



Another Day at the Office

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One morning a few weeks ago, I was sitting with my son deer hunting. It was cold and dark when we first arrived on our stand. However, as the morning wore on, he pointed out how the forest came to life. He noticed the small birds rustling the leaves, searching for small seeds and insects. He commented on the squirrels who kept him on his toes, making him think a deer was approaching our stand. While his enthusiasm kept him warm, I froze in my hunting coveralls.

His enthusiasm for being outdoors got me to thinking. It reminded me of my days as a kid walking in the forest. It reminded me of how much I liked to hunt and fish while growing up. It reminded me of a time when an Alabama Forestry Commission employee came to my high school during a career day program to speak about forestry as a profession. In fact, I was so impressed with this presentation, I went by the old Jefferson County AFC office in Forestdale to speak with foresters Phearthur Moore and Larry Wright about their jobs. Their advice, as well as that of former supervisors George Wood and Rick Johnson, would eventually lead me to become a forester.

Through the years, I've had a great career. I could not have made a better choice for myself than becoming a forester. After working with a private forestry company in Mississippi, in 1993 AFC District Nine Forester Gerald Steeley gave me an opportunity to work with the Alabama Forestry Commission. As with any job, there was a learning curve. The rangers in the office – Wayne Winsted, David Reid, and Willie Pride – patiently showed me the ropes, for which I'll always be thankful. It is true that the Alabama Forestry Commission is a family.

Unbelievably, my forestry career is approaching 25 years. My training was with a compass, pacing, and topographic maps. Today it's satellite imagery and global positioning systems. Tracts that we originally planted, I am now seeing being harvested and reforested. Landowners I've been fortunate to meet have become personal friends. I've watched colleagues who mentored me retire and pass the torch to another generation.

My son's comments struck me. Perhaps, I had become jaded and could not see the forest for the trees. Over time I have seen

so many incredible properties while working with the AFC's TREASURE Forest program, maybe nature was taken for granted.

He reminded me of the enormous trees that I had assisted in being declared State Champions. My youngest daughter was so impressed by my description of one of these giants that she asked to see it for herself. We still have the pictures she made with the tree . . . an oak so large its trunk-like branches almost touched the ground. She asked me how old the tree was. I could only speculate to its age, and just what events that tree may have witnessed from its place on earth.

All of this reflection has brought about a re-awakening of sorts for me. It has reminded me of the joys of being a forester, and having the opportunity to work with such incredible people as those found in the TREASURE Forest program.

It also reminded me of just how important environmental education programs are to our young people. You cannot tire of asking them about their experiences with the forest and wildlife, and not be impressed with their answers. Unfortunately, in today's world, a walk in the forest often takes second place to video games. However, I have never witnessed a child whose eyes did not light up at the sights and sounds encountered in a forest. I would venture to say, they will long remember nature hikes over video games as they grow up.

This notion is something that should make every TREASURE Forest landowner proud. In my career, I have never heard of a TREASURE Forest landowner turning down the idea of an educational tour, FAWN, or 'Classroom in the Forest' program. Each one of you wants to give back to the younger generation your appreciation for all nature's wonders. It's almost as though your property belongs to us all.

We did not see any deer moving that particular morning. My son was a little disappointed. Without any words being spoken, he did not realize his gift to me. As he grows older, he will experience many hunts. He and his sisters will continue to enjoy the great outdoors with which our state is blessed. As for my Alabama Forestry Commission and TREASURE Forest family, it's just another day at the office. ♣

