

Discovering Alabama

Teacher's Guide

Alabama Countryside

Suggested Curriculum Areas

Science
Social Studies
Environmental Studies

Suggested Grade Levels

4–12

Key Concepts

Rural Heritage
Ecological Services
Sustainability
Land Ethic

Key Skills

Inquiry
Critical Thinking
Forecasting
Planning

Synopsis

Discovering Alabama has produced almost 100 programs to date. Typically each program visits a specific natural area or concentrates on a specific natural resource topic. “Alabama Countryside,” on the other hand, embraces the whole of Alabama. This program celebrates the natural essence of our state, the land itself, and looks at the many values associated with Alabama’s rural lands as host Dr. Doug Phillips shares some of his concerns for the long term future of the Alabama “Countryside.” Guest interviews include representatives of organizations credited with helping to restore the environmental health of Alabama’s lands and waters following widespread natural resource depletion in the early 1900s and during the Dust Bowl era. Particular emphasis is given to the need for better long-term planning to help sustain Alabama’s abundant rural lands as today’s society becomes increasingly urbanized and disconnected from the land.



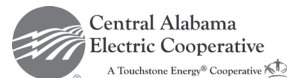
THE UNIVERSITY OF
ALABAMA



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*The Solon and Martha
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Alabama Department Of
Conservation and Natural Resources
State Lands Division

Before Viewing

1. Do a quick survey of your students to find out how many live in a city/town, a suburban/subdivision area, or in a farm/rural setting. Arrange students in small groups with each group composed of students from the several different settings. Allow 10–15 minutes for the groups to compare and discuss the “pluses” and “minuses” of living in each different setting, from urban to rural.
2. Have each group report on the conclusions/results of their discussions. Discuss how life in Alabama might be affected if the state returned to being almost entirely rural similar to conditions in Alabama 100 years ago. Discuss how life in Alabama might be affected if, 100 years into the future, most of the state has become almost entirely urban/suburban similar to present conditions in many other parts of the nation.
3. Introduce the video by explaining that it includes discussion about changing landscapes and lifestyles in Alabama, and related implications for how Alabamians might live in the future.

While Viewing

Have students watch/listen for the various ways that Alabama’s rural lands provide benefits for all Alabamians.

Video Mystery Question: Technology, of course, brings many useful benefits, but, according to an Alabama farmer’s observation mentioned in the video, technology cannot do what? (Answer: The farmer’s observation, verbatim, is “Technology is great, but technology can’t grow a turnip,” referring to the fundamental value of Alabama’s rural lands in growing food.)

After Viewing

1. Return students to their small groups and have them list the various benefits from Alabama’s rural lands as presented in the video. Discuss these and be sure to enumerate the many environmental and ecological “services.”
2. The video contains interviews from representatives of several organizations whose mission is to serve the needs of natural resource conservation and productivity in Alabama. Review with the class the names and roles of these organizations. Ask if any students know someone affiliated with these or similar organizations.

Extensions

View other *Discovering Alabama* programs featuring issues related to managing economic growth in concert with protecting environmental quality in Alabama. Among such programs are “Alabama Soils,” “Alabama Forests,” “Alabama Rivers,” “Alabama Wetlands,” “Mobile River Basin,” “Cahaba River Watershed,” “Bear Creek Watershed,” “Tuscaloosa County,” and “A Walk in the Woods.”

Philosophical Reflections

To plan or not to plan, that is the question. More precisely, as discussed in “Alabama Countryside,” the question is whether or not to do comprehensive planning for the long term. And the answer given to this question varies among differing viewpoints. For example, some people believe intensive planning is essential for proper community development, while others contend that growth and development should be entirely a function of free-market forces. The future of Alabama’s rural lands will ride heavily upon which of these contrasting perspectives gains greatest public support.

Discovering Alabama has always emphasized that Alabama is an especially desirable place to live largely because much of the state is not yet heavily populated. We still enjoy plentiful natural surroundings and a generally comfortable pace of living together with a host of freedoms and flexibilities that are no longer available in more crowded regions. In fact, Alabama’s rural assets not only contribute substantially to the state’s economy and quality of life, these assets are an increasingly significant attraction to people and businesses from other parts of the nation and beyond. Thus it would seem wise that we be concerned about accelerating rates of expanding growth into rural areas of the south and disruptive impacts this often creates. How Alabamians decide the proper role of planning in our state will depend upon our preferences for the future of Alabama’s rural lands. And a key question is whether or not Alabamians will choose to engage the unique human brain capacity for contemplating the future and considering how best to manage predictable long term change.

Nature in Art

Have students work individually to list major aspects they consider desirable for a quality future for your community or county (or for the state if you want to tackle a grander scale). Place students in teams with the assignment to combine their thinking and develop a team “vision” for their preferred future, a vision that can serve as a target scenario to guide a process of comprehensive planning.

