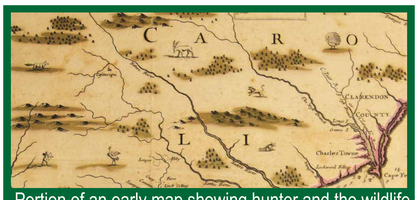
South Carolinians and the Land they Love

"When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

-Aldo Leopold, *Land Ethic*



Portion of an early map showing hunter and the wildlife in the Carolina Colony.
South Carolina Historical Society collections

Settling the Wilderness

South Carolinians have had a strong tie to the wilderness since the early days of settlement. They quickly realized that the temperate climate, good soil, and abundant water were the basis for creating a sustainable settlement and economic trade opportunities. Each successive generation rediscovers these truths about land, water, and sky, and learns their responsibilities to preserve and to protect them.

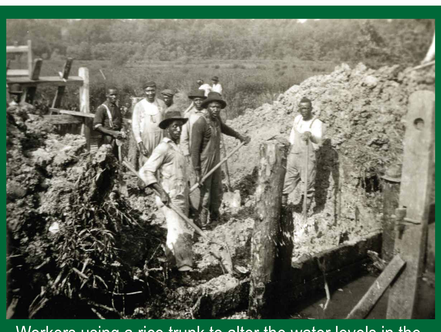
Cultivating the Wilderness

Rice proved to be a successful cash crop for the colonists living in the Lowcountry of Carolina. Enslaved Africans introduced techniques to successfully grow rice in the inland freshwater swamps. Laborers, both free and enslaved, had to remove trees, drain the water, level the land, and sculpt new embankments and dikes.

By the 1720s, planters exported six million pounds of rice per year and needed more labor to keep up with demand. Droughts also presented challenges. The wealthiest planters moved their operations to the tidal rivers, mostly on the Cooper River, when they realized they could harvest the freshwater that rested above the salt water by skimming it off the top.

At the start of the American Revolution, planters grew 150,000 acres of rice in areas transformed from swamps. As a result, the rivers flooded and often widened, which allowed saltwater to flow further inland, changing the ecology of the region.

As early as 1792, Charleston engineer Charles Hateley warned a planter about the negative impacts that could result from building a canal on his plantation. Hateley cited a Georgia plantation that widened the Ogeechee River to make travel by water easier. As a result, salt water rushed three miles deeper inland and destroyed the rice crop. Hateley warned about trying to fight against the natural ways of the environment, and slowly, the planters started to listen.



Workers using a rice trunk to alter the water levels in the landscape for their crops.
South Carolina Historical Society collections

Mining the Wilderness

In the 1870s, the demand for inexpensive fertilizer and the new technology to mine phosphate created a new economic opportunity for the Lowcountry. The mines offered jobs to recently freed African Americans and provided Charleston with a new export after the Civil War destroyed many of the region's plantations. Many locals hesitated to support the new industry since Northerners appeared to be the primary driving force behind the mines. Within a few years, Charlestonians saw the landscape destroyed by large quarries and pits, tall smokestacks, and diminished river banks. By the end of World War I (1918), the mines were depleted, with the environmental impacts remaining visible into the Twenty-first Century.

Harvesting the Wilderness

After the Civil War, rice plantations were all but abandoned, and people often used the rice fields for duck hunting. Commercial lumber companies, many from the North, needed timber after depleting their resources in their home states. In the 1880s, wealthy Northern timber companies wanted to see the South industrialize, and they needed access to lumber for buildings, bridges, mining operations, and rail lines. They moved their operations to the South, bought up abandoned or low producing plantations, and enacted a "cut and get out" policy to maximize profits by quickly and carelessly clear cut as much lumber as possible without concern to short and long term effects.

Francis Beidler of Chicago founded the Santee River Cypress Company. From 1890 to 1910, Beidler bought land along the Santee, Congaree, and Wateree rivers. His operations decimated over 165,000 acres of bottomland forest that transformed to barren mud and stumps as the topsoil eroded away and wildlife habitats disappeared.

In 1907, the state agricultural commissioner warned that these wasteful methods would "soon exhaust our timber resources." By 1920, almost no marketable timber remained in the Lowcountry. The lack of trees allowed rainwater to wash topsoil into the rivers. Between 1880-1920, ninety million acres were cut. Less than 1% of the bottomland hardwood forest remains, and it's the largest in the country, making it an endangered landscape.

By 1932, all major lumber mills shut down. The Northern mill owners sold lumber, but they also raised cattle, raised vegetables, and had interest in preserving the land for hunting and fishing hobbies. They wanted to change laws to ban poachers and preserve wildlife populations. As the demand for cotton and rice exports decreased, rice fields reverted to tidal marshes and cotton fields to forests.

Cypress Gardens, *South Carolina Historical Society collections*

"Spillway and partial view of Santee Dams" on the Santee River, *South Carolina Historical Society Collection*

Damming the Wilderness

The Santee Cooper project (1939) provided hydroelectric power by damming the Santee and Cooper Rivers. Other than providing power, the project promised to minimize natural flooding, reclaim and drain swamps, and reforest river watersheds. Locals were concerned about the destruction of the swamps, forests, natural habitats and negative effects on the towns.

The $48 million project created Lake Marion and Lake Moultrie for recreation, which garnered public support of the massive undertaking, the largest in the country at the time. The project cleared 171,000 acres of swamp and timberland, clear cut 200 million feet of timber, moved 42 million cubic yards of earth, and poured 3.1 million cubic yards of concrete. The damming of rivers significantly reduced the flow of the Santee River and destroyed much of the natural swamp and forests.

Yeoman's Hall Golf Course, *South Carolina Historical Society collections*