

Gateway to the Canyon

Situated scant yards from arguably the most scenic waterfall in the state, the Little River Canyon Center provides a gateway for the public to become fully absorbed in northeast Alabama's contribution to the state's status among the top 10 in biodiversity in the nation.



The 23,000-square foot building located on Highway 35 northeast of Fort Payne serves as a center for outdoor interpretation, “green” architecture and the vast cultural aspects of the region. The center has an auditorium, classrooms, library and outdoor trails, as well as administrative offices for Jacksonville State University (JSU) and the National Park Service. The Canyon Center has plans for a full-scale museum with interactive capabilities, amphitheatre, native gardens and even outdoor zip lines.

Pete Conroy, Director of Jacksonville State University's Environmental Policy and Information Center, spearheaded the effort to build a facility at Little River Canyon that would serve a variety of purposes.

“Top on that list is education,” Conroy said. “Renee Morrison in my office at Jacksonville State coordinates the Field School programs. She does a great job juggling professors, artists and recreational experts. Conservation would be second on the list, then community service and a place to promote the cultural attributes of the area. This is about lots of different things being brought together in one place.”

“The Appalachian Mountain Scenic Byway and the Lookout Mountain Parkway are really great resources and this facility is basically at the confluence of both.”

The center is the culmination of many years of work on the part of many people, Conroy said. “This has been a vast collaborative effort with a cast of many characters, including Jacksonville State University, Randy and Kelly Owen, DeKalb County leaders, congressional leaders and Alabama Power Company,” he said.



Laying the Foundation

Conroy said that around 1990, Olivia Barton Ferriter from late Congressman Tom Bevill's office likely triggered the effort to designate the area as a National Preserve and purchase Little River Canyon from Alabama Power.

"Olivia, who was from the Birmingham area and just loved canoeing and kayaking, invited me to Washington to do some planning," Conroy said. "I participated in House and Senate testimony."

Conroy worked together with Owen, lead singer for country megaband Alabama and Fort Payne native, during the process to obtain funding for the building. "Randy was instrumental in getting this done," Conroy said. "When we were in Washington, not only did members of Congress know him, even the cab drivers knew him. He's internationally recognizable and associated with the outdoors. He had a relationship with Bill Young, Chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. That relationship was likely enhanced because Mrs. Young loved the Alabama band. Frankly, that may have

made a significant difference. Slowly, over a period of time, we got funds (\$6.8 million) to build this building.

"This is one of the very first centers that is separately owned, done in a lease arrangement with the National Park Service and not an ownership. It actually got in one of the federal authorization bills, where the Interior Appropriations Committee strongly recommended the partnership between JSU and the National Park Service. That authorizing language was real important and meant a lot in obtaining funding. It really helped sell the deal. Sen. Richard Shelby was the Senate sponsor that created the national preserve."

One of the funding sources for the building was the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which required a commitment to interpret and educate the public.

