

In Flow: A Passion for Place
A Case for Conservation in the Work of Photographer
Beth Maynor Young
— Based on a January 10, 2008 interview —
by Carol Cook Hagood

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It's said that Southerners seem to have a natural sense of place, an easy affinity for the lush landscapes of their lives. But in this increasingly urbanized age, as Birmingham-based conservation photographer Beth Maynor Young remarks, "People don't go down to the river like they did. . . ." Nowadays, many of her fellow Southerners may be familiar with the ecological treasures of their home states, like Alabama's fabled Cahaba – a river with more fish species per mile than any other river in North America – less from personal experience than from the widely-known photographs that Young has created of them.

Young's photographs are featured in public settings – libraries, science centers, art galleries. They illustrate the Web pages of countless environmental groups, such as the Cahaba River Society, the Rivers of Alabama, the Nature Conservancy (AL), the Freshwater Land Trust. Her photos also are seen in the beautiful note cards and fine art prints made available by her firm, Cahaba River Publishing (for visual references, see www.kingfishereditions.com). But wherever they appear, the images are striking and memorable. They embody not only intrinsic beauty, but what Young describes as the "highest calling" of nature photography, the creation of an "identity" for the places they portray, a voice for the voiceless beauty and purpose of the Southeast's ecologically rich and environmentally challenged streams, rivers, and woodlands.

According to *The Huntsville (Ala.) Times*, "Young's creations are ethereal, spiritual, captivating. They seize the character of the South's remnant wild places and offer them up to the world." The *Times* further notes that

“environmentalists recognize the power of Young’s vision – that people can’t view her work without experiencing an urge to grab a banner, plant a tree, call a congressman. According to American Rivers, the national conservation organization, ‘In the Southeast, it is the photography of Beth Maynor Young that has helped inspire people about rivers and educate them about the need for river conservation...Beth’s images convey the beauty and soul of Southeastern Rivers.’”¹

Of her remarkable, more-than-20-year career as a conservation photographer, Young says, “I don’t think things out . . . so much as I move along in a direction until I bump into something important – something that pulls me like a magnet. . . .” In this brief sketch we will trace some of those “magnets” in Beth Maynor Young’s career, defining moments in which this key figure in Southern environmentalism discovered her penchant for photography, her passion for the natural places that define her home state and region, and her power, through memorable images, to create a wider understanding of the value of natural places and a deeper commitment to their preservation.

Young’s interest in photography flowed into her life at an early age. At 19, invited to join her father and cousin on a sailing trip to the Bahamas, she bought her first camera – and used it occasionally, she says, on the journey. But more importantly, it seems, her time on board the sailboat opened her eyes to an intimate experience of the natural world. It was, she says, “you know, the whole simplicity of the trip . . . being outside constantly, and the light, sunrise, sunset, just the air, the *feel*. The things we saw were all just *there*, but I wasn’t really thinking about art or photography.”

On her return home, however, when she learned that a neighbor had access to a darkroom, she persuaded him to show her how to print something.

¹ *The Huntsville Times*, Saturday, Jan. 17, 2002, “The Artist’s Vision: Photographer’s work helps renew flow of state’s liquid assets, by Giles Vaden, for the *Times*.”

She says, “I still remember the first photograph that came up [in the developer] . . . it was just a childhood friend of mine—a photograph that I had taken of her in a grocery store, of all things — I had gotten down low like this and photographed up at her, and she was just looking down at me with this knowing glance...but it was one of those things that was . . . a magnet . . . When I saw that [photo] come up, you could feel the world shift. . . ” The young artist had discovered her medium, but the subject she was destined to make her own lay ahead, still undiscovered.

After studying photography in college, along with healthy doses of science, particularly geology, Young landed a tech job in the darkroom of Southern Progress Corporation, the Birmingham publisher of *Southern Living* and *Southern Accents* magazines, Oxmoor House crafts and cooking books, and, in those days, the venerable *Progressive Farmer*. But the darkroom couldn’t hold her long, just six months or so. “Someone would come down needing a photographer and no one would be available, so I would just go and do it,” she says. “I didn’t get into trouble and I didn’t get fired, and eventually I got promoted.” Soon she was photographing gardens and quilts and home dec interiors — all the subjects that were stock-in-trade for this giant lifestyle publisher. After ten years of shooting for every department and every publication in the company, she eventually learned this was not the work for her—but she also learned a lot about photography. And occasionally, among the many things she was asked to do, she drew an assignment that resonated.

“I remember the natural areas,” she says. “There were three stories I did that really resounded, that seemed like some of the most real, truthful things I had ever worked on.” In one instance, she was called to shoot a streamside discovery program, “where there were people from the University of Tennessee out doing fish sampling. They were, you know, out catching bugs — dragonflies, damsels — and all these things, all of a sudden, had such a huge

importance for me.” Another time, she worked on a story about Neil Compton, father of the Buffalo River National Park in Arkansas. She says, “Here was this man who came from the same town as Sam Walton and was about the same age . . . Neil Compton was doing something that sang inside him and drove him on to protect and to begin this national park... this man saved *that* many acres, and look at how many Sam Walton paved over.”

