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CENTER**

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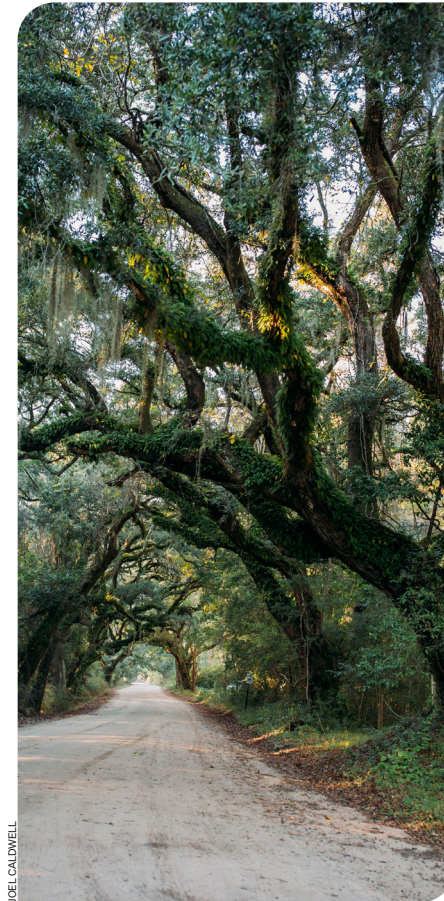


The Southern Environmental Law Center is one of the nation's most powerful defenders of the environment, rooted in the South. With a long track record, SELC takes on the toughest environmental challenges in court, in government, and in our communities.

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JOEL CALDWELL



Dear Friends of SELC,

This April, Rufa red knots traveling all the way from the tip of South America to the Arctic again stopped along the South Carolina coast, as they've done for centuries. But thanks to SELC's legal work, this year, for the first time in decades, these migratory shorebirds were able to feast uninterrupted on billions of horseshoe crab eggs left on South Carolina beaches. I have a deep sense of satisfaction knowing that litigation and the resulting strong settlement we negotiated is helping to keep our natural systems in balance.

The success of our legal strategy — where courts recognized the essential role horseshoe crabs and their eggs play in the survival of red knots, which are protected by the Endangered Species Act — is providing a model for others. It's also an example of what I love most about working at SELC: We tackle issues others simply can't. The breadth and depth of our knowledge about this region allows us to see opportunities others don't. And thanks to our generous donors, this work is possible.

In this issue, we're honored to share an essay by lauded South Carolina conservationist, author, professor, cultural ornithologist, and friend of SELC, Drew Lanham, who was so deeply inspired by his own love of shorebirds and our work on their behalf that he graciously agreed to write our cover story. In his essay, he talks about the relationship at the heart of our horseshoe crab case, calling on us to remember our kinship with the natural world, both as fellow human beings and as vital and influential members in the web of life, which ties us all to fates beyond our own.

It's a powerful reminder and one I hope spurs you to reinvigorate your ties to the natural world around you, as well as to the essential work happening day in and day out at SELC.

With gratitude,

Catherine Wannamaker
Senior Attorney, Charleston Office

**CHAPEL HILL
CHARLOTTESVILLE
ATLANTA
ASHEVILLE
BIRMINGHAM
CHARLESTON
NASHVILLE
RICHMOND
WASHINGTON, D.C.**

Red knots, horseshoe crabs, and us

A CONSERVATIONIST'S CALL FOR THE CARE OF KINSHIP

By J. Drew Lanham



It's an annual ritual, the flocks of red-breasted shorebirds landing to refuel along the Atlantic shores of South Carolina during one of the longest migrations in the animal kingdom. The red knots' layover on their journey from the Patagonia region of South America to the Arctic is timed to the spring spawning of horseshoe crabs and the abundance of eggs lining the beaches. But red knots have been less plentiful of late, so much so they are now protected under the Endangered Species Act.

It was the red knots' dependence on the horseshoe crabs that led SELC and our partners to a historic victory protecting these threatened birds from the harmful impacts of commercial horseshoe crab harvesting. The courts agreed harvesting should be limited because of the vital role crabs' eggs play in the species' survival.

The birds' South Carolina stopover isn't far from the Edisto-area pink house where J. Drew Lanham retreats for focused writing. A renowned author of books, essays, and poetry, as well as a cultural ornithologist, academic, and MacArthur Fellow, Lanham is intimately familiar with the red knot migration and their reliance on the horseshoe crabs. The following essay dives into his perspective on this prehistoric relationship and the ways our human culture ignores it at our own peril.

A bird's-eye view, that's how I see most of the world. I'm an ornithologist by training and a wild bird adorer by something hardwired heartwise. This is to say, I am more than an academically objective identifier of birds. I identify *with* birds and have been in love with them for most of my life. These lifelong relationships make bonding with them second nature and evoke in me a kind of wild-wishing.