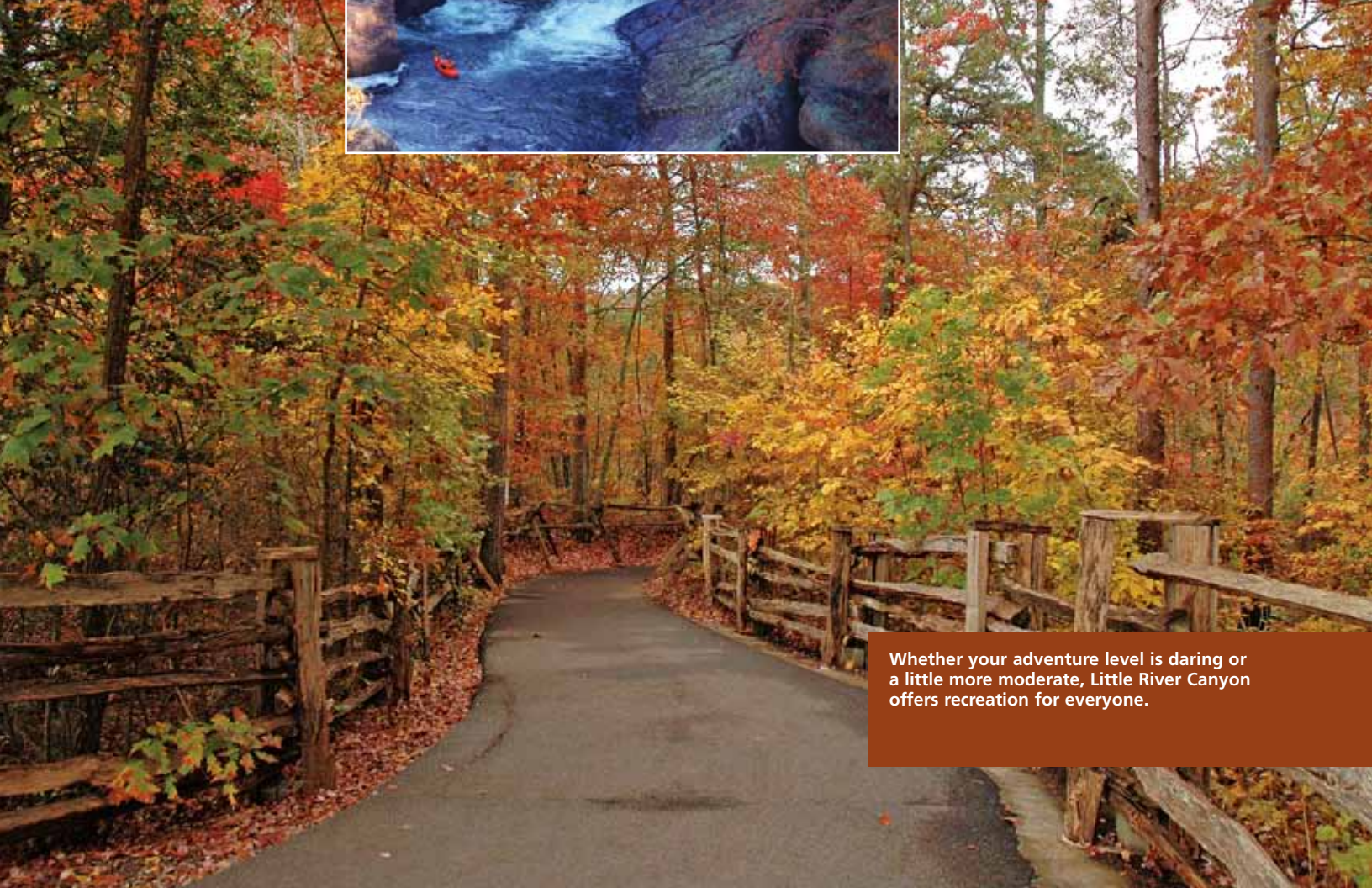


Going Green

With funding approved, JSU sought to make the Canyon Center one of the greenest buildings in the state and wanted a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified building.

"It's the largest geothermally heated and cooled building in the state, for now," Conroy said. "We had \$6.8 million in the budget, but it was a lean, mean construction machine. Eidson Construction out of Cullman won the bid. They had never done a LEED building before, but they said they believed that this was the wave of the future.

"The geothermal aspect was a top priority. We drilled 36 wells, each 300 feet deep. It's a closed loop system that passes glycol (similar to automobile antifreeze) through the temperature of the earth, which is about 57 degrees. So on a hot day, that 57 will cool a 90-degree environment, and on a cold day, it would heat a cold environment. And it's working. We have energy-saving aspects like energy-conserving windows, recycled newspaper for insulation, occupancy sensors that control the lights. We have IceStone® (recycled glass) countertops. This building is saving about \$1,000 a month in energy costs."



Whether your adventure level is daring or a little more moderate, Little River Canyon offers recreation for everyone.



Several overlooks in the canyon area offer places to take in the spectacular views.

Promoting Area Tourism

Conroy said conferences will be held on biological diversity, environmental education, and energy. “We’ll have concerts, lectures and films,” he said. “There will always be something going on here all the time. We’ll have a two-mile trail that winds through property that JSU owns and it intersects with National Park property. We’re developing a trail that will take you right to the falls with a bridge that is being constructed. Also, we’ll tie in this new beautiful building with the waterfalls through a trail system that will have learning stations – cultural resources, pioneer village and ecology.”

