

SUCCEEDING IN THE FOREST

IT's happening at Camp Pirtle every night and day, 24/7/365! IT happens whether anyone's there or not. IT happens right after an ice storm or windstorm or a harvest. IT happens immediately after the Camp Rangers mow the activity areas. IT's never voted on by anyone in the East Texas Area Council but everyone fully approves of it. IT happens so slowly that most of us don't even realize that IT's happening.

IT is Natural Succession, a process that occurs in every plant-growing ecosystem on earth. The Dictionary of Forestry defines succession as, "the gradual supplanting of one community of plants by another." As one community of plants, from grasses to trees, loses the competition for sunlight, water, and nutrients, or is removed by a disturbance, it is replaced by another plant community.

Before the East Texas Area Council purchased the land destined to become Camp Pirtle, much of it was farmland; from all indications, probably cotton farms. When the farmers abandoned their fields, grasses moved in, eventually to be replaced by tall weeds, briars, and shrubs. As the shade deepened on the surface, large shrubs and trees (pioneer species) made their debut.

Sun-loving species like sweetgum, water oak, elm, shortleaf and loblolly pine, persimmon, yaupon, beautyberry, and many others took advantage of the abundant sunlight and nutrients. Those species are very much in evidence in the camp's relatively young forest.

As the years progressed some areas have seen the growth of trees that are stronger competitors, such as post oak, holly, red oak, black oak, hickory, and others. They can grow well and reproduce where the shade is deep and will be with the camp for a long time unless a disturbance changes their dominance.

So, the years have gone by and the grasses that moved in after the farmers left have been replaced with a typical East Texas pine-hardwood forest.

What do disturbances have to do with a forest's natural succession? Each time a disturbance like a storm or a harvest occurs, it results in more sunlight getting to the soil's surface. Succession is moved to an earlier stage and the process starts again, with either natural or cultivated species. Before the last ice storm broke trees and limbs at Camp Pirtle, many campsites were deeply shaded and easily accessible. After the storm, some sites, like Campsite 14, were much more open and brushy plants began to reclaim the site. One day they'll be shady again.

A good example of working with natural succession is the mowing that takes place at Pirtle, and at your home. Each time we mow we set the current successional stage back to a pre-determined point, usually with the grass being only 2 inches tall or so. Just try letting your grass grow for a full season without mowing! You'll see all those "weeds" that you're trying to keep out come back. They're just doing what's natural!

When my wife and I purchased our current home in 1991, the acre and a half outside of the privacy fence had been heavily grazed by horses, which had eaten everything right down to the soil. Instead of mowing those areas we planted a few native trees but mostly let natural succession occur. We practiced Forestry by pruning and by removing diseased or undesirable trees. By 2001 we were able to help a high school student prepare a leaf collection for her Biology class. She collected over 50 species of trees, shrubs, and vines, all from that acre and a half! We have a young mixed forest due to natural succession. It looks a lot like Camp Pirtle.

A couple of years ago I came upon a poem by America's poet, Robert Frost. This sensitive man understood one of the most important aspects of Forestry – natural succession. I use this in a test question in my Forestry class to see if my students understand what he's saying and what IT's all about.

Natural succession is the basis for the GWP Forest Stewardship Program. Through an understanding of that process, the camp's Forester will work with Camp Pirtle's East Texas plant communities to accomplish Council-approved objectives including education, recreation, aesthetics, water quality enhancement, forest health.

THE LAST MOWING

By Robert Frost

There's a place called Faraway Meadow
We never shall mow in again,
Or such is the talk at the farmhouse:
The meadow is finished with men.
Then now is the chance for the flowers 5
That can't stand mowers and plowers.
It must be now, though, in season
Before the not mowing brings trees on,
Before trees, seeing the opening,
March into a shadowy claim. 10
The trees are all I'm afraid of,
That flowers can't bloom in the shade of;
It's no more men I'm afraid of;
The meadow is done with the tame.
The place for the moment is ours 15
For you, O tumultuous flowers,
To go to waste and go wild in,
All shapes and colors of flowers,
I needn't call you by name.