I'm often asked what my favorite bird is, and because answering such a question is impossible, I respond

“the one with feathers,” relieved at not having to choose one from ten thousand. I must admit at times to playing favorites though, if only for a moment. That favoritism is torqued by season and habitat. I can't take a living being out of the context of time and space. Because I love coastal places, especially seashore and salt marsh, shorebirds inspire a certain kind of wandering wistfulness. It is impossible to be in the company of wheeling flocks of them, watching them skitter, scatter, peep, call, and probe, without every sense coming alive as surf

pounds the soul and the sulfur stink of pluff mud fills the nose.

The late nature writer and ardent Zen-conservationist Peter Matthiessen categorized shorebirds as “wind birds” and wrote: “The restlessness of shorebirds, their kinship with the distance and swift seasons, the wistful signal of their voices down the long coastlines of the world make them, for me, the most affecting of wild creatures.” I share his soulful sentiments for the fancifully named species like sanderlings, curlews, whimbrel, godwits, willets, plovers, and a robin-sized sandpiper called a red knot (*Caldidris canutus*). As the ornithological bias often bends my perspective through a featherweight prism, different shorebirds conjure different stories that bind me not just to them, but to other beings not fortunate enough to be feath-

ered. I agree with Matthiessen's idea of “kinship” but extend it beyond the charm of birds to other beings easily overlooked.

One such kinship tale, the story of the red knots and horseshoe crabs, is a charisma-driven, care-conjuring odyssey that leads me to seek relationship and cause for concern in animals that few see any likeness or relatedness in. Turns out that red knots have a kinship so close to the horseshoe crab that one might consider them cousins of a sort. It is a link that connects us to a kind of ancestral Adam and Eve — the horseshoe crab. *Limulus polyphemus* is an ancient crustacean evolved in a sea-swamped not-yet-drifted-apart world at the beginnings of life on earth. Being old enough to have crawled from Eden's seashore gives them ultimate “kin” credibility.



Lanham scouts the tree line looking for feathered friends on the South Carolina coast near Edisto. Photo by Joel Caldwell. Above left: Red knots and horseshoe crabs gather on the shoreline. Photo by Gregory Breese.



Red knots feast on horseshoe crab eggs as they refuel on their annual migration from the Patagonia region of South America to the Arctic. Photo by Fletcher Smith.

Horseshoe crabs, with their literal blueblood lineage, sit near the head of life's legacy table at the evolutionary family reunion. The "blood is thicker than water" maxim speaks to family kinship. It's a saying that falls in a different way on this ancient being that has existed for most of the time that life on earth has existed. After all, finding a horseshoe crab flipped right side down, chocolate brown carapace of armor mired in the sand and its ten spiny legs, water-breathing gills, and exposed undersides drying in the beach sun doesn't evoke a sympathetic response in many who see it as some odd thing to avoid rather than some elderly ancestor to offer help.

On my wanderings along South Carolina beaches, I come across them mostly in the legs-up, shell-down topsy-turvy state. Forgoing my beach cruising for shells at low tide to enact right-side-up rescue, most of the horseshoes I encounter have been unlucky and long dead, suffocated in dry air. On the occasions when I find one of them still alive but struggling to right itself and return to its saltwater home, I stop not just to observe but to make some kind of difference. Maybe the act will be worth some karmic correction that comes my way when I find myself turned head down, on the edge of some depression. After all, isn't helping another in distress the right thing to do?

Ancient history

In these rapidly advancing years, it seems that convergences can be the magic and the miraculous that make life's journey a sweeter peregrination. I've rescued a few horseshoe crabs, but I came to know this species best by its relationship to those wind birds Matthiessen spoke of. Whatever deep-time evolutionary linkages one might attempt to make between the hardshell carapace of *Limulus p.* and the downy soft feathers, of *Calidris c.*, there is a more observantly obvious and immediately urgent kinship between "crab" and Calidrid.

Each spring, for at least ten thousand years or so but likely beyond that, red knots and their shorebird relatives have come to a time-evolved, moon-mediated agreement with horseshoe crabs. Knot migration to North America coincides with the peak of horseshoe crab spawning. The crab's reproductive investment in the future provides critical food that fuels the red knot's journey to the Arctic. The millions upon millions of gravel-like eggs are essential fuel for their journey of almost 10,000 miles from the bottom of the world to the top and back again. Flying north from near Antarctic extremes in South America's Patagonia or Tierra del Fuego, up past the bulge of Brazil, to island hopscotch through the Caribbean and up the southeastern Atlantic coastline, it is one of the longest migratory marathons. It leads to a reunion that



Lanham takes in the scene along the water's edge at Edisto Island. Photo by Joel Caldwell.



The South Carolina coast is a birders paradise, welcoming a wide variety of species like these dunlins and short-billed dowitchers. Photo by Joel Caldwell.

would seem one-sided if the uncountable masses of eggs scattered in the sand could ever be completely devoured by the once-abundant masses of shorebirds. But abundance supports abundance in nature and this reunion that crosses blood lines has for a very long time been at the heart of hordes supporting hordes.

