

Southern Oral History Program



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Making Connections Across North Carolina Landscapes

January 29, 2015 By Rob Shapard



Kate Dixon is executive director of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail, based in Raleigh, N.C.

Interview and blog post by Rob Shapard

Kate Dixon moved to the Triangle about twenty-five years ago, and she has played a meaningful role ever since in shaping the natural landscape of this region and the state of North Carolina. Dixon started work for the Triangle Land Conservancy in Raleigh and later became that land trust's executive director, helping the trust to conserve some 4,000 acres during her years there. She moved on from the Triangle Land Conservancy in 2003 to lead the Land for Tomorrow coalition, and then took her current job as executive director of the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail in 2008.

The hiking trail runs cross-state between Clingmans Dome in western North Carolina and Jockey's Ridge on the Outer Banks, covering some 1,100 miles through a diverse range of natural landscapes and local communities. The route currently includes approximately 620 miles of

constructed trails, and hikers use designated low-traffic roads to cross the gaps between trail sections. Dixon and the Friends of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail (FMST) continue to work on closing those gaps by completing new trail sections, while a large network of FMST volunteers scrupulously maintain the existing sections. Dixon's organization also has developed a large amount of detailed information about the trail for people who are interesting in experiencing it.

"It's just an extraordinary way to see the state and learn about places," Dixon says about the MST trail. "People did [the trail] who grew up in North Carolina and think they know everything [about N.C.], but once you're out there walking it, it's really such an extraordinary experience, and you learn so much that you didn't know before."

Dixon recorded an oral history recently with the Southern Oral History Program, as one of the first interviews in a series at SOHP focusing on people actively engaged in environmental issues in the South. Dixon was born in 1959 near Princeton, N.J., in a community that remained quite rural during her childhood. She and her sister spent many hours playing in the woods around their home or riding horses, and long walks with her father through the neighborhoods, forests, and fields around Princeton also enabled Dixon to connect directly with nature from an early age.

During her childhood, the Dixon family moved to New Delhi, India, for two years, then to Washington, D.C. – two highly urbanized settings where Dixon and her siblings nonetheless sought out green spaces to explore. In D.C., the family lived a block from the old Chesapeake & Ohio Canal along the Potomac River, which is a national park today. Dixon recalled playing along the canal structures, and the steep cliffs and a waterfall at the river where she liked to sit and "think deep, teen-age thoughts," she chuckled.

One of the "big picture" questions the SOHP asked Dixon during her interview was, "How do you envision the ideal relationship between people and our natural environment, i.e. the most healthy and sustainable

relationship? Can you describe what that would look like?" That's a very difficult question, Dixon replied. "And I don't know that I have a good answer. I mean, honestly, there are lots of times when I just don't know where we're going. When I feel like that, I think, 'I'm going to work on my small part, and do the best I can.'"

Still, Dixon also mentioned some specific issues and actions that she feels are critical, which could be seen as pieces of an overall vision, the "small part" of the larger issue on which she seeks to make an impact. For example, she pointed to all the driving that people do every day – including her own driving – and the related issue of auto emissions. She also talked about her love for working with the volunteers who maintain the Mountains-to-Sea trail sections and work on adding sections, and her love for engaging with residents in communities where new trail sections are envisioned. In those interactions, Dixon says, the FMST has an opportunity to help those local people put their own passion for the land into action. So working on her small part for Dixon means empowering volunteers and local residents, as well as protecting as much land as possible through the work of land trusts.

Check back with the SOHP in the coming weeks to hear the entire interview with Dixon (at the interview database on sohp.org), and **listen to a short clip** from the interview here, as she describes a meaningful meeting between two long-time Bladen County, N.C., residents, one a white man and the other a black woman, during local planning for a new section of the Mountains-to-Sea Trail:



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Kate Dixon, Aug. 5, 2014



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