

## How Green is Alabama Anyway?

*We take a look at the condition of Alabama's environment—and how our citizens, organizations, politicians, and policy makers are (or aren't) responding.*

**By Todd Keith**

Financial planner Scott Walton walks up the spiral staircase to his office's rooftop patio that overlooks downtown Homewood. "Once I committed to achieving LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification for the building, I wanted to illustrate that anyone can do this," he says. With the office's 1,500-gallon rainwater cistern, solar panel, dual-flush toilet, salvaged materials, and shredded blue-jean insulation, Walton has done it. "I want it to be an example and a resource so people are inspired to go out and try these innovations on their own without the steep learning curve I experienced," he explains. To that end, Walton has dedicated the second floor of his 1948 brick building to house the offices of the Green Resource Center for Alabama.

### **The Chicken or the Egg?**

Walton's efforts as a citizen and business owner go far beyond the norm, and it raises the question: Upon whom is it incumbent to lead this charge to change in Alabama? Does it start with our elected leaders or as a grassroots movement—one kitchen compost bin, one bike ride to work at a time? At the personal, household level, we all can strive to reduce our consumption and recycle more, yet the larger issues such as public policy, transportation, and regulations require larger solutions. E.O. Wilson, an Alabama native and one of the world's preeminent scientists, explains in *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* that through a combination of habitat loss, climate change, and other factors, half the plant and animal species on our planet could be gone or destined for extinction by the end of this century. Anyone who believes that our natural environment is important realizes the need to take steps to protect it. And given the preponderance of evidence, anecdotal as well as measured, Alabama's approach to managing our environment leaves plenty of room for improvement.

According to a 2007 Forbes "America's Greenest States" listing, Alabama is ranked 48th for the state's lack of strong policies to promote energy efficiency and high air quality, as well as for our excessive energy consumption. Forbes cited our comparatively weak environmental laws, numerous hazardous waste sites (three industrial waste sites near Mobile have been on the federal Superfund list for 20 years and not yet cleaned up), and the heavy footprint of our coal-fired power plants. Florida and Georgia are ranked 20th and 29th respectively.

Alabama's ecological diversity would seem to guarantee its conservation. As The Nature Conservancy notes, "Alabama has more species of freshwater fish, freshwater mussels, freshwater turtles, freshwater snails and crayfish than any other state." Around 90 percent of the mussels and almost 73 percent of the aquatic snail species in the United States are found here.

But the damming of waterways like the Coosa and the completion of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway has caused catastrophic destruction to certain fish, mussel, and snail species. It's a high price to pay for hydroelectric power and lake homes. The good news is the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) ranked Alabama second in the nation for drinking water quality in 2001. Now we just have to keep it clean, for the remaining aquatic species that have survived, as well as for the humans that rely on it.

### **Part of the Cure?**

The old-school thinking that “environmental responsibility” is all about spotted owls and mussels is over. People are suffering too, in their pocketbooks. Yet for those who assume that environmentally responsible policies equal a loss of jobs, the evidence seems to indicate the opposite. Though somewhat dated, a 2000 “Gold and Green” list by the Institute for Southern Studies used two separate lists of indicators to evaluate states’ economic performance and natural environment. Seven states rank in the top 15 for both economic and environmental well being, suggesting a correlation. Similarly, states that do poorly on economic indicators—such as Alabama (47th)—tend to do poorly on environmental ones as well (49th). It's a lesson that Alabama could learn, looking at the non-profit League of Conservation Voters’ National Environmental Scorecard, which analyzed the 109th Congress and frankly, Alabama and many other Southern states were found wanting in terms of their protection of the environment on a national level. (For facts on how members of the Alabama delegation votes, see our blog at [www.thicketmag.com](http://www.thicketmag.com))

In Alabama, our pollution has kept new jobs away. Since 1990, Jefferson and Shelby counties have been classified by EPA as an “ozone non-attainment area,” which has prompted the government to penalize the region twice. First, economic development restrictions are placed on recruiting and expanding industries. During the state’s recruitment efforts on both Mercedes-Benz and Honda, potential sites for these facilities could not be shown in either Jefferson or Shelby counties because they would not be able to obtain the necessary air permit from the Alabama Department of Environmental Management (ADEM) for their facilities; in our current situation, no permits will be granted to any industry that would result in an increase in ozone-related emissions in the area. In the 1990s, according to the Birmingham Metropolitan Development Board, they could not compete for at least 15 new projects amounting to nearly 11,000 jobs and \$4.6 billion in capital investment.

Established in 1982, ADEM’s mission is to implement state and federal rules and regulations to safeguard the environment for present and future generations of Alabamians. At the time of ADEM’s founding, hazardous waste was disposed of in unlined surface impoundments and around 120 such municipal solid waste landfills were operating in the state. Illegal scrap tires dumps were common, and few efforts were being made to redevelop brownfield sites. There was no beach monitoring of water quality. No waterways were designated as Outstanding National Resource Waters and no waterways were classified as Outstanding Alabama Waters. Today, over 800 miles of waterways have been designated as Outstanding National Resource Waters and over 280 miles of waterways have been classified as Outstanding Alabama Waters. This has all changed, yet there are plenty of challenges that remain.