Blue-blooded

I see humanity in that lineage, linked by flight and wander envy. Sea water is much of who we are, our blood is mostly brine. Horseshoe crabs are eaten by few and have historically been used as fishing bait and fertilizer by others, but now there is a different intensity of threat that humans leverage against nature's, and their own, best interest.

All those millennia of abundance are being imperiled by an intense bloodlust. Imagine being a red knot, flying all this way to the South Carolina coast through tempest and tumult, past predatory peregrine talons, through a gauntlet of natural barriers, and now those human-constructed. Imagine living a life on the wind, by wing and feather faith of lift, and muscle-powered thrust, to a family reunion scheduled multiple mil-

lennia ago. It's a reunion to meet up with an ancient auntie who gives sage advice and provides sustenance too. And then someone somehow abruptly pulls the plug on the show. Red knots, so named because of the rotund nature of their robin-sized bodies made fat by their horseshoe crab egg feast, were choice targets for market hunters, gunners eager to kill not just for their pots, but to feed hungry palates in northern cities like New York and Boston. The knots were easy targets as were many other species of shorebirds and populations plunged in the unregulated and thus unsustainable "harvest." Fortunately, the Lacey Act of 1903 and the 1914 Migratory Bird Treaty Act came to fruition in the nick of time to stave off the fate that birds like passenger pigeons, Carolina parakeets, and heath hens suffered into extinction. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now lists red knots as threatened, one step away from endangered.

In spite of some protections, oil spills, coastal development, and shorelines disappearing under warming, rising seas disrupt and downright destroy habitats and birds. The birds arrive and see what we know, that horseshoe crab populations have dropped. What they don't know is that it is thanks in large part



Horseshoe crabs' blue blood is extracted by pharmaceutical companies and used to ensure medical products are bacteria-free, despite there being a synthetic alternative. The hundreds of thousands of harvested crabs are then returned to the ocean, though many don't survive the process. Photo by Ariane Müller.

to demand from the pharmaceutical industry, eager to extract *Limulus Amoebocyte Lysate* (LAL) from their blue blood. Horseshoe crabs bleed a hemocyanin copper-infused blue green unlike our vertebrate bright red, and it is rich in this protein. LAL can be used in vaccines and to test for potentially fatal endotoxins in humans, though a synthetic alternative exists. This ancient species is literally, and from an evolutionarily figurative standpoint, blue-blooded, and being drained for this same blood.

Kinship

Become for a moment a horseshoe crab with a lineage that runs millions of years deep. Most of the species that ever existed in earth's existence have drifted into extinction. You're a survivor built on a simple plan outlasting trilobites, T. Rex, life-smiting meteorites, Tasmanian tigers, and all life — and the threats to it since. But 21st century humanity's designs on progress never met a challenge to exploit it could pass up. Never bet against greed. The desire for blue blood threatens you like no crater-creating space rock separating the age of reptiles from the

age of mammals could. There's no denying the need to heal sickness and ease the pain of chronic disease, but doing so at the cost of another species' existence seems a short-sighted and unethical trade. There's even less need when science gives alternatives.

The "progress" we put ahead of nature puts both red knots and horseshoe crabs between a shared rock and very hard place. Both in that spot are suffering bruised existences. Red knots, once among the most abundant of shorebirds, have declined so dramatically that seeing them is becoming increasingly difficult.

We are once again breaking the chain of custody between wild beings and wildness and our own well-being. Use for the greater good might be considered at the noble end of horseshoe crab exploitation, but as a Black man with a lineage of ancestral enslavement behind me, I've heard those arguments before. As I spend more and more time in the ACE Basin, one of National Geographic's Fifty Great Places, and a priceless gem of ecological and cultural convergence where the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto rivers meet, I find a kinship with multiple aspects of my own being. This includes

the birds and beasts, the bitter history of a landscape dramatically altered at the cost of human lives considered less-than, and what the future holds for how we all relate to one another across lines of space, time, and identity. That ecological ink blot that helps me understand my relatedness to every other thing is critical for all of us, human skin, rusty red knot feathers, or armor-plated horseshoe crabs.

There is some good news with red knots rebounding after new protections for horseshoe crabs, but these days I advise caution before celebrating. Greed by some who want to exploit nature's bounty for profit seems to always be a threat. We must be ever vigilant to protect those who can't protect themselves. Because care is the cause of conservation, and since that care most effectively happens where we draw close to

empathy, or at least some sense of personal stake in "saving" nature, I advise thinking beyond human relatedness to expand heart and helping hand to those other beings with whom we ultimately share the same fate.

From somewhere on high, perhaps a migrating red knot looks down and sees me flip a single horseshoe crab that returns seaward. I cannot know what the knot knows, but the bird lover within knows that helping this ancient uncle return to the sea might mean more eggs spawned on future moonlit nights that will feed shorebirds to give them better chances at surviving and making more of themselves. That means more birds and crabs for us to wonder over and watch. The cause of kinship among us all demands no less. ■

Horseshoe crabs are often called "living fossils," meaning they have existed nearly unchanged for at least 445 million years, appearing on Earth long before dinosaurs. Photo by Ariane Müller.



