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## SPOTLIGHT ON DEKALB, JACKSON AND MARSHALL COUNTIES



Jacksonville State University Little River Canyon Center is nearing completion on the JSU campus, the latest investment to access northeast Alabama's wealth of wilderness resources. Pete Conroy oversees the project as director of JSU's Environmental Policy and Information Center.

# THE HIGH YIELD ON WELL-CULTIVATED NATURE

*The Little River Canyon Field School Center will soon crown northeast Alabama's treasury of ecotourism, with a resource to rival any in the National Park Service.*

BY JIM DUNN  
PHOTO BY  
CAROLINE BAIRD SUMMERS

For Pete Conroy, the environment is green, and not just from the leaves and grass. Conroy, director of Jacksonville State University's Environmental Policy

and Information Center, sees greenbacks in ecotourism.

"I probably know ecotourism best because I grew up in Asheville, North Carolina," Conroy says. "I came to learn that the most visited national park in the United States is the Blue Ridge Parkway. At Asheville, every single tourist who came to see the leaves, people coming to the Great Smoky Mountains, they brought money. And economic development in Asheville, North Carolina is alive and well."

Conroy moved to Alabama in 1985 to work as curator of the Anniston Museum of Natural History. It didn't take him long to figure out the state was environmentally blessed, so he set about capitalizing on those green assets.

"When I moved to Alabama, it was pretty easy for me to see that

our leaves in the fall were just as pretty. We didn't have a Blue Ridge Parkway, but we had other roadways. We had canyons and waterfalls and coastlines, so I made it a point of concentration to build an ecotourism network in northeast Alabama."

Today, the area has a National Park in Fort Payne's Little River Canyon, a National Wilderness in the Dugger Mountain Wilderness (part of the Talladega National Forest) and a National Wildlife Refuge in the Mountain Longleaf National Wildlife Refuge between Atlanta and Birmingham.

"Pretty much within a 100-mile radius, we've got all this national park, national wilderness, national wildlife refuge and national forest," Conroy says. "The combination of all of these natural areas and trailways and pathways really does create an



environment where people want to come, recreate and spend money."

The ecotourist dollars Conroy speaks constitute serious money. A 2006 publication by the Alabama Cooperative Extension System estimated the impact of birding in Alabama to be \$626 million.

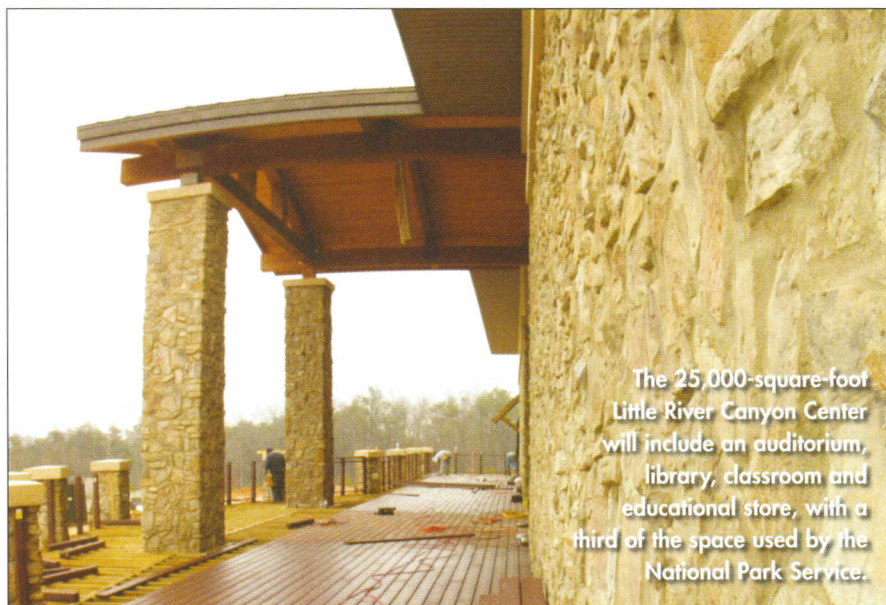
"Weiss Lake has an annual economic impact of over \$200 million," Conroy says. "I didn't believe it, so I got hold of the study. And sure enough, there it was. There was a detailed analysis that the lake, because of the crappie fishing — they call it the crappie capital of the world — so it's not just guys going out there to fish, it's the gas that they buy, the hotels that they stay in, the trailers that they get for their boats. Likewise for other types of ecotourism. It's the binoculars, or the backpack, or whatever else. It's a cumulative effect."

Being located in the midst of such outdoor assets makes for a greater quality of life, which in turn leads to greater economic development for the area.

"In the past, the economic development people have been thinking of factories, and now I think everybody has been thinking more about the broad brush," Conroy says. "If you're a CEO and you want to move your company and your family somewhere, because computers have leveled the playing field, quality of life means an awful lot. When CEOs are surveyed what's most important to them, an educated workforce is usually number one, and number two is access to cultural and recreational activity. That's another reason to build hiking trails and have nature centers and parks and things like that."

Soon, the area will be home to another eco-asset. The Jacksonville State University Little River Canyon Center, on the JSU campus, is nearing completion. Conroy says, "It will be the new home for the Field School Program. For over 15 years, the Field School has been a series of classes, programs, hikes, everything from bird watching to fly-fishing and rock-climbing. But we've never had a place, a building to call home."

From an original spread of 10 acres donated by Alabama Power Co., the Field School has grown to cover more than 60 acres. The center will be a 25,000-square-foot facility owned by JSU, although a portion of it will be leased to the National Park



The 25,000-square-foot Little River Canyon Center will include an auditorium, library, classroom and educational store, with a third of the space used by the National Park Service.

Service for office space.

"About one-third of it will be for the National Park Service, and the other two-thirds will be for other public uses, with auditorium space, classroom space, library space, hiking trails and an educational store," Conroy says. "It will be right up

against any of the other great interpretive centers that you might see at the Grand Canyon, or the Tetons or Yosemite. Our center will rival any of theirs."•

*Jim Dunn is a staff writer for Business Alabama.*

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