

MOUNTAINS

Children's book looks at need for wildlife crossings



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

When I started working at Great Smoky Mountains Association in 2017, I figured I would write a book at some point in my tenure. But I never dreamed I would become the author of a children's book.

The impetus for it goes back to my own childhood, which was idyllic. I grew up in Eastern Kentucky at a summer camp for which my parents acted as overseers. I spent summer days swimming, canoeing, hiking, and horseback riding, immersing myself in a landscape of Appalachian wildlife. The only sadness I recall was seeing animals hit and killed on roads.

In my 30s and 40s, I traveled the world as a tourism professional and lived for a period of time in both Canada and Costa Rica. These experiences raised my awareness of wildlife road mortality as a global problem.

Not long after I began working in Great Smoky Mountains National Park, I got involved with a group of federal, state, tribal, and non-governmental organizations discussing the need for wildlife-crossing structures along Interstate 40 near the park boundary — in the Pigeon River Gorge between Asheville and Knoxville. I was drawn to this group because I had been seeing black bear, white-tailed deer, and even an elk killed on Interstate 26 north of Asheville, near my home.

Flash forward to late March 2020. The pandemic ground most of my travel and social interaction to a halt. But sitting out by the creek on my six-acre property in Flag Pond, Tennessee, a colleague in the wildlife-crossing collaborative popped a startling question: "When are you going to write a child-

dren's book about the need for wildlife crossings?"

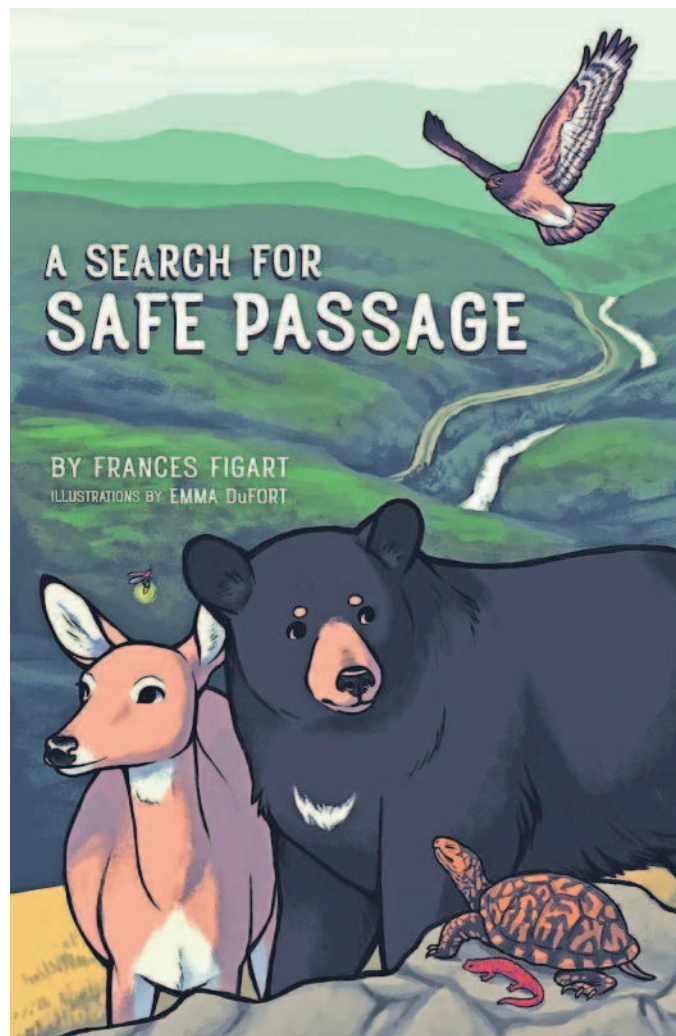
I must have spewed a five-minute litany of protests. At the apex of my career as a creative director managing five leading-edge innovators, being involved in a plethora of engaging projects with my colleagues at Great Smoky Mountains Association, in the National Park Service, and with other park partners such as Discover Life in America — how could I begin to think about taking on such a project?

The next day, I found myself at the creek again with a yellow legal pad and a pen. I filled six and a half pages with a story draft, and about six more with detailed notes. I created an outline for eight chapters, drew a crude map, and charted out personality types for 16 characters of various species. This was just the beginning: For the next six weekends, I typed on my computer, finishing the narrative in early May.

"A Search for Safe Passage" tells the story of best friends Bear and Deer who grew up together on the North side of a beautiful Appalachian gorge. In the time of their grandparents, animals could travel freely on either side of a fast-flowing river, but now the dangerous Human Highway divides their home range into the North and South sides.

Many animals have died on the Human Highway trying to follow the ancient trails. So, to keep everyone safe, Turtle, the elder, has created a law forbidding anyone to try to cross, and a Forest Council has been formed to look for solutions. Hawk and Owl scout the area each day for other ways to travel from North to South, with no luck. But on the night of a full moon, two strangers arrive from the South with news that will lead to tough decisions, a life-changing adventure, and new friends joining in a search for safe passage.