J. Drew Lanham is an esteemed ornithologist, author, and Clemson University professor based in South Carolina's Upstate region. He won SELC's 2018 Reed Environmental Writing Award for his book "The Home Place: Memoirs of a Colored Man's Love Affair with Nature" and released his latest book, "Joy Is the Justice We Give Ourselves," this April.

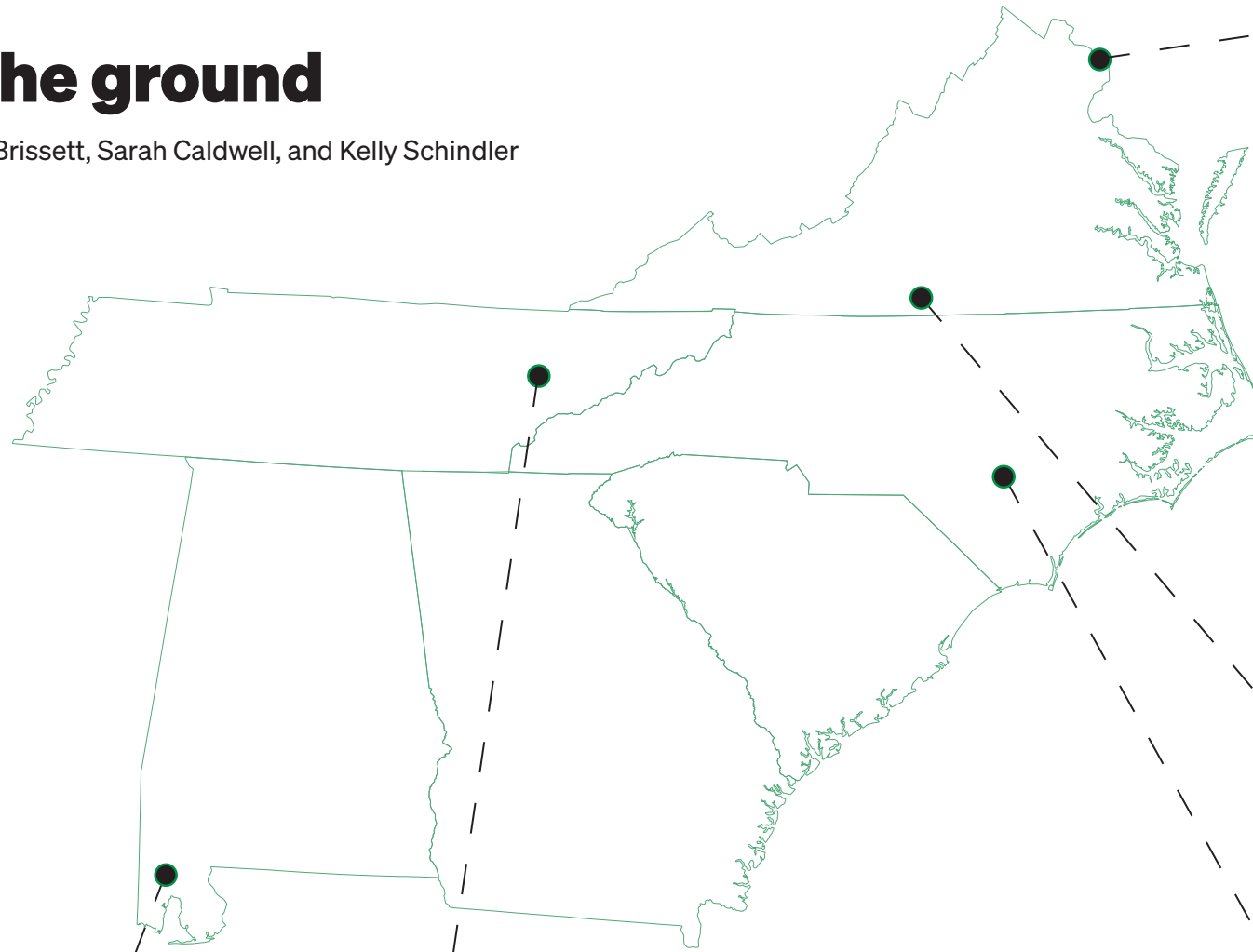


To hear more from Lanham, scan to listen to his interview on SELC's podcast Broken Ground.



On the ground

By Wilson Brissett, Sarah Caldwell, and Kelly Schindler



BUCKS, AL Coal ash recycling to start near Mobile

For years, SELC has fought alongside our partners to protect Alabama's iconic Mobile-Tensaw Delta, home to some of the greatest biodiversity in the country, from 21 million tons of toxic coal ash sitting on the water's edge in a leaky, unlined coal ash pit. This years-long effort saw a significant step in the right direction when Alabama Power recently announced plans to recycle some of Plant Barry's coal ash into concrete, although it's unclear how much of the ash will be removed. SELC will keep pursuing our federal lawsuit against the illegal burying of the ash in place.