A third assignment Young remembers vividly was for a story on the Blue Ridge Parkway. She and the writer of the piece set out one rainy morning: “I mean, we hiked all over that place – in the rain – and that was back when there were still balsam trees all over.” Eventually, the drizzle drove them inside, and Young set up her lights in a blacksmith’s shop near Spruce Pine. As she readied her equipment for the shoot, the blacksmith talked to her constantly – “I mean, he was a *talker*,” – but as his rambling tale of his developing career wound on, Young began to discern in it something very important to her. “This blacksmith . . . here he was, out in the middle of these mountains, in the middle of nowhere, and he had people from Egypt . . . Elizabeth Taylor . . . he had all these people that were asking him to design things . . . And I thought, here is one man, standing right here, on these mountains, and people are coming to him . . . he doesn’t have to go all over the world to do his work; he can do it *right here* . . . that resounded.”

In search for her “right here,” her own place to do her best work, Young eventually left Southern Progress and turned her hand to other things. With garden designer Norman Johnson, she created a book called *Everyday Flowers*.² Young grew the flowers, Johnson arranged them; Young photographed them, Johnson wrote the text. She also did photography for clients as diverse as real

² *Everyday Flowers: Growing, Arranging and Living with your Flowers*, Norman Johnson and Beth Maynor (Longstreet Press, 1990)

estate firms, construction and remodeling companies, trucking firms, lighting firms and window companies.

Then, in 1988, events occurred that pulled her work into a deep new channel. A group called the Cahaba River Society was forming to seek protection for Alabama's longest free-flowing, most environmentally rich river, one that is home to more fish species per mile than any other river in North America. To raise awareness of the beauty and importance of the Cahaba, CRS wanted photography of the river; they were trying to protect it, but few people even knew what it looked like. Would Young be interested in photographing the Cahaba for them, they asked. Young laughs. "I said . . . 'yes.' Such a little thing. And I had no idea what profound changes were coming into my life because of that little word."

For when Young began photographing the Cahaba, she says, "I was just HOME . . . I knew exactly what I needed to be doing for that river. I didn't know yet how to use the photography, but I *knew* I could photograph that river and it would be beautiful. And the way I learned to see the river was through the eyes of people who already knew and loved it, people like biologist Randy Haddock [field director of the Cahaba River Society]. I can't tell you how much Randy's thoughts and ideas are just constantly in my mind and heart. And the more I learned, the more it all made sense. When you get to know a place, you get to understand it, and once you understand it, you love it. Then, because you love it, you begin to understand what all rivers and streams are like." Young's work for the Cahaba led to her exploration and photography of other Southern rivers and waterways. And as her body of work grew, she began to think of a book of photography showing the diversity and beauty of southeastern rivers.

Her growing commitment to the conservation of regional waterways also led to something of a new relationship with her work. "Before, as a photographer," she says, "I could be real reclusive. I didn't have to say anything.

I could be invisible. I could just *work* and let everybody else take the energy to go and do this thing.” But as her involvement with the work of CRS expanded, and her own interest in conservation deepened, she found herself not only working behind the scenes, but stepping up to make public talks about the ongoing work of preservation. She had become not only an artist, but an advocate.

She made calls on corporations, persuading them to finance her photography in natural areas where they had environmental involvement – yielding photographs she could use to produce note cards and fine art prints for the companies’ use. She pushed her own explorations deeper into the natural world of southern waterways and wetlands, “going camping for a week at a time . . . so that I could get these photographs.” She expanded her connections with nonprofit conservation groups, many of whom hoped to use her images to support their work.

As she says, “One thing led to another.” By the year 2000, Young’s files were crammed full of images from her photographic expeditions. She was doing a great deal of corporate photography, and there was enthusiasm for her work from many quarters. In April 2000, she and one of her corporate clients met to talk about a book on rivers of the Southeast. “They were going to help market it,” she says, “and they were really getting behind it.” That conversation took place on a Friday, and on the following Tuesday, Young’s office burned almost to ashes, destroying most of its contents and large portions of her work.

“It was an electrical fire,” she says. “It was overwhelming... I got emails from everywhere. I was in shock. . . . I couldn’t think; I couldn’t do anything . . . Frank [her lawyer husband] was out of town; he had a case going on in Texas somewhere. You know, my office had *burned down*, and there wasn’t anything I could do. . . .they wouldn’t even let us into the building for a week. Then, Randy Haddock and I went down there and climbed up to the roof . . . You know, when

horses walk in a pasture, they always touch each other . . . you know, touch noses. Well, I couldn't talk, but as long as my elbow could bang against Randy's, I was all right. So we got up there, and we could look straight down into the office, because *there is no roof*.