Most students may be inclined to describe their preferred future in the form of verbal narrative, but make sure they eventually proceed to the important stage of crafting an actual physical vision for your community/county, to include designated areas for rural farmland, forestland, and undeveloped wildland. And if different teams generate different visions for the future, no problem, this provides an excellent basis for further exploration of issues and challenges that pertain to long-term planning.

Community Connections

1. Arrange with local farmland or forestland owners for a class visit to participate in some aspect of crop production/natural resource management.
2. Have student teams conduct independent research to determine the general variety of consumer food items purchased in Alabama that come from outside the state, compared with those that are produced in Alabama.
3. Have students explore the kind of “planning” presently conducted by your county, region, or local community. Relevant questions include: Which organizations conduct community planning in your area? What do these plans contain? What is the primary purpose of each planning process? How broad is the scope of each – for example, is it largely “infrastructure” planning, or does it include a wider range of economic, environmental, social, and land use considerations? Is there a guiding policy or philosophy that, for example, incorporates recognition of the importance of rural lands and lifestyles? Do such important words as “farming” or “agriculture”

appear anywhere amongst the official planning priorities? Do such important terms as “ecosystem” and “ecosystem services” appear amongst official planning priorities?

Additional References

- *A Sand County Almanac, and Sketches Here and There* by Aldo Leopold, Oxford University Press (1949)
- *The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth* by E.O. Wilson, W.W. Norton & Company (2006)
- *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas* by Donald Worster, Cambridge University Press (1985)
- *What Has Nature Ever Done for Us?* by Tony Juniper, Synergetic Press (2013)
- *Keep Out: The Struggle for Land Use Control* by Sidney Plotkin, Berkeley: University of California Press (1987)
- *The Politics of Land-Use Reform* by Frank S. Popper, University of Wisconsin Press (1981)
- *Land Development and the Natural Environment: Estimating Impacts* by Dale L. Keyes, Urban Land Institute (1976)
- *Saving America's Countryside: A Guide to Rural Conservation* by Samuel Stokes, A Elizabeth Watson, and Shelley S. Mastran, The Johns Hopkins University Press (1997).
- *It's a Sprawl World after All: The Human Cost of Unplanned Growth—and Visions of a Better Future* by Douglas E. Morris, The New Society Publishers (2005)
- *The Bulldozer in the Countryside: Suburban Sprawl and the Rise of American Environmentalism* by Adam Rome, Cambridge University Press (2007)
- *Rural by Design: Maintaining Small Town Character* by Randall Arendt, American Planning Association (1994)
- *Discovering Alabama Forests* by Doug Phillips, University of Alabama Press (2006)
- *Alabama in the Global Economy—Working toward a Sustainable Future*, prepared by the Center for Business and Economic Research, The University of Alabama for the Alabama Association of Regional Councils (2011)
- *Conservation Communities: Creating Value with Nature, Open Space, and Agriculture* by Edward T. McMahon, Urban Land Institute (2010)
- *Better Not Bigger* by Eben Fodor, New Catalyst Books (2007)

Parting Thoughts

As noted in “Alabama Countryside,” a common form of community planning in Alabama can be described as relatively narrow in scope. Often the dominant focus is to promote economic development while charting projections of potential new development and assessing needs for infrastructure to accommodate expanding development. Now, I don’t mean to impugn anyone in citing this observation. Such planning has served to support needed economic growth in many Alabama communities. And certainly, Alabama communities are richly blessed with caring people, including city and county planners, who are far more capable than I in providing for needs essential to community well-being. With this in mind, “Alabama Countryside” seeks a broadened approach for planning, giving emphasis to the importance of the state’s many rural values in this age of urbanization that so often equates with heavily diminished natural values in other regions.

I’m far from alone in holding strong sentiments for the Alabama countryside, a fact confirmed daily in my travels throughout the state as Producer of Discovering Alabama. Many Alabamians feel a strong affinity for Alabama’s countryside and have a lifelong connection with these lands that includes a special wisdom fast vanishing in today’s urbanizing world. And many of these Alabamians readily recognize the possibility that current trends of growth in our region could someday bring dramatic impacts to rural Alabama. Likewise, these Alabamians are hoping the state will promote long-term planning to sustain this great rural heritage. Of course, any discussion about planning for a preferred vision of the future is unavoidably tied to human subjectivity. We can make reasoned arguments, and we can innumerate hard facts where useful, but human bias is the main currency that stirs personal interest and concern in such matters. The trick is to recognize these biases and still apply thoughtful foresight in assessing available options and contingencies for Alabama’s future. Therefore, “Alabama Countryside” encourages Alabamians to advocate for thoughtful leadership that will ensure careful planning to give Alabama the best chances of retaining our state’s abundant rural assets.

Oh yeah, I almost forgot. As any good teacher knows, students should not be propagandized to see only one side of an issue. And the question of how best to achieve a desirable future is an ideal issue for helping students to consider a range of pertinent perspectives.

Happy outings,

Dr. Doug





Discovering Alabama

Activity/Information Sheet

Alabama Countryside

Alabama Countryside: Past, Present, ...Future?