KNOXVILLE, TN Protecting a rare Tennessee salamander

The Berry Cave salamander is only found in a handful of caves around Knoxville, Tennessee. These remarkable creatures spend their entire lives in subterranean streams in a small corner of the Volunteer State but were denied protections under the Endangered Species Act in 2019. At the time, the Southeast region of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was using a quota system, a policy since abandoned, that set annual targets for rejecting protections. We're taking legal action to have the salamander reconsidered for federal protections as disappearing habitat due to rampant development and climate change are pushing them to the brink.

WASHINGTON, D.C. Agency's 'timber targets' at odds with climate goals

SELC has filed a new, first-of-its-kind lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service. Each year, the agency logs hundreds of thousands of acres of public forests to fulfill agency-set "timber targets." Yet the Forest Service has never studied the massive environmental and climate impacts of these increasing timber targets nor the cumulative effect of the logging projects authorized to fulfill them. The targets lead to reckless harvesting of remarkable mature and old-growth forests, undermine the Biden administration's important efforts to protect old growth and fight climate change, and violate the National Environmental Policy Act — so we're taking the agency to court.

"The agency's single-minded pursuit of these targets threatens almost every value that people cherish about our national forests, puts the climate at risk, and violates federal law."

— PATRICK HUNTER, MANAGING ATTORNEY

PITTSYLVANIA COUNTY, VA Dirty compressor station dropped

In a win for Pittsylvania County, Virginia, the company proposing to build the Mountain Valley Pipeline's Southgate extension announced plans to shorten its methane gas pipeline, eliminating the need for the Lambert Compressor Station. This means no additional air pollution for a predominantly Black community already living in the shadows of two compressor stations. SELC worked alongside the Pittsylvania County NAACP and other partners to fight this proposal and will continue to challenge the remaining MVP Southgate extension.

ROSEBORO, NC Unneighborly: North Carolina landfill pollution spreading

Members of the eastern North Carolina community of Snow Hill are pushing back against the Sampson County landfill. The nearly 1,000-acre facility accepts and processes 1.8 million tons of waste every year, exposing residents of the majority Black community nearby to noxious fumes and contaminating local drinking water wells, surface water, and groundwater with chemical pollution. SELC has notified the landfill owners of our intent to sue on behalf of the community-based organization Environmental Justice Community Action Network unless the pollution coming from the site is stopped and action to remedy the contamination starts immediately.



SEEING THE SOUTH

Good neighbors?



Photos by Julie Dermansky

The golden rule teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves. But what happens when your neighbor is a massive facility pumping out pollution that doesn't stop at your property lines? It's a question too many of our neighbors across the South face and one we're working to address.

Pollution can often be hard to see. But neighbors know. They know the dust that collects on their cars, the headaches that flare up when it rains, and the smells that keep them indoors.

To illustrate just how pervasive the presence of polluting industries in residential areas is, we asked photojournalist Julie Dermansky to visit some of the communities fighting these dirty neighbors. She traveled to impacted neighborhoods across the South, including Jefferson County, Alabama, (above), where residents worry about Alabama Power's coal ash storage affecting drinking water, and Georgetown, South Carolina (left), where an International Paper plant looms over a community baseball field.





Swan Pond Baptist Church is in the shadow the Tennessee Valley Authority's Kingston Fossil Plant and the facility's coal storage.

Previous page: At Plant Miller, northwest of Birmingham, Alabama Power is proposing to leave tons of toxic coal ash in dirt pits along the Locust Fork River, threatening the river and drinking water sources.



Constant truck traffic is one of the many issues facing Sampson County neighbors of North Carolina's largest landfill.

In Adel, Georgia, not one, but two facilities for producing wood pellets are proposed in the same predominantly Black neighborhood.





Hopewell represents one of Virginia's most environmentally burdened communities. Combined, local industrial facilities account for 8 percent of the state's total toxic air emissions — in a city that has only 0.2 percent of Virginia's population. Here, a school bus passes the Associated Asphalt plant.



Westrock Paper Mill in Florence, South Carolina is sited along the Great Pee Dee River.

In Hopewell, Virginia, homes and a playground butt up against AdvanSix Chemicals and Resins, LLC. The average life expectancy in Hopewell, 69 years, is more than eight years shorter than the statewide average.



CHANGEMAKER

DeWayne Barton

Bringing community together through art and nature

By Tasha Durrett



DeWayne Barton's childhood left him with fond memories of his roots in West Asheville, North Carolina. At a young age, his family moved to Washington, D.C., but he'd return in summer to visit relatives in the close-knit Burton Street community.

What greeted Barton when he decided to move back in 2001 was a crisis playing out in Black neighborhoods across the country. Places he'd played as a child were torn apart by the construction and subsequent expansion of I-26 and the neighborhood was shaken by a drug epidemic. Faced with a community ravaged by overlapping catastrophes, he decided to take action, creating The Peace Gardens and Market as a place of respite, knowledge-sharing, and economic opportunity for his neighborhood.