ADEM’s 2007 budget was \$49.8 million, nearly half of which, \$20.2 million, came from federal grants. Fees and fines accounted for 49% of the budget, at \$24.2 million. The state contributed

\$5.3 million, or 11% of the budget, which is fairly comparable to Arkansas, for instance. While different state environmental agencies handle different things, comparisons are apples to oranges at best, but looking at ADEM's budget next to the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality's total budget of \$113.1 million (that state contributed \$12.7 million and fees accounted for \$71.5 million), one gains an idea of how we as a state value the protection of Alabama's environment.

“As the Director of this agency, I am continuously working to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of our internal operations at ADEM,” insists Trey Glenn. “As with all government agencies, we are being asked to do more work with fewer resources and we are relying on a host of new initiatives to assist us in that endeavor.” In 2007, an environmental justice initiative was introduced by ADEM, as was electronic discharge monitoring reports while ADEM's quality management system was developed further, according to Glenn.

### **Grassroots, Spreading**

So what's the good news and who is involved? It's broader than you might think. Measuring Alabama's collective commitment to the environment is a hodgepodge effort. It's the Alabama Clean Fuels Initiative where a handful of people try to convince counties to run school buses on biofuel. It's Alabama's Forever Wild land acquisition program, begun in 1992, which has acquired 53 tracts of more than 113,000 acres for state parks, wildlife preserves, and general recreation. It's the Alabama Land Trust, which protected nearly 8,500 acres through conservation easement in 2006. It's even Alabama Power, now offering a renewable energy program that uses Alabama-grown switchgrass as its main fuel source, and PowerSouth Energy Cooperative offering a green power program as well.

In Birmingham, two new major parks and one expanded one, Railroad Park, Red Mountain Park, and Ruffner Mountain Nature Center respectively, are poised to transform Birmingham into one of the greenest cities in the United States in terms of acres of park space. And after years of non-compliance, the Birmingham area recently met national air quality standards for ozone for 2003–05. Over the past two decades, the Cahaba River Society and Alabama Environmental Council spawned numerous offshoot environmental advocacy groups around the state. But more encouraging, lately it is cities and municipalities—and in many cases, individual leaders throughout the state—beginning to take environmental matters into their own hands.

The City of Hoover, which has experienced dramatic growth (and accompanying sprawl issues) in the last decade, recently earned international recognition, receiving silver and bronze mentions from The International Awards for Livable Communities in London in late 2007. The awards were given for being among the world's best for environmental management efforts, preserving and conserving nature, alternative fuel initiatives, and more. In Calhoun County, Commissioner Robert Downing and others worked to make sure the county courthouse and administration buildings were the first two public buildings in the state to earn Energy Star® designations. Located in Anniston, the buildings are in the top 25th percentile for energy efficiency with ratings of 88 and 90, respectively (only four other private sector structures in Alabama have achieved this designation).

The City of Huntsville similarly garners high praise. In 2006, the National Geographic Society's The Green Guide ranked cities of 100,000 people or more and named 10 as the nation's top

“Green Cities.” Huntsville was No. 9. There were no other Southern cities on the list. Toyota established the first greenfield site to meet Toyota’s zero-landfill objectives, and Raytheon Company built the first of two green LEED certified buildings there. In February 2008, Popular Science ranked Huntsville number 18 on its “America’s 50 Greenest Cities,” again, higher than any other Southern city. “These green and beautification efforts have an impact because we are an international city and the business community responds to these kinds of awards,” Mayor Loretta Spencer observes. “They take a great deal of pride in these awards. Now a developer out of Nashville is building our first green subdivision.”

But unlike Huntsville and Hoover, many rural areas in Alabama badly need economic development and face tough choices when it comes to investing in what might be called green infrastructure vs. chasing jobs. “Everything has to go through Montgomery,” explains a frustrated Debbie Quinn, currently in her third term as city council member in Fairhope. “So if you want smart zoning in your county for green spaces, buffer zones, tree protection ordinances, storm water management and other “green” initiatives, it has to be approved by the state legislature. It’s very difficult the way it is set up.” Short of a new state constitution that frees the hands of counties and cities—or the painstaking process of amending the current constitution article by article—change will come slowly.

### **It’s Not Us vs. Them. It’s Us and Them.**

We also know who the polluters are. It’s us. Gas and power generation tops the list, but solely blaming utilities is like blaming your waiter for bringing you that crème brulee you ordered. We are all complicit—me as I type, Thicket as we print 30,000 copies and have them flown and driven all over the state, you as you read this, especially if you throw the magazine away rather than recycling or passing your copy on to someone else.

Ultimately, someone in Alabama doesn’t have to give a hoot about Al Gore or the World Wildlife Fund. Just look in our own backyard. The cries of “bobwhite” that filled our ears as we walked the fields with our grandfathers are largely silent now as the native quail fights for survival in a vanishing habitat. For those living along the beautiful lakes of the Coosa River, Mobile River basin, or eating fish from the Gulf of Mexico, having to check consumption advisories for PCBs, dioxins, or methylmercury levels before eating your catch somehow diminishes the father-son joy of fishing. One fact often forgotten is that our Alabama environment is not just about forests, rivers, or animals; it is also about people and the quality of their lives. One cannot be separated from the other.

“There are lots of parallels between talking long-term financial investments and talking about good stewardship of our environment,” Scott Walton says on this warm, sunny day in his new office. “Both may cost a bit more in the beginning. But in the end, a well-laid plan can pay for itself many times over.”

*For more facts, figures, and examples of how Alabama as a state approaches its own environment, please see our blog at [www.thicketmag.com](http://www.thicketmag.com).*