There are obvious limitations to a thirty minute video – only so much discussion can fit in such short space. “Alabama Countryside” cannot address all relevant issues, point-counterpoint, and still cogently convey its essential message promoting respect for Alabama’s rural lands. For example, the video does not address significant issues associated with industrial agriculture and related concerns about food quality and food safety. These matters are often complex and controversial and warrant a separate program to allow sufficient discussion.

A primary theme of “Alabama Countryside” is the celebration of Alabama’s rural abundance. And the main concern of “Alabama Countryside” is not that these lands face impending demise, but that their abundance is increasingly special in a world today with many regions experiencing loss of rural surroundings at an accelerating pace. The take-away message of “Alabama Countryside” is for Alabamians to consider the future they want for rural Alabama and to begin planning for that desirable future while timely opportunity is still available to do so. This culminating concern of “Alabama Countryside” is drawn in context of some relevant history, as highlighted briefly below.

Rural Lands Restored

The American conservation movement that began in the early 1900s emerged in response to previous decades of rampant exploitation of the nation’s lands, waters, and wildlife. Leading champions for this movement include Aldo Leopold, noted ecologist, forester, and wildlife expert, and today often credited as the “father of American conservation.”

Leopold gained acclaim, in part, because of his philosophy of the “land ethic,” as presented in his famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*, and offered by Leopold to counter the wanton land abuse so prevalent at the time:

We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man....

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics....

Despite powerful opposing interests, the American conservation movement enabled the establishment of a host of conservation agencies and organizations to help restore America’s lands, waters, and wildlife. A number of these groups are featured in “Alabama Countryside” and represent the continuing work of conserving Alabama’s rural land heritage.

Rural Lands Imperiled

However, many conservationists today share a heightened concern about currently exploitive trends that could someday spell troublesome consequences for Alabama’s rural lands. These trends, now dominant in many urbanizing regions, are largely rooted in a phenomenon that has been growing steadily since the early observations of Aldo Leopold:

Perhaps the most serious obstacle impeding the evolution of a land ethic is the fact that our educational and economic system is headed away from, rather than toward, an intense consciousness of land. Your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it, to him it is the space between cities....Turn him loose for a day on the land, and if the spot does not happen to be a golf links or a “scenic” area, he is bored stiff....

The problem then is how to bring about a striving for harmony with land among a people many of whom have forgotten there is any such thing as land, among whom education and culture have become synonymous with landlessness....

More recent observations seem to underscore Leopold’s lament. For example, national assessments reveal that rural lands and open space are being developed at a rate of more than 6,000 acres per day, a total area roughly the size of the state of New Jersey converted to urban/suburban landscapes every two years. Meanwhile, the South is now the fastest growing region in the U.S. And while this has generated important economic benefits for many areas, expanding growth is also contributing to difficult environmental and economic problems, including widely-publicized problems with water quality and water supply in several southern communities (for example, the infamous Georgia–Alabama “Water Wars” that is a consequence of Georgia water shortages due to sprawling development surrounding the Atlanta area).

Rural Lands Sustained?

Discovering Alabama has produced several programs that allude to planning for environmental sustainability. However, “Alabama Countryside” takes the case for planning to a more assertive level. This, no doubt, will find a cold response in some circles. Efforts for broader planning in Alabama have historically met with resistance, leaving state and community officials reluctant to endorse the idea of comprehensive planning. This reluctance can stem from concerns some people have about the term “planning” and whether broad powers of planning are a guise for broad powers of “control.” A common fear is that such planning could bring unwanted restrictions on individual liberties, particularly in regard to private property rights. This fear is frequently linked with an assortment of negative connotations associated with other planning-related terms, including “comprehensive,” “land-use,” and “sustainability,” words that, by definition, are quite appropriate for planning purposes but, unfortunately, today are often misconstrued by groups who deliver politically driven insinuations to stymie needed planning. Of course, resistance to intensive planning can sometimes have a reasonable basis, depending upon the local situation. However, there should be no general fear of improved planning in Alabama if the planning is conducted openly, honestly, and with active citizen participation as a central dimension of the planning process. In other words, the planning process may be initiated and hosted by government, but it is most effectively accomplished with ample citizen partnership and subsequent citizen “ownership” of the process and its outcomes.

Needless to say, given political realities in Alabama, effective comprehensive planning will require firm leadership. Most importantly, it will require courageous leadership willing to boldly lead for the long-term sustainability of the state’s special rural heritage. Without such leadership, Alabama is vulnerable to potential radical rearrangement of the state’s rural landscapes over the long term. What will Alabama look like in 50, 75, or 100 years? What will daily life be like in Alabama for future generations? Without courageous capable leadership that is willing to stand up for the land and willing to stand against opposing interests who would profit from careless exploitation of the land, Alabama may stand instead to lose the abundant rural heritage that today sets the state admirably apart from other regions.