Since then, his efforts in West Asheville have grown to include Hood Huggers International, which offers tours of the neighborhood along with arts and community programming.

His advocacy for his community and work around highway expansions led to him crossing paths with SELC.

Barton was a key player when, in 2009, the neighborhood started work to outline community goals and create a plan for mitigating further highway projects encroaching into the neighborhood. This document, the Burton Street Neighborhood Plan, was finalized in 2010 but never adopted by the City of Asheville.

In 2016, the city reopened talks around the neighborhood plan and brought in the North Carolina Department of Transportation. They created a new document outlining a strategy for mitigating the impacts of upcoming highway expansions, with the earlier plan as the starting point. Asheville then adopted this updated 2018 Burton Street Neighborhood Plan, which focused on creating a livable built environment that supports a healthy community through projects like sidewalk improvements and a new park. Implementing the plan has been harder, but Barton's experience shows us what ongoing commitment to community well-being in the face of highway construction and expansion can look like.

How has your work educated people about communities like Burton Street?

My work in the community inspired me to create Hood Huggers International and Hood Tours, Asheville's first Black-owned tour company. Hood Tours highlights the ingenuity, resilience, and determination of historically Black spaces and neighborhoods throughout the region. As Hood Huggers expanded, I was also developing a grassroots community development model called the Community Accountability Plan or CAP Framework. The CAP Framework is a healing and rebuilding strategy that removes silos and brings together multiple individuals and institutions to restore the health and wealth of these communities. Central to the CAP Framework is our Under Instruction model that works with youth to develop the next generation of leaders and business owners.

The Burton Street Neighborhood Plan was developed 15 years ago. What are your thoughts looking back on that process?

It was a roller coaster ride. The initial neighborhood plan was initiated by the community — a partnership between the Burton Street Community Association, MountainTrue, Asheville Design Center, and students from Appalachian State University. The students conducted a door-to-door survey, we hosted community design sessions, reviewed the draft plan, and started the process for formal adoption by the city. At that time, the city opted not to adopt it. So, to continue outreach efforts, we sent a proposal to the North Carolina Department of Transportation outlining a plan for neighborhood residents to conduct the outreach. Though DOT didn't move forward with this proposal, it eventually led to them contracting with an agency who led the process of redeveloping our neighborhood plan and getting it formally adopted by the city, though it excluded key elements like a business incubator from the earlier version.

The push in recent years to tackle environmental and climate justice often attempts to leave race out of conversations. How have you included it?

At the heart of much of our work is the identification, restoration, and celebration of historically Black spaces, which are being erased nationally at an alarming rate. First, we started Peace Gardens & Market. Then, in 2008, I co-founded Green Opportunities, a green jobs training initiative targeting young adults with barriers to employment — many of whom lived in under-resourced, historically Black neighborhoods. We've worked on projects within the neighborhoods and communities where the participants live, installing solar on people's homes, weatherizing and creating more energy efficiency for folks who could not otherwise afford it.

Hood Hugger's tagline is that it is "rebuilding Appalachia through art, environment, and social enterprise." How do all these elements intersect?

Each one of these plays a part. The hammer they've dropped on our communities over the

years has left people feeling lost and hopeless. For us to build, we have to heal, but sometimes we must build and heal at the same time. Art is the creative way we can express ourselves. The environment part is that we must do whatever we do in an environmentally conscious way. The social enterprise part looks at how we sustain it all.

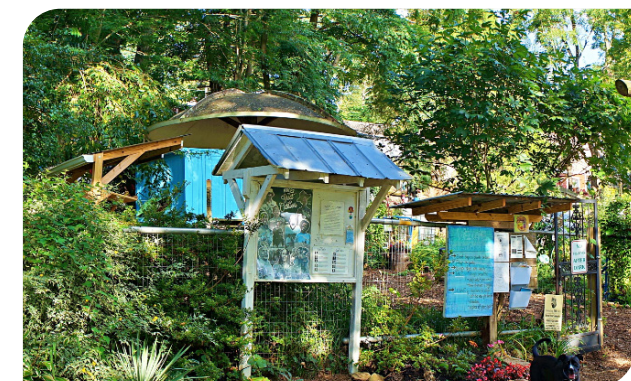
What should people who love to visit Asheville, but are unaware of the diversity that exists in its communities and residents know?

I'd invite them on a Hood Tour, share the history. We'd celebrate the beauty of this history together, the art, artists, businesses, leaders, and more. Then we'd talk about the policies. We always end our conversations with ideas about how each of us can enrich community and make the world a better place. ■

Left: Barton poses in St. Matthias Episcopal Church in Asheville's East End, which is known for its African American craftsmanship. Photo by Steve Mann.



Scenes from around the Peace Gardens and Market, including an art installation, harvested kale, a volunteer workday, and the garden entrance.



Top photo by Safi Martin; others by Hood Huggers International.

