developing ecotourism and nature-based tourism opportunities, particularly in rural areas.

The agencies and organizations involved in the Outdoor Alabama Partnership include the following:

Alabama Bureau of Tourism & Travel, Alabama Department of Conservation, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, Alabama Farmers Federation, National Park Service, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. One of the goals for this partnership is the development of a resource booklet of ecotourism and outdoor recreation related resources available from each partner. For more information on this partnership, contact the author at chesnjt@auburn.edu or (334) 844-3517.

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From Coastal Birding to Primeval Forest — Alabama Has It All!

Perhaps you've noticed those big green signs as you enter Alabama that say "Alabama the Beautiful." It's true. Alabama is blessed with plentiful and diverse natural resources. But are we taking full advantage of this great resource?

With an estimated \$3 trillion in annual revenues, tourism has emerged as one of the world's largest industries, contributing significantly to economies. In 2004, travel and tourism in Alabama contributed more than \$7.3 billion to the state's economy and sustained more than 157,000 jobs. More than 20 million people visited Alabama last year. However, these numbers could grow. One emerging sector of tourism that should be further developed is ecotourism — the practice of touring natural habitats without inflicting negative ecological impacts. The \$626 million birding industry in Alabama is a good example of ecotourism.

Exceptional water, land and wildlife riches are found in every region of the state and represent relatively untapped environmental and economic assets. Finding ways to protect our natural resource base while developing its economic potential will create new jobs and business opportunities for Alabama.

Approximately 77,000 miles of rivers and streams, 50,000 small impoundments and 42 large reservoirs are found within our state boundaries. These abundant water resources provide a wide range of environments that harbor the most diverse aquatic fauna of any state in North America. Two-thirds of the state (22 million acres) is covered in forestland, with 45 percent in hardwoods, 35 percent in pine and 20 percent a mix of pine and hardwoods. These diverse natural habitats, which span from the Gulf of Mexico to the Tennessee Valley, make Alabama an ideal place to observe wildlife and birds year-round.

We have wonderful state parks — 22 to be exact. Most provide camping and hiking opportunities, but in general they do little to encourage ecotourism. Alabama state parks provide more than 100 hiking trails, but only five are listed as interpretive nature trails. (In comparison, Georgia has 48 state parks with 41 nature trails.) We lack naturalists and nature centers in most of the parks. Naturalists in most of our colleges around the state would eagerly share their knowledge, but few are called to give talks at our parks.

Visits to Web sites, such as Outdoor Alabama (www.dcnr.state.al.us), provided by the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, and the ALEARN site (www.alearn.info), provided by the Department of Fisheries and Allied Aquacultures and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System at Auburn University, yield enticing lists of our natural resources and a good deal of information about them. From there, however, the going gets tougher. With some hard searching, one can find information on such attractions as birding trails and overnight canoe trips down the scenic Cahaba River and Mobile Delta to overnight stays in romantic cabins in the northwest Alabama's Dismals Canyon, one of the oldest primeval forests east of the Mississippi River. For the most part, information on these sites is available, but hard to find.

Auburn University, through the Alabama Agricultural Experiment Station and Extension, has recently proposed an initiative that will boost the development of Alabama's ecotourism potential. Some

of the actions proposed in this initiative are to build data bases of potential destinations, provide businesses with management training, help develop marketing plans, supply environmental education programs and curriculums that train graduates for careers in tourism and many more activities that will help develop the infrastructure for an expanded ecotourism industry in Alabama.

If these ecotourism ideas are put into action and efforts are made to build this industry, "Alabama the Beautiful" will be more than a roadside slogan. It will be a way to further strengthen our tourism industry, which will create jobs and economic opportunities for the entire state.

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Ecotourism and the Future – How to Avoid Loving Alabama to Death

The growing popularity of ecotourism in Alabama will eventually pose the need for guidelines to manage visitor impacts and prevent natural areas from being loved to death. For example, the size of touring groups will be limited. New restrictions against littering will be enforced. And, inevitably, strict protocol will be required in some cases to avoid disturbance to wildlife. But this is the easy part. A far greater challenge looms ahead for Alabama. There is a present danger in extolling the natural wonders of Alabama. If large numbers of people experience the state's natural appeal, over time this could attract multitudes of new residents to Alabama. Continuous population growth can be environmentally destructive, particularly in a state with no comprehensive planning and few powers for controlling land use or guiding growth.

Alabama has significant economic needs. On the other hand, we can safely anticipate that the South will remain a region of accelerating growth

and that Alabama will continue to gain new development and a growing human population, together with many attendant environmental impacts. In the long term, Alabama's abundant, native natural surroundings may suffer demise for the very reason that these unique qualities are so lovable. The short space of this article prohibits a fuller discussion, however, a few key recommendations are offered in hopes of better preparing Alabama to sustain the state's natural heritage for generations to come.

Recommendation 1: Increase public education about Alabama's natural heritage

An old adage holds, "the nature of life is nature." A good, basic education should include a proficient understanding of our basic life support system and our natural environment. Institutional and political barriers to such an education must be overcome. Accomplishing this will require bold, active support from state leaders willing to strongly and publicly promote greater environmental education in Alabama.

Also, teachers need a method of incorporating environmental learning that helps ease rather than further burden

the complexity of demands presently confronting teachers. Such an approach is provided by the innovative model program, Discovering Our Heritage — A Community Collaborative Approach, being offered to Alabama schools by the Alabama Wildlife Federation in partnership with the Alabama Museum of Natural History and the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. This model program is based on the interdisciplinary design of the award-winning public television series, "Discovering Alabama."

