

Valdosta State University
Valdosta, GA 31698
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Editor
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Dear Editor:

Before my first meaningful introduction to Valdosta, I had passed through the city on the interstate several times. Of course, the sterile, molded and machine-stamped Valdosta I had seen was and is not the Valdosta I have come to know and love; it was merely another cluster of interstate exits. I shall never forget my first visit to the Valdosta State campus when I interviewed for my current job in early September of 1984. Shortly after my morning arrival, I walked across campus with a group of my future colleagues to a café at the corner of Brookwood and Patterson. I was absolutely entranced by the splendid old pine trees with their drapes of Spanish moss flowing gently in the warm breeze. Since I was first touched by Valdosta and Valdosta State, I have watched as storms, both natural and human in origin, have taken their toll on these remnants of what was a magnificent, vast pine forest that covered tens of millions of acres in the coastal plain of the southeastern United States. Once when I told a native Valdostan of my first impressions of his hometown, he remarked that I should have seen it before the live oak canopy along Patterson Street was destroyed. Having experienced the embrace of such canopy roads in other towns of the live oak belt of the deeper coastal south, I have tried to imagine what Patterson Street must have looked and felt like 40 years ago....

That my aesthetic view is not particularly eccentric, I am confident. Invariably, visitors, when shown Valdosta, remark about the beauty of the large old pine trees, especially those on and near our campus, and local friends have lately bemoaned the destruction of these old trees and the beauty they bring to "Tree City USA". Certainly, a similar aesthetic appreciation for this remnant of our natural heritage is evident in the opening strains of the Valdosta State Alma Mater "among the stately pines of Georgia, glorious to the view".

In fact, some of the largest longleaf pine trees on our campus are more than 200 years old. These living individuals have grown from seeds that germinated before our nation began. How old were the parent trees that contributed their genes when these seeds were formed more than 200 years ago? 200 years old? 400 years old? Longleaf pine trees of such an age are indeed rare, and I see precious little evidence that modern humans, obsessed with instant gratification and motivated by profit, will resist temptations, whatever their motivation, to allow individuals of longleaf pine to reach such a grand state of maturity. These trees, living organisms, are a part of our natural heritage, an invaluable remnant of what once was and will never be again.

I owe a great debt to my teachers, including the earliest ones, my parents, for instilling in me an appreciation and respect for life and the natural world. Although it is difficult for me to assume that everyone else was not similarly blessed, from time-to-time I am reminded that sadly they were not. The unnecessary cutting of old trees on the Valdosta State University campus, authorized by the highly educated, is such a reminder. Also nowadays most children, divorced from any meaningful connection with the natural world, assume in their naïve innocence that trees and other kinds of plants are not alive because they do not get up and move about. Having grown up on a farm, I knew that plants were living organisms from my earliest years, for I was well acquainted with the basic life-attributes of reproduction, growth and death of crop and garden plants and weeds and, by extension, the native plants of the woodlands. Further, spending my formative years on a productive, working farm gave me more than a passing acquaintance with the concept of profit motive and the pragmatics of survival in the business world.

Many, in ignorance, laugh at any suggestion that our natural pine woodlands are in peril, pointing to vast areas of pine plantations throughout the region. However, we must understand that a modern pine plantation has very little in common with the original natural forest it replaced. A natural pine forest is a complex assemblage of plants, animals and micro-organisms interacting with one another and with the soil and atmosphere. In preparing a site for the planting of pines, the soils are plowed, root-raked and heaped into unnatural rows in much the same way that agricultural fields are prepared. Such practices destroy natural drainage patterns and other soil conditions required for the survival of many native plants and other

organisms in the natural pine forest. The objective of modern pine silviculture is to promote rapid growth and turnover of a single species, usually slash pine in our area, in order to maximize short-term profit. Tree-farming, however beneficial to our local economy, is not forestry and in no way promotes the survival of a natural, integrated, functional forest community.

From my earliest years I was taught about stewardship. In these lessons the good steward wisely protected the king's holdings, insuring their perpetuation. Although I fear that such lessons are sadly out of fashion and mostly long forgotten, they promoted, at least subconsciously, the idea that ownership is a privilege bestowed by our society and system of government, carrying certain obligations...that ultimately we must yield to a higher good when our selfish interests begin to affect adversely society at large. Most of what I learned about stewardship was learned in Sunday school and at home. It has stuck.

For society to function as a unit beneficial to the whole, our most base selfish instincts to exploit one another and the natural world must be checked. Such checks and balances should be a function of good government, and such concepts should be instilled in the next and future generations by our educational system. Although blessed with abundant natural resources, our little corner of the world is not free from the destructive effects of out-of-control development and the blind motivation to turn a profit. Throughout the Georgia coastal plain, natural forest communities are being converted into pine plantations, farms, and real estate developments at an alarming rate. Because of these trends I fear there will be precious little of natural forest communities remaining for the next generation to experience. Will there be enough for them even to imagine what Valdosta and surroundings used to be like? Remember the tale of the frog. It jumps out when placed suddenly into a pan of hot water, but when placed into a pan that is gradually heated to boiling it does not respond and is cooked. Are we similarly getting used to a gradually altered environment? Assuming we are sentient beings, unlike the frog, at what critical point will we see that the changes cumulatively have been drastic? At that point will the trends be irreversible? Will we like what we have wrought?

I am not so radical or naïve to suggest banning the timber and pulp industries. However, I am a staunch advocate of good stewardship...the notion that all of the landscape should not be ceded to the interests of the few motivated by short-term gain and quick profit...that a portion ought to be set aside and preserved in order to assure a higher quality of life for future generations. To this end, we must begin now through local and state governments to purchase and set aside for preservation some of what remains of our natural heritage. We must be wise stewards of these precious remnants, whether they be ancient trees or patches of natural landscape. I implore our University officials to exercise wise stewardship over what little of our natural history remains on our campus. I challenge our city and county fathers to seek the higher good and to provide local funding and to pursue state and federal funding for such preservation as vigorously as they pursue funding for development of industry and commerce.

Hopefully,

Richard Carter
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