The center’s grand opening in February 2009 drew 4,000 people in four hours and almost shut down traffic on Highway 35.

John Dersham, Director of the DeKalb County Tourist Association, said the center will be an added attraction for the area. “As Pete mentioned, this is a focal point, not only for the National Park Service and Little River Canyon, but it’s really a focal point geographically for tourism,” Dersham said. “So if you think in terms of how to market northeast Alabama, this is something we can use. DeKalb County doesn’t mean anything to most people. Little River Canyon they’ve heard of. We not only promote DeKalb County, we promote the whole I-59 corridor in northeast Alabama. In order to do that well, we have to identify something the consumer can relate to. Little River Canyon and this particular center has the synergy and geographical focal point to attract the consumer to this market.”

Perfect Partnership

“We talk about what the center can do, not only educationally but also meetings about environmental issues and flora and fauna. From a tourism standpoint, we take the elements we’re best at — a relaxing,

beautiful environment to sit on the back porch of a cabin. You can hike the canyon or take a drive around the canyon. You couple that with the whole family learning about the environment. It’s a place to come to experience it with all the festivals planned. The Canyon Fest is a major attraction for this whole region and gives people a chance to participate in the whole experience with ecology, educational tools, artists and food,” Dersham said.

From the National Park Service perspective, the Canyon Center is a perfect complement to the 13,633-acre national preserve.

“This is a partnership that began a long time ago before there was a canyon center,” said Preserve Superintendent John Bundy. “Jacksonville State University and the National Park Service were in partnership to use the resources of Little River Canyon as a teaching opportunity, not just for college students but also other interested people. The advantage for JSU was they would be able to use the park itself as a classroom. The advantage for us was we were getting interpretive programs and didn’t have to hire staff to have that expertise.

“Without a facility, there was no one place where the public has been able to go to learn about the resources and the importance of Little River Canyon National Preserve. They can go to the waysides and individuals overlooks. What they don’t have is a single place where they can talk to somebody, where they can see exhibits and maybe a movie that can give them a sense of background on why the canyon has been set aside and what’s important about it. The Little River Canyon Center will give them the ability to do that. We think it’s a great partnership.”

For Jacksonville State University, the Canyon Center offers a wide variety of valuable opportunities, according to school President Bill Meehan. “It adds a value to


the opportunities for our students to have a field station to experience in a practical way what they learn in the classroom,” Meehan said. “For example, our biology and geology classes and other sciences have their experiments and field studies in a unique environment because that gorge is the largest gorge east of the Mississippi River. For example, in my own field of biology, there are unusual and endemic species there. We can host field opportunities for elementary and high school students there. Recreation folks can do canyon excursions and canoe trips and there are rappelling opportunities in the canyon. So just about every department at the university can interface with the public and expand their experience through the center.

“The additional value we have is we’re forming a partnership with the National Park Service that will occupy a portion of the center. That partnership brings a cost saving as well as a good use of the facility. So people will be able to visit a National Park now.”

Meehan also said it was important for the university to be on the forefront of energy conservation.

“That was a duty we needed to fulfill through our environmental policy efforts here at JSU,” he said. “We wanted to put our best foot forward and show we are conscious of those efforts to conserve and preserve our environment, especially in the Little River Canyon.

“I want to thank our board of trustees, they were very supportive. Mr. Randy Owen was very important in helping us getting the funding, as well as Congressman (Robert) Aderholt. We’ve had support from our elected officials all the way through our faculty and staff.

“It’s been a great unified effort to do something that will be unique for Alabama and allow people to learn more about our state’s biodiversity.” 

For More Information

Little River Canyon Center
472 Ala. Hwy. 35
Ft Payne, AL 35967
256-845-3548
<http://www.nps.gov/liri>

Currently JSU opens the center on Fridays and Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. When the National Park Service moves in, hours will expand. Until then, visitors are encouraged to call before visiting to make sure the center is open.