Gassed: Taking the steam out of utilities' fossil-fuel dreams

By Emily Driscoll

Earlier this year, energy company Williams took the first step needed to construct a large expansion of its Transcontinental Pipeline that runs from Virginia to Texas, cutting through five SELC states. There hasn't been a gas-delivery project of this scale in the South since the Atlantic Coast and the Mountain Valley pipelines were proposed in 2014.

But it's not just this pipeline. The South is facing one of the largest methane gas buildouts in the country. Utilities regionwide continue to propose new pipelines and gas-fired power plants, even though they're directly at odds with goals to cut greenhouse gas emis-

sions. Over a 20-year period, methane is more than 80 times more potent than carbon dioxide at warming the planet when it leaks into the atmosphere. Plus, burning methane for power produces carbon dioxide itself, the primary driver of climate change. Nonetheless utilities are looking to lock customers into yet another fossil fuel for decades, stalling our transition to clean energy.

The decisions we make about methane gas now and in the next few years will determine our climate future. The time is now to fight against new fossil-fuel investments and for a future fueled by clean energy.

"The gas-fired fever dream gripping the South is completely at odds with the need to decarbonize how we get our energy," said Greg Buppert, senior attorney and leader of SELC's regional gas team. "Methane is just another dirty fossil fuel that pollutes communities and heats up the planet. It's time to make a different choice."

What is methane gas?

Methane is a fossil fuel that is one of the world's most potent, dangerous greenhouse gases and poses tremendous risks to our health and climate. It is the primary component of what utilities call "natural gas." There is nothing clean or renewable about it.

It is most commonly extracted through hydraulic fracturing or "fracking," using horizontal drilling and chemicals pumped underground to break up shale formations.

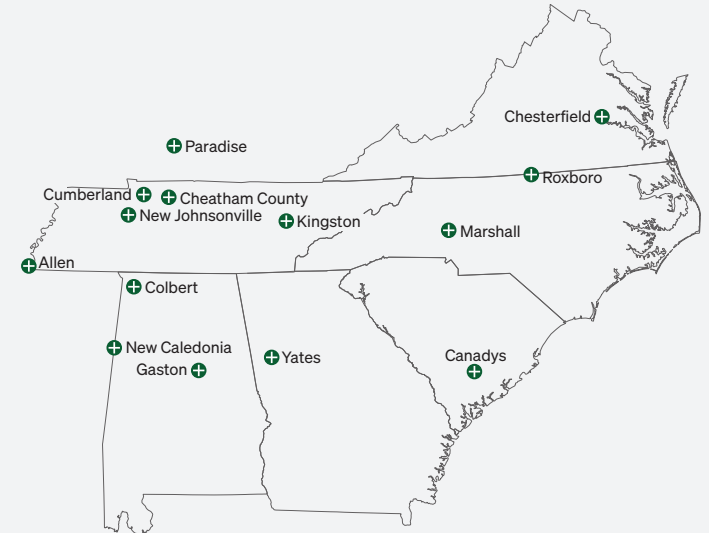
What are the health and cost risks of methane gas?

Methane gas power plants and compressor stations threaten surrounding communities — often communities of color who have already borne the brunt

Construction of the Mountain Valley Pipeline is continuing to face legal challenges as it tears a 303-mile path across the Blue Ridge Mountains. Photo by Kristian Thacker.

The South is facing an onslaught of new methane gas.

These new plants represent less than half of the proposed buildout.



of harm from industrial facilities for decades — with dangerous air pollution. This includes fine particulates and formaldehyde, which are harmful even at very low levels. Methane pipelines and other infrastructure are also prone to leaks and explosions.

Volatile fuel prices and the major financial investments of plants and pipelines also pile on more financial strain for Southern families who already pay some of the highest monthly electric bills in the nation.

“Methane is just another dirty fossil fuel that pollutes communities and heats up the planet. It's time to make a different choice.”

— GREG BUPPERT, SENIOR ATTORNEY AND LEADER OF SELC'S REGIONAL GAS TEAM

How are gas expansions playing out across the South?

The Tennessee Valley Authority is seeking permits for one of the country's largest gas expansion buildouts, spanning four states with eight new fossil-fuel plants and two new gas pipelines proposed so far. This includes plans for a new gas plant in south Memphis, where residents are already overburdened by industrial facilities. Combined, these facilities will release millions of tons of climate-warming gases every year.

Utilities in Virginia, South Carolina, North Carolina, and Georgia are also pushing for major investments in new gas capacity. Across SELC's region, monopoly power providers are planning to add nearly 33,000 megawatts of new methane gas-fired power plants by 2038. One large gas plant would emit about the same amount of carbon as half a million cars do each year.

To fuel these plants, developers are pursuing significant new interstate pipelines and expansions of existing pipelines. The Southeast Supply Enhancement project — the largest pipeline expansion proposed in the South in the last decade — would affect states from Virginia to Alabama and primarily deliver to Duke Energy and Southern Company utilities for new power plants.

What are the alternatives?

Demand from both residential and industrial customers for cleaner, more affordable energy options like solar, wind, and battery storage only continues to grow across the South. And the cost of these clean options continues to drop.