Recommendation 2: Develop a comprehensive statewide conservation plan

Alabama can be proud of its acclaimed Forever Wild land protection program. However, this must be accompanied by an ongoing statewide inventory of natural diversity and natural habitats, together with a comprehensive plan for perpetuating abundant farmland, forestland, natural communities and overall ecological health in the state.

Recommendation 3: Establish a state planning council for a sustainable future

Alabama presently has no game plan for a long term sustainable future, for coordinating economic, educational and environmental planning. This presents an open invitation for the scenario many Alabamians fear, a future of haphazard development, urban sprawl in many areas, continued rural poverty in other areas, degraded environmental resources, land-use disputes, government by crisis-management and rising taxes aimed at forestalling problems that will only multiply in the absence of comprehensive planning.

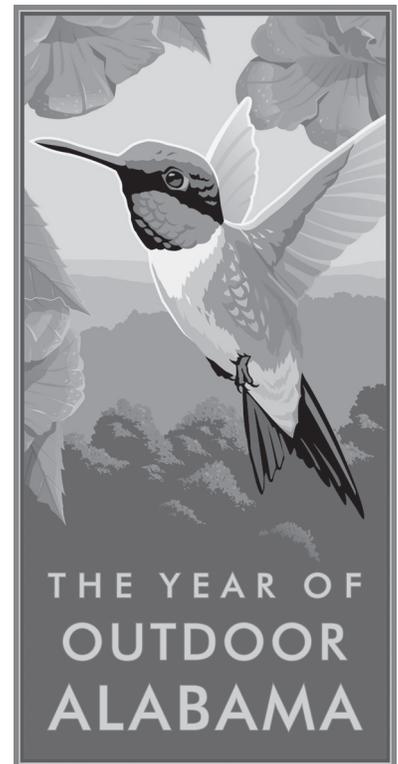
Alabama can best avoid such a troubled future by establishing an independent, permanent planning council, involving pertinent divisions of state government, but separate from the revolving politics of state government. A fundamental function of this council should be to freely consider the many issues, options and contingencies associated with planning and preparing for Alabama's long term future.

Recommendation 4: Heed the voices of those who feel a close bond with the land

A key to sustaining Alabama's natural heritage is to embrace the sentiments of Alabamians who feel a personal connection to the land and who still need wild nature. Too often these voices are left out of committees, councils and commissions involved with community planning. Too

often local officials develop a vision for community progress that fails to include a physical vision of native landscapes and natural surroundings. Modern trends may continue to foster a popular preoccupation for fads and superficial consumerism, but the land, the forests and the rivers remain the real and the fundamental basis of life in Alabama.

Doug Phillips
Discovering Alabama
Alabama Museum of Natural History, University of Alabama



The Year of Outdoor Alabama

The Alabama Bureau of Tourism and Travel will be highlighting Alabama's great outdoor recreational vacation opportunities when the marketing campaign, The Year of Outdoor Alabama kicks off in January.

The upcoming campaign will be the State Tourism Bureau's third yearly marketing theme. 2004 was the Year of Alabama Gardens and 2005 is the Year of Alabama Foods. The bureau will carry out this campaign through public relations, advertising and marketing functions. The bureau's eight state welcome centers, its toll-free call center and the state tourism Web site will be used.

Action

Alabama
 Communities
 in Transition

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Action is published once each quarter by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System.

We would like you to share success stories in your community for inclusion in future issues of Action. Send to: J. Thomas Chesnutt, 218 Extension Hall, Auburn University, Alabama 36849.

The market for tourists interested in recreational activities has been growing. A national survey on recreation and the environment lists viewing and photographing birds as the fastest growing activity during the last 20 years with an increase of 231 percent (National Survey on Recreation and the Environment, Ken Cordell). Across the nation, an estimated 73 million enjoy this activity. To attract those tourists, ABTT will be promoting the Birding Trails now established in both north and south Alabama. In addition, ABTT is among the partners working to establish a birding trail through central Alabama.

Other recent surveys point to the desire for people of all age groups to enjoy the outdoors. An estimated 63.5 percent of the general population older than 16 participate in at least one outdoor activity, with adventure sports travel increasing by 14 percent since 2001. Twenty-five percent of Americans 16 and older are estimated to have taken a vacation during 2004 where the primary purpose was to participate

in an adventure or outdoor activity (Information from the Outdoor Industry Foundation's Outdoor Recreation Participation Study for 2004 released June 2005).

During the Year of Outdoor Alabama, ABTT will promote a range of activities to quench the thirst of those outdoor enthusiasts. The bureau will feature some 40 hikes in Alabama, 20 road bike rides, 10 mountain bike routes, 20 canoe and 20 kayak runs. Other targeted areas are rock climbing, horseback riding, camping, wildlife watching, hunting and fishing. ABTT will have information available on where tourists can take their off-road vehicles for an Alabama adventure as well as where they can balloon, sky-dive or parasail. Adventure vacations that include overnight horseback riding, crawling through caves and night hikes are just some of the activities ABTT will highlight.

As never before, the Alabama Bureau of Tourism and the Alabama Department of Conservation will join forces to promote the great outdoors in Alabama. A special

Year of Alabama Outdoor Web site will be developed using information from both state agencies. With state parks and national forests in Alabama, work on the Year of Outdoor Alabama has included a range of interested outdoor parties.

Those groups included the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, Alabama Department of Conservation, Alabama Wildlife Federation, Alabama Department of Economic and Community Affairs, Alabama Farmers Federation, Alabama Power, Natural Resources Conservation Service, U.S. Forest Service, National Park Service, U.S. Army Corps, U.S. Fish & Wildlife and Alabama Department of Public Health. Outdoor clubs and outfitters in Alabama were also invited to meetings held in both Montgomery and Huntsville for their suggestions.

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Visit the Community Resource Development home page at www.aces.edu/department/crd/



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