"At this point in time, the insurance investigators are walking in, and they say, 'What do you want us to look for?' And I say, 'Check my files,' and I point. They throw off loose pieces of tin, and they get their shovels and pry the drawers like this, and I'm thinking, 'oh, the dust!' – of all thoughts – and they reach inside and say, 'Hey! You're all right!'"

As it turned out, of all Young's work, it was only the film of the rivers that had survived, because of where it was filed and how it was filed, jammed tight into bulging folders. The folders themselves were smudged and stained with smoke, and sometimes the top layers of slides had been welded together with the heat, but, underneath, the film of Young's river expeditions remained, salvageable.

Almost before she knew what was happening, 75 people, friends and supporters, had gathered in a large downtown building and were washing and hanging film. "I was just dumbstruck" [by the outpouring of support], she says. And when they were through, they boxed it all up, and it fit into a single truckload of material, delivered to her home, where she set up an office in her living room, until eventually her husband and a friend built an inviting new studio for her, tucked beneath the back of the house and looking out onto a beautiful sloping wooded hillside.

The outcome of this cataclysmic event showed Young that friendship is stronger than fire, and pointed the way for her career to continue. With her equipment for more conventional professional photography now gone (an array of lights and large-format cameras she could not afford to replace), she turned her attention full-time to conservation photography. In order to respond to the

many requests she continued to receive from non-profit conservation groups, Young created the Watershed Identity Foundation. Now, rather than respond in a hit-or-miss fashion to individual requests (which often arrived at a time of year with little to photograph), she began to create a well-planned group of images which could not only provide material for groups' brochures, Web sites, and more, but could also be reproduced and sold as note cards and collectible prints, continually funding the foundation. In this way, she was able to better fulfill groups' needs for photography at low cost.

She has also continued to work with corporations and other businesses who want beautiful photographs of natural areas they have chosen to protect, photographs that can be used in corporate art collections, or to produce promotional items such as calendars, note cards, and complimentary prints. Sometimes this partnership for protection brings members of the business community directly into the community of volunteer stewards for the environment. For example, when International Paper donated almost 1,000 acres for a conservation easement along the Wolf River, a beautiful 66-mile waterway located in the pine belt of southeastern Mississippi, employees of Mississippi Power, led by Bob Fairbank, manager of the company's governmental and environmental affairs, together with other community members, organized the Wolf River Conservation Society to safeguard this pristine local waterway – and they are group that, Young says, “is doing an awesome job.” Fifteen years later, she got a call from International Paper to photograph a book on their conservation legacy.

Whoever she shoots for, Young's photos seem to provide the catalyst for a powerful partnership between passion and place, making individuals and groups of all kinds more mindful of the beauty – and fragility – of the natural settings around them. With almost a decade of work behind her now since the fire, Young's career is maturing. The river book she has long been planning will

soon be available: *Headwaters, Descending the Rivers of Alabama*, with text by Dr. John C. Hall of the University of Alabama, is planned for release in spring 2009 by the University of Alabama Press. Other titles are also slated, including *Longleaf Pine: The Fire Forest*, a book project with Rhett Johnson, co-founder of the Longleaf Alliance.

Young now fully understands her role in the environmental movement: she is a conservation photographer—not, as she says, simply “a nature photographer.” As she says, “The difference between what I’m doing and being a nature photographer is that a nature photographer will go to places that are already protected – the goal being to get great photographs. I’m going to places that are unprotected” – with a purpose beyond simple celebration.

As she looks to the future of conservation photography, Young is heartened by developments in technology that will create ever-greater opportunities for its impact. “With the power of the Internet,” she says, for example, “one person can create a very powerful project . . . have a vision, create a story, a very powerful presentation . . . and put it on the Web. There are all sorts of ways to leverage that; it doesn’t have to cost a fortune. The key to that is making it compelling and doing it with really exquisite images.”

And the young people growing up with this technology are the ones to whom this future truly belongs – “just imagine the impact they can make.” Recently, Young employed two summer interns, charged with creating images of the Upper Cahaba River, which is especially imperiled by increasing development. On her Web site, Young expresses her pleasure at having worked with the two, Hunter Nichols and Ben Thomson. “Both young men are smart, caring, talented people that will do very well,” she says, and she points proudly to their work available online. Young also is pleased to be working on the longleaf forest photography with her son Bill Maynor, who is quickly becoming, she says, a photographer of wildlife “with surprising vision and skill.”

Given these hopeful signs for the future, Young says, “I think conservation photography is going to become the fastest growing form of art in the world. We have new tools to work with, and young people growing up just *knowing* how to work with these things. The new technology makes it very easy to tell a passionate story, and I’m eager to hear what they’re all going to say.”