

Making Room for Longleaf at the Dupont Preserve

What do you do when you see an endangered species eating an endangered plant?



Longleaf pine seedlings are quite distinct and beautiful.

One way the land trust protects land is by securing land protection agreements from generous landowners, who in turn receive tax incentives and maintain their private ownership. Sometimes, landowners actually donate their land in fee title and the Coastal Land Trust owns and manages this land. Since 1992, the N.C. Coastal Land Trust, one of 23 land trusts in N.C., has protected more than 38,000 acres. Dupont generously donated 422-acres of land to the Coastal Land Trust in 1997 in five separate parcels. On two of these parcels, the trust is working to protect, maintain, and improve the longleaf pine ecosystem through activities such as planting seedlings, controlled burning, and removing competing hardwoods and loblolly pines.

The trunks of longleaf pines, the state tree of North Carolina, have been used for wood and the tar for ships. And people have tended to replace longleafs with faster-growing loblolly pines. With less and less longleaf being replanted, and fire being suppressed on the landscape, the longleaf pine forests of yesteryear are a rare find. Associated with the decline of the longleaf forest are a whole host of other animals and plants dependent on it including red-cockaded woodpeckers, fox squirrels, and a slew of rare songbird species.

OK, that was a hard one.

What do you do when you see a relatively rare species being crowded out by a common species?

That wasn't a tricky one for the N.C. Coastal Land Trust which is thinning out loblolly pine and hardwood stands at its DuPont Preserve in Bladen and Cumberland Counties to make room for longleaf pines on 174 acres near Fayetteville.

Longleaf pine forests once carpeted portions of North Carolina and much of the rest of America's southeast. Today only three percent of that coverage remains and longleaf forests are considered very rare.



Jim Gray, consulting forester, and Dave Allen, NC Wildlife Resources Commission, discuss forest management options at the Dupont Preserve.

Thus, the land trust, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service, and the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, are partnering under the Forest Landbird Legacy Program to thin some timber on the Coastal Land Trust's DuPont Preserve. Dupont has also joined in to restore longleaf pine on much of their adjoining land.

"For the last ten or twelve years, we've been trying to become more green," says Mark Swecker of Dupont. The chemical company is working to develop nature trails, restore longleaf forests, maintain healthy forests for wildlife.... "We're trying to do the right thing."

They are even taking out invasive bamboo on land they still hold privately.

"For me, that's a real sign of their overall interest — when they're going after bamboo on their tract," says Janice Allen, Director of Land Protection for the Coastal Land Trust.

About half the total acreage on the two target parcels of the Coastal Land Trust's Preserve will be thinned, not clear-cut, with buffers along waterways and selected hardwoods left standing. Additionally, the longleaf stands will be getting the benefit of regular controlled burns every few years.



Jim Gray, consulting forester, finds turkey feather at the Dupont Preserve.



Longleaf pine seedling will benefit from recently thinned stand at Dupont Preserve.

Thousands of years ago, regular low-intensity fires helped foster longleaf ecosystems, which actually require burning to help plants grow and cook off forest debris that can build up, contributing to an eventual catastrophic blaze. Today, making up for years of fire suppression, professional foresters like Jim Gray oversee the burning and pruning of forests towards what nature intended.

"The objective was everywhere we had relict longleaf trees to open it up," says Gray. This lets the longleaf seedlings grow along with their associated animals.

If we want to get back to the species that are a priority in North Carolina, we need this, according to David Allen of N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, one of the many different groups and people involved in restoring the longleafs and saving their ecosystems.

But nobody can do it alone — it takes help from all of us.

(Photos by John Derrick, legal intern for the NC Coastal Land Trust)