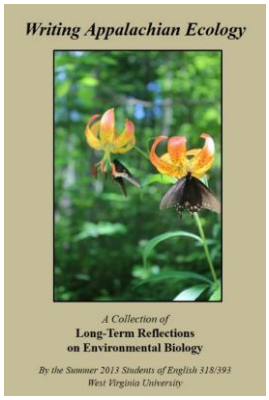

Excerpts from Writing Appalachian Ecology Summer 2013 Edition:

Passion Evoked: Man and his Weight on the Forest

When I was younger, I used to go into the mountains and sit among the trees. The forest was always my refuge, a place of reflection. As I got older, I made it to the forest less and less. Now I hardly ever go and I regret that. I need to go more. I need to see that the forest lives on without my presence. I need validation for my memories. I need to know that the trees are still there.

I decided to rise from my repose and make my way back, alone, to the grave. I had some words for Henry Irons. I wanted to know why he had settled in this area. I wanted to know if he had walked where I was walking. I wanted to know how he died. I wanted to know if he had picked that spot out, was it special to him. I wanted to know what the forest looked like in the 1850s when he was there, before the clear cut, before the Civil War. I wanted to know how the forest was before man began pushing out the animals, pushing out the natives. I wanted to know what the mighty American chestnut looked like, what a herd of woodland bison sounded like traveling through the forest, how big an Elk actually got. I wanted to hear the howl of the wolves, or the squall of the eastern cougar. I wanted to see the flock of passenger pigeons. Mostly I wanted to see his reaction to the state of our forest. I got no answers from him. He is gone, like many who came before him. Like many old growth trees that came before him. There are no more men clear cutting this forest. Bill Pennington, "BoHunk Benny," and Rex Rhodes, men who helped timber the forest, are gone. There are no more gigantic American Chestnuts to fell. The only things that I got from Henry Irons were more questions.

-- Chris Brewster

Tribute to the Fallen Heroes

My two friends tell me how they stood tall against the raging winds and whip-cracking lightning. They grew tired during the fight as it went on for hours until something gives way. They lost their footing and fell down from their hillside home across the creek to the ground. My two friends are trees that were uprooted, and to this day, slowly dying. They lay across Elklick Run with flaky dark skin, soft spoken, with their roots exposed to the elements, and Dr. Peterjohn said there is no chance of survival. Their leaves are still green, hearts beating on, like a wounded soldier being taken care of by a medic

except there is no medic to help save them. What about a crane to lift them up, dig a hole, try and help them survive? They may have fallen in battle, but they