

Environmental Education:

Forests for Today and Tomorrow

By Marsha S. Moorehead



It's not like any other place: rolling hills, crooked creeks, prime hunting and fishing, friendly folks, and lots of trees! Welcome to Clay County, Alabama, where more than 80 percent of the land is forest.

Trees paint a beautiful landscape, but they also help clean water, improve air quality, become useful products, and provide jobs.

The Lay of the Land

Clay County, located in east central Alabama, lies in the Appalachian foothills and has about 14,000 residents. Ashland and Lineville, the only two incorporated towns in the county, have populations of about 2000. While three scenic state highways wind through the county, there are no four-lane roads. It is the home county of Alabama's current governor, Bob Riley. Rich natural resources abound, with parts of Mt. Cheaha State Park, Talladega National Forest, and Cheaha Wilderness area located here. Portions of the Odum and Pinhoti Scout trails also run through the county. Clay County is bordered on the east by Lake Wedowee, a beautiful 10,000 acre lake considered one of the best fishing lakes in the state.

While the Talladega National Forest stretches across a large portion of western Clay County, the majority of the forestland is privately owned. It's not surprising that forest-related industry is the county's largest industry. It is the lifeblood of our economy. The logging industry is a major employer as is the cabinet industry. In fact, the county is home to several family-owned cabinet

companies and other forest product industries.

Clay County Forestry Planning Committee

For more than 20 years, the Clay County Forestry Planning Committee has been the driving force behind the county's natural resource management. Their mission is: to promote the stewardship of renewable forest resources including wildlife habitat on private forest lands; to protect the environment; and to increase public understanding of all benefits of sustainable forests. County committees are a part of the State Forestry Planning Committee, also known as the Alabama Natural Resources Coordinating Council. Local committees use a partnership approach that includes Extension agents and private landowners. They identify natural resource-related problems and issues and then coordinate, facilitate, and deliver programs addressing those needs. They assist forest landowners through forestry and wildlife education, field tours, and training sessions.

Committee members have a passion for both the outdoors and natural resources preservation. As private landowners, members implement best management practices, and their hard work has not gone unrecognized. The Clay County Forestry Planning Committee has won numerous awards for their work. They were recently recognized as the State Outstanding County Natural Resources Council for exemplary programs on improving natural resource management. Individual members have also received state, regional, and national awards.

Outreach Activities

The environmental message doesn't stop within the committee. The committee has worked to increase public understanding of forests and environmental stewardship. These efforts have included news articles, public tours, and educational

programs. This commitment to teach sound environmental practices, land management, wildlife management, and timber production led to two State Tree Tours. The tours, each attended by nearly 100 people, were held on the Lamar and Felicia Dewberry property in 2007 and on the John Osborne property in 2008. Both of these tour sites are award-winning farms. Other tour stops included presentations on local history, a Southeastern Raptor Center exhibit, and the danger of meth labs in forests.

Forests provide habitat for abundant wildlife in the area so hunting is a popular sport. Committee members have partnered with the Alabama Department of Conservation in providing hunter education classes to teach hunter safety and responsibility. Forests also provide a place for recreational activities such as hiking, camping, birding, and a growing interest - wildflowers. The diversity of Mt. Cheaha State Park lends itself to a variety of blooming plants from early spring well into fall. A desire to share photographs of flowers like the mountain laurel and wild azalea seen around the park became the inspiration for hosting a wildflower tour and printing a wildflower reference book. The wildflower tour took some 45 attendees on a scenic hike around the Lake Chinnabee shoreline and camping area to identify native flora and instill an appreciation for these plants.

Youth Programs

The 4-H Club Forestry program helps young people understand their link to the natural environment and the need to conserve and manage these resources. Youth learn a number of skills including how to identify trees, evaluate forest stands, measure standing timber, and identify insects and diseases of trees. Committee members have served as dedicated teachers and coaches for Clay County 4-H Forestry Judging teams devoting many hours of work over the

years. Because of their commitment, Clay County 4-H teams have won three national championships and currently hold the national title. But more importantly, dozens of youth have acquired knowledge and life skills about forestry and natural resources.

The Forest in the Classroom/Classroom in the Forest program for 5th graders has a primary objective to expose students to wise management of forest resources. Conducted by the Committee, it has taught about 300 students the importance of forest and natural resources, private landownership, and everyone's responsibility to be good stewards. The first session is set in the classroom where students learn the importance of forest natural resources in everyday life. Session two is set in a local certified TREASURE forest. Here students participate in games and activities such as "Oh Deer!", a game that teaches how habitat affects wildlife populations.

Logger Education

The Committee also offers annual training to loggers seeking continuing education units to fulfill the professional logging manager requirement of six hours per

year. Trainings have included topics such as logging safety and environmental concerns.

Conclusion

We are the caretakers of the forests today. Through these and future projects, it is our hope that today's citizens will join in the conservation and management of our natural resources so that these resources can be enjoyed by generations of tomorrow. 🌲

Author's Picks for Further Reading

Alabama Cooperative Extension System

📖 www.aces.edu

Alabama Treasure Forest Association

📖 www.atfa.net

Alabama Forestry Commission

📖 www.forestry.alabama.gov

About the Author

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