Investing in more energy efficiency and reducing barriers to renewable energy regionwide will lower monthly bills while creating local jobs.

What's next?

This push by utilities to make generational investments in methane gas comes at a critical moment to act on the climate crisis — a moment that will ultimately determine the South's energy future. SELC and our partners are pursuing all legal and policy avenues to stop this gas grab: filing lawsuits against proposed plants and pipelines, challenging utility plans in public utility commission proceedings, advocating for renewable energy alternatives, and working to leverage federal climate action. ■

Speak up against gas expansion. Say no to TVA's new gas-fired plant in Memphis.



Water crisis in Prichard

By Samantha Baars; photos by Julie Dermansky

At some point most Americans have poured themselves a glass of water straight from the tap, but Carletta Davis can't remember ever doing that at her home in Prichard, Alabama.

Imagine eggs boiling on the stove, but there's no water in the pot. That's how Davis describes the smell of her water to folks who haven't been to Prichard.

"We've been buying our water for years," says Davis. "It's either you do that or you get sick."

Prichard — called the City of Champions for its way of churning out successful professional athletes — is facing a water crisis. After years of neglect and mismanagement, the system no longer delivers water consistently or cleanly. This is not only unacceptable for daily life, but also puts emergency services like fire response at risk.

"Those responsible for protecting our right to clean, affordable water have epically failed us," says Davis.

A community failed

Nearly 60 percent of Prichard's drinking water leaks from the system, and the Alabama Department of Environmental Management describes the water service lines as "very poor" and in "dire shape." Local and state testing confirms the presence of bacteria and chronic inadequate disinfection since 2021.

At the same time, mismanagement of a \$55 million bond by the Prichard Water Works & Sewer Board is to blame for a devastating 22 percent rate hike for residents. Davis describes water bills ranging from \$300 to \$400 for basically just bathing.

A former banker, she now leads a local environmen-



tal justice group called We Matter Eight Mile Community Association. And she picks up the phone when people call with questions about their water.

"I'm an environmentalist by force, not by choice," she says.

More than 90 percent of Prichard's nearly 20,000 residents are Black and nearly 70 percent of residents earn a lower or fixed income. With a valid lack of trust, locals are in favor of restoring their water system. They worry about the loss of autonomy and the opportunity for further neglect if they have to tie-in to Mobile's system, which is one proposed solution.

"Economic depravity causes a lot of the social issues you're seeing," says Davis. "Access to clean water is a God-given right that should never be taken away."

Emergency legal action

Ryan Anderson, who works as an associate attorney in SELC's Birmingham office, says she was "stunned" to hear Davis' personal record of the water crisis unfolding in Prichard.

After hearing Davis' story, SELC partnered with Southern Poverty Law Center to file an emergency petition to the Environmental Protection Agency under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

"We've been buying our water for years. It's either that or you get sick."

— CARLETTA DAVIS

"EPA has a responsibility to use its authority to keep people safe," says Anderson.

We are asking EPA to provide financial assistance for water system upgrades and commit to a long-term plan to address water contamination issues.

Clean water for all

Prichard isn't the only place where people don't have enough clean water to drink. Determined community leaders like Davis are the reason we make progress toward environmental justice.

"When utilities and state agencies aren't doing their job, it's the community groups and advocates who have to lead the charge," says Anderson. "Carletta is such an inspiration. She is one of the most passionate advocates I've ever met."

Clean water for all is possible. SELC is proud to support We Matter Eight Mile Community Association's fight for justice in Prichard. ■

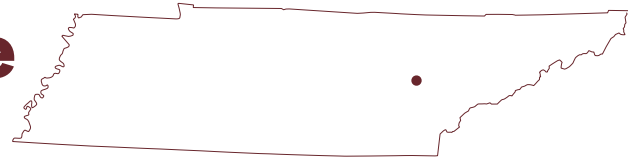


Carletta Davis is a founder of We Matter Eight Mile Community Association, is an avid gardener, a passion that's been stunted since water service to her home and greenhouse is unreliable and, when water does arrive, it often runs brown. Opposite page left, downtown Prichard.

MY SOUTH: EMILY STRASSER

Watts Bar Lake

Kingston, Tennessee



“The place I always think about is my grandmother’s house in East Tennessee on Watts Bar Lake, which is a piece of the Tennessee River. It’s a landscape with rolling hills, small farms, and fence lines overgrown with wildflowers, wild blackberries, queen lace, and black-eyed susans. I think of deer appearing suddenly at the end edge of the woods and winding country roads.



Now old wooden farmhouses are falling into disrepair. Nobody’s going to take them down, and board by board, they’re going to fall until they just go back into the earth. But it’s not without complication because of the history.”

That history is the focus of Emily Strasser’s first book, “Half-Life of a Secret: Reckoning with a Hidden History,” which follows her journey to confront a toxic legacy of secrecy around her grandfather’s work building nuclear weapons in Oak Ridge, Tennessee, a few miles upriver from Watts Bar Lake. The book won SELC’s 2024 Reed Environmental Writing Award.

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