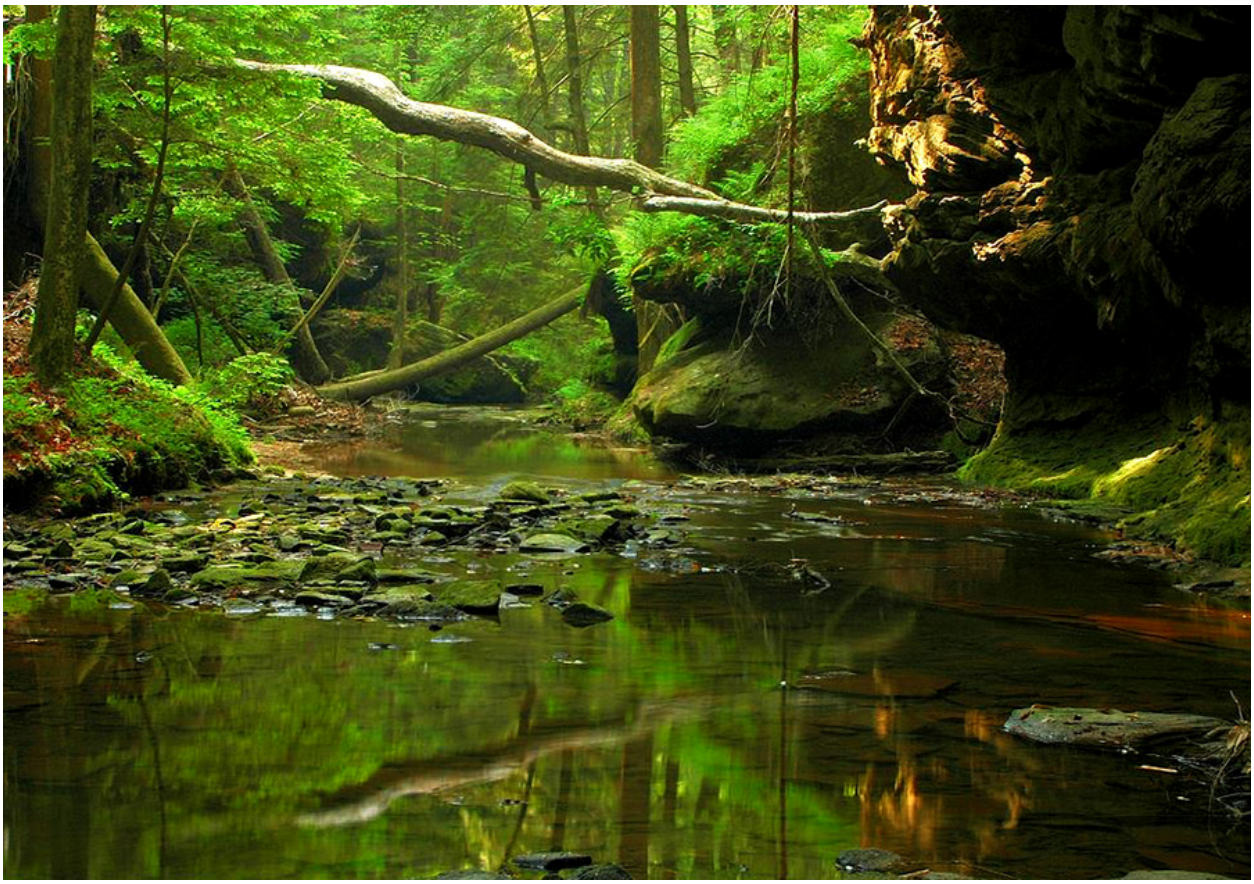
National Forests of Alabama

Alice S. Christenson, Birmingham, Alabama

Tuskegee National Forest

Alabama's national forests are among the state's most extensive natural treasures, encompassing almost 667,000 acres of publicly owned lands in 17 counties. The Bankhead, Conecuh, Talladega, and Tuskegee National Forests reflect the diverse geography of the state, ranging from the Cumberland Plateau physiographic section in the north to the East Gulf Coastal Plain physiographic section in the south. As Alabama increases its profile as a tourist and outdoors destination, its forest resources will surely play an important role. Alabama's four national forests are home to approximately 900 species of birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and fishes, including endangered and threatened species such as the gopher

tortoise, eastern indigo snake, and the red-cockaded woodpecker. Thousands of species of insects and other invertebrate creatures, as well as countless plant species, thrive in these forests. They are also important outlets for public recreation, offering myriad activities including fishing, hiking, swimming, boating, camping, picnicking, and hunting. Forest rangers have reported more than 700,000 visitors a day enjoying the many attractions of Alabama's forests.



Bankhead National Forest

National forests are lands overseen by the U.S. Forest Service (USFS), an agency of the Department of Agriculture. At the turn of the century, damage from grazing, uncontrolled logging, and burning prompted public outcries for protection of federal lands. In 1891, Congress passed the Forest Reserve Act, empowering the president to proclaim forest reserves on the nation's publicly owned lands. This

step did not greatly affect lands in the east, which were largely privately owned. In 1911, however, severe clear-cutting of watersheds produced major flooding in several eastern states, and Congress passed the Weeks Act, which provided for "the purchase of forested, cutover, or denuded lands within the watersheds of navigable streams." At the time, the federal government owned thousands of acres in Alabama, having obtained them from the Creek, Chickasaw, Choctaw, and Cherokee Indian tribes through treaties and other means. Some acreage had been sold or leased, mainly for logging or mining purposes. By leasing land for commercial use, the government was able to profit from its holdings. Some of the land had been homesteaded, and many residents were willing to sell and move to more fertile ground. The USFS purchased or reclaimed these lands and gradually reestablished forest cover with the help of the Civilian Conservation Corps, whose workers built roads, dams, and trails and planted trees.

The principal purpose of national forests was commercial and public use. According to the Multiple Use Act of 1960, the purpose of the USFS became "the enhancement of recreation, soil, range timber, watershed, wildlife, fishing, mining, based on the most judicious use of the land." Forest management aimed at meeting all of these mandates has produced different plans for success and created conflicts regarding what constitutes the best use of resources and land. On one end of the spectrum is productivity, and on the other is preservation.

Conecuh National Forest

In Alabama forests, the philosophy of productivity prevailed, and mining and commercial logging of hardwoods and longleaf pine stands was encouraged. These enterprises brought in income and paved the way for planting quick-growing loblolly pine, the preferred species for paper mills. During the mid-twentieth century, forest fires were considered harmful, and as a result, native species of plants that required fire for renewal and growth, and the animals that depended on them, declined. Moreover, single-species forests brought infestations of the southern pine beetle, which has destroyed thousands of acres of trees. In response to these declining conditions, Alabama's conservation groups, citizens, forest service employees, and representatives of the timber industry began working on new policies. In 1998, the Alabama Division of the USFS embarked on a Forest Revision Plan with public input, and in 2004, health and restoration initiatives were established for each of Alabama's national forests. The underlying philosophy

of the plan is maintaining the health of the forest itself, with its interdependent ecosystems, with public and commercial use following that lead.