The story is fiction, but it is based on the real-life problem. The setting is a microcosm of the Pigeon River Gorge, a



"A Search for Safe Passage" by Frances Figart is published by Great Smoky Mountains Association. It can be purchased in park bookstores and at smokies-information.org. COURTESY OF GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

beautiful, wild landscape with a treacherous highway bisecting ancient wildlife corridors. In the back of the book is an interpretive section about the real-life animals and their actual wildlife crossing needs. It is geared for ages 7-13 and contains allusions and wit for adults to enjoy with kids.

All the while I was preparing the book for publication, I was supporting the collaborative effort to collect data, plan, and help implement wildlife crossings along the dangerous 28-mile stretch of highway in western North Carolina and east Tennessee. On Feb. 25, the public became aware of Safe Passage: The I-40 Pigeon River Gorge Wildlife Crossing Project. Six partners — The Conservation Fund, Defenders of Wildlife, Great Smoky Mountains Association, National Parks Conservation Association, North Carolina Wildlife Federation, and Wildlands Network — have made it possible for donations to be collected for fu-

ture road mitigation and wildlife crossing structures via a fund at SmokiesInformation.org.

Through all this work, I have come to the realization that humans must refuse to accept roadkill as a natural part of traveling in our modern world. There are viable and affordable solutions that have succeeded all over the planet—and the time has come to do something about this issue in our biologically diverse Southern Appalachian landscape.

Frances Figart is the editor of *Smokies Life* magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 34,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Find "A Search for Safe Passage" at SmokiesInformation.org, learn more about the collaborative project at SmokiesSafePassage.org, and reach the author at frances@gsmassoc.org.

Dog kennel application pulled, resubmission planned

Derek Lacey Asheville Citizen Times
USA TODAY NETWORK

Plans for a dog kennel near Weaverville were withdrawn by the applicant March 3, after the Buncombe County Board of Adjustment decided an acoustical engineer wasn't an expert in the case.

Applicant and property owner Hailey Hirsch applied for a conditional use permit to allow the construction and operation of the 108-room Orion Daycare and Retreat Center on Pinebrook Road near Weaverville.

In order to build the facility, listed as a dog kennel in county code, Hirsch would need a conditional use permit because the site is currently zoned Residential.

Neighbors have opposed the project, citing mainly noise and property value concerns.

The board met March 3 after continuing the issue for a third time at a meeting in early February, with the intent to conclude the hearing by the end of the day.

The hearing concluded, but not because the board made a decision.

Attorney Brian Gulden, representing Hirsch in her application, announced that the application would be pulled to be resubmitted later.

The announcement came after a consultation with the board's staff attorney, Brandon Freeman, and John Noor, an attorney representing the homeowners' associations for neighborhoods on either side of the site.

"In light of the conversations I had with Mr. Freeman and Mr. Noor and the expected ongoing limitations, I've conferred with my client and at this time we're going to withdraw our application for consideration to be resubmitted at a different time," Gulden said.

Those conversations came after the board voted that Bennett Brooks, an acoustical engineer, was not an expert for the purposes of the application.

Brooks, citing more than 40 years of experience in acoustic consulting and a member of the Executive Council of the Acoustical Society of America, was one of two experts left to be presented by Gulden.

According to state laws Noor cited, it's "unlawful for any person to practice

or to offer to practice engineering or land surveying in this State ... unless the person has been duly licensed."

Brooks said he is not licensed as an engineer in North Carolina and that the state does not offer a licensure in acoustical engineering or acoustical consulting.

After a 15-minute recess where Freeman discussed the line of questioning with Noor and Gulden, the hearing resumed and Freeman advised the board to continue Noor's questioning.

But Gulden cited rules of evidence that say "a witness qualified as an expert by knowledge, skill, experience, training or education may testify thereto in the form of an opinion."

North Carolina license or not, based on those attributes Brooks qualifies as an expert able to give his opinion, Gulden said.

Members of the board were left to weigh both the importance of a licensure and Brooks' background to decide whether he qualifies as an expert.

"I know for me, I'm very strict," board member Katherine Morosani said. "But he also comes to the table with a lot of

experience."

Board member Dot Cordell said that even with his resume, the board has only Brooks' statements to go by, but if he were licensed by the state, the state would have double-checked those.

Ultimately, the board voted 4-1 in favor of a motion to not admit him as an expert.

After the decision, Brooks gave some brief observations about noise on the site.

He said he visited the property to take acoustical measurements, assess background noise and heard "a lot of different things."

"There's a lot going on out there," Brooks said. "There's the interstate highway, there is a quarry that's not far from there, there's all kinds of machinery that's operating all the time, there's just typical rural-type sounds like gunshots. It's quite actually an active area in terms of acoustics."

But after another 10-minute recess to discuss the proceedings with Freeman, Gulden announced that the application was being withdrawn.

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