

Excerpts from Writing Appalachian Ecology Summer 2014 Edition:

Writing Appalachian Ecology



A Collection of
Long-Term Reflections
on Environmental Biology

By the Summer 2014 Students of English 318/393
West Virginia University

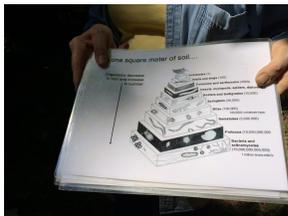


A Legacy of Ghost Towns

The rhododendron grows wild and thick in the Fernow. The particular patch I found myself enamored with was growing along the creek bank and was still blooming in late July when we visited. Its delicate, white petals dropped on slick rocks and floated on water and pooled together in small corners of the creek bed. It grew from between the forks of fallen trees and jumbled masses of dead leaves and broken branches from flooding.

If something that is seemingly so fragile could grow from such debris, then surely our state's people could grow out the dependency we believe we have not just on coal but on the exploitation of our state as a whole. The rhododendron is beautiful and strong, and I think we could take a lesson from the state flower we take so much pride in.

-- Caitlin Pell



Buried Horizons

To think about my home, West Virginia, without coal is impossible. I've always imagined them as Cain and Abel to one another. Coal, like Cain, came before West Virginia was conceived, and jealous of West Virginia's beauty has conspired to kill it. West Virginia, on the other hand, has always been the shepherd of Appalachia, keeping a foolhardy but hardworking flock. The people who make up this flock are as diverse as the trees that make up the forests there. Their story is as much part of Appalachia as the trees, rivers, and mountains. Though Appalachia's story is melancholy, each triumph matched with an equal defeat, the mountains have provided a resilient role model for the things that exist there. "Resist to persist," call valleys of mountains long eroded.

-- Matt Walker



Silent Giants

Standing in the middle of the Fernow Experimental Forest I learn about the many different research practices being conducted. Through the watershed, forestry, and Golden Eagle research, I learn about the history of the Fernow and how old obstacles became new research sites. I'm overwhelmed by the volume of data being collected about this small patch of land; the amount of water that passes through, which clear-cutting methods work best, migratory patterns of Golden Eagles, which are rare to West Virginia, and the problems with limited resources. Walking along the Zero Grade Trail, Melissa Thomas-Van Gundy stops along each plaque, discussing some different practices surrounding clear-cutting, single-tree selection, diameter-limit cutting, and commercial clear-cutting. Each with their own place among the necessary evils that plague the world. She tells stories of how the loggers of old would float those silent giants down the Elk Lick Run, so that they could be loaded on the waiting trains. This was how these men made their living, and I wondered if any of them had ignored their conscience in doing so.

-- Derrick Bolden



The Wild Hymnal of the Woods

After the hummingbird flies away I stand and wait for a minute, emptying my mind of any thoughts, and that is when it hits me. The sounds of the forest engulf me. I am surrounded by the great symphony of nature playing the same ancient overture that it started playing at the beginning of time. The steady rain forms the rhythm as drops fall on broad leaves, the wind rattles the trees and the birds and squirrels sing their high falsettos. It is as if I am trapped inside of the orchestra pit, yet I am a happy prisoner and at peace, hoping that the music never stops. I listen in amazement as I watch two of the musicians, a pair of black-and-white warblers, sing a rapidly spoken, high pitched duet as they creep along the trunk of a tulip poplar. Higher up in the branches a red-eyed vireo accompanies them. The performers are perfect, blissfully playing their parts, never missing a beat, even without the guidance of a conductor. It seems to me that the music is written into every living thing's DNA, that this constant song of praise is innate and necessary to the continuity of the wild.

The speech of forests is often overheard. You have to sit quietly and listen as the wind fills in the space between the leaves and pulls the trunk in the direction of its choosing. If your patience pays off you will hear the ancestral tongue of strong wood, a creaking groan, or the guttural cry of a fawn, or the calming babble of a crystal clear stream, none of which can be deciphered by a human ear, but I am certain that these wild songs are hymns of tranquility and peace. When one truly listens to nature they can hear it speaking to them, although they may spend a lifetime trying to translate its meaning with no success, our ears lost their ability to interpret nature's language the day we learned how to burn oil, mine for coal and forge steel.

-- Ethan Schnell



As Seen by a Tourist

A bee is buzzing near me. It wanders on its way, reminding me again of life. Just as the deer prints christening the path before me did. A slow creeping fog moves in in front of me and reminds me to breathe. To breathe deep. Rain in the city smells of earthworms—rain in the trees has its own unique smell. Here, deep in the Fernow Experimental Forest in northeastern West Virginia, this rain has taken a long journey in order to drench my shirt sleeves. I am not the only visitor to these woods—the raindrops occasionally splotching the page in front of me are proof enough of that. They fall slowly down from the sky towards me—some droplets are intercepted by the leaves forming the canopy above and some find their way through to slip smoothly into the soil hiding beneath my feet. From there they will mingle with nitrogen and calcium atoms and make their way into the root systems of the nettle plants and beech trees that sit here beside me.

Like rain, nutrients too are temporary tourists to the woods. The fallen beech I sit on is being slowly broken down by rain and decomposition. The nutrients that once moved within its bark leach downward into the soil beneath my feet while weathered bedrock far below slowly release their nutrients upward. Calcium, potassium, nitrogen and more, all enter briefly into that teeming world from one direction or another, passing through with their cameras flashing and hopping onto the double-decker bus of the nearest root system.

-- Bethany Drahota

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