

Wyche is worthy of honors

AWARDS, NO MATTER HOW GRAND, can seem a paltry thank you compared to the magnitude of the achievements that earned them.

Such is the case with the Extraordinary Achievement award bestowed last week upon Greenville conservationist, photographer and lawyer Tommy Wyche by Upstate Forever, the nonprofit conservation group founded more than a decade ago by Brad Wyche, his son.

Their relationship is noteworthy only because Upstate Forever owes its existence to the passion for protecting nature's beauty handed down from father to son. Brad Wyche traces that passion back to a childhood of backpacking, hiking and canoeing with a dad who has been a catalyst and inspirational force for conservation in South Carolina.

"If I could accomplish 10 percent of what he's done, I would be very pleased," he said in an interview with Greenville Magazine last month.

This is not false modesty or filial duty speaking. His father's decades-long determination to preserve the wild beauty of South Carolina's mountains led to one of the most significant conservation achievements in U.S. history: the protection of over 100,000 acres of the Blue Ridge Escarpment – a mountain range stretching from the Chattahoochee National Forest in Georgia to the Poinsett Watershed in upper Greenville County.

The Cherokees called it the Blue Wall: a breathtaking array of craggy peaks, plant-carpeted ravines, dark forests and abundant waterfalls. Protecting it has been Tommy Wyche's tenacious work of almost 40 years, as he painstakingly persuaded landowners and developers, hunters and hikers, urbanites and mountain dwellers to share his vision and agree to preserve the wilderness in its natural state.

In 1973, Wyche founded Naturaland Trust, the second-oldest land trust in the state, with the goal of protecting the state's mountain edge with a bridge of public land. Piece by piece, he has negotiated the conservation easements, watershed buffers and state parks necessary to guard the land from development and protect scenic views. Jones Gap State Park, Jocassee Gorges and Caesar's Head State Park owe their existence to Wyche's advocacy.

Most recently, Naturaland Trust donated 305 acres to Jones Gap State Park, a gift valued at \$1.8 million. The tract includes the headwaters of Tankersley Branch River and the peak of Grassy Top Mountain, which at 3,268 feet is just 300 feet shy of the highest peak in the state, Sassafras Mountain. Naturaland has also in the past several months secured major grants to protect important tracts along Scenic Highway 11.

This has truly been the passion of a lifetime. And Wyche's advocacy has not been limited to his work with the Naturaland Trust. He is an accomplished nature photographer with six published coffee table books, including *Cycles of Nature*, *The Blue Wall – Wilderness of the Carolinas and Georgia*, and *Guide to the Mountain Ridge Trails*.

Tommy Wyche is accustomed to accepting awards. His work has been recognized nationally. He is the past recipient of the Alexander Calder Conservation Award, the Nature Conservancy Oak Leaf Award and the Order of the Palmetto. Indeed, the list is long.

But nothing on it compares to Wyche's greatest reward: the wild Blue Wall that will be protected for generations to come, thanks to his extraordinary achievement.