

A Healthy Forest for the George W. Pirtle Scout Reservation

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Forests are living ecosystems in which the appearance of plants and animals, including humans, is constantly changing through a process known as “natural succession”, the replacement of one community of plants and animals with another over time. As old organisms die, new ones, either of the same species or of a species that can adapt to the forest’s current conditions, replace them. In time those organisms will also be replaced. From the viewpoint of our short human life span, it may seem as though some conditions last forever, but even trees that live thousands of years will eventually be replaced.

Those of us who love forests, and that’s a bunch of us, are often in awe of big, seemingly old trees; I know that I am. It’s taken years of experience and education for me to realize that forests whose trees are mature or over-mature are not necessarily indicators of healthy forests. Hiding behind their woodland beauty may be greater susceptibility to natural disturbances such as damage and mortality from disease, insects, fires, winds, lightning, and drought than when the trees were young and vigorous. In a recent article Dr. Patrick Moore, a forest ecologist, co-founder of Greenpeace, and leader in the environmental field, states:

“As the world looks for ways to keep carbon dioxide (CO²) – the greenhouse gas produced by burning fossil fuels – out of our atmosphere, science tells us managed forests will play a key role.

Trees are the most powerful concentrators of carbon on earth. Through photosynthesis, they absorb CO² from the atmosphere and store it in their wood, which is nearly 50 percent carbon by weight.

You might be surprised to learn young forests outperform old growth forests in carbon absorption. Although old trees contain large amounts of carbon, their rate of absorption has slowed to a near halt. A young tree, although it contains little fixed carbon, pulls CO² from the atmosphere at a much faster rate.

While it is true that cutting down an old tree results in a net release of carbon, new trees growing in their place can more than make up the difference. And wooden furniture made in the Elizabethan era still holds the carbon fixed hundreds of years ago.”¹

Certainly those of us who have lived and worked with Camp Pirtle’s forest have repeatedly seen the result of forest disturbances. There haven’t been any damaging wildfires at camp, but insects, drought, and windstorms have been agents of change several times in my 21 year association with the camp. Some of you may recall the tornado that occurred right before summer camp started a number of years ago. The incoming staff spent most of their development week just cleaning up the place. Then there was the ice storm that caused trees to crash onto power poles and transformers, resulting in their very costly, totally unplanned replacement.







Another windstorm did significant damage to Campsite 14 where it toppled trees and opened that area to increased sunlight and an explosive growth of brushy plants. An infestation of bark

beetles that began in 1998 resulted in the death of many mature pine trees. That ongoing infestation is partially a result of the droughts of 1996, 1998, and 2000. Last year, Hurricane Rita damaged surprisingly few trees at Camp Pirtle, possibly due to a harvest in 2004 that removed many hazardous trees from the camp

The George W. Pirtle (GWP) Forest Stewardship Committee and renewable natural resource managers continually ask the question, “How can we sustain a healthy, aesthetic forest, knowing that the natural process of succession is at work?”

The method of stewardship chosen by GWP’s committee is to harvest and utilize the forest’s trees when appropriate and to actively take steps to ensure that reforestation occurs quickly. The committee conducts only well-planned activities that include harvesting and planting trees or developing conditions that encourage natural regeneration to replace the camp’s mature forests with younger, more vigorous trees. That is responsible, sustainable stewardship!

The GWP Stewardship Committee has chosen to harvest trees and practice sustainable forestry for the following reasons:

-  to maintain a healthy, aesthetic, usable forest for all current and future Scouts;
-  to improve the overall safety of the forest;
-  to utilize the harvested trees rather than let them go to waste;
-  to simulate natural succession when intervention is appropriate, but with a planned program that meets the Council’s objectives for the camp’s forest;
-  to provide Camp Pirtle, the East Texas region, United States, and the world with economic benefits and employment opportunities for people;
-  to maintain a healthy, vigorous forest through periodic harvests in order to contribute to the removal of the greenhouse gas, carbon dioxide (CO²) from the atmosphere.

The conservation ethic espoused by the founder of Scouting, Lord Robert S. S. Baden-Powell, is very much alive in the GWP Forest Stewardship Plan. Scouts are called to be good citizens of the world, and the natural renewable resources that they own and manage should be a part of their answer to that high calling. Dr. Moore further states:

“One of the best ways to address climate change is to use more wood, not less. Wood is simply the most abundant, biodegradable, and renewable material on the planet.

It is hard to imagine a more all-purpose, environmentally friendly act than that of contributing to the number and variety of trees growing throughout the world. In the age of climate change, Johnny Appleseed takes on new meaning.”²

1 Moore, Patrick 2006. Forestry part of the climate change solution. *Forests and People – Official Publication of the Louisiana Forestry Association*, v56 (2):38, Second Quarter 2006

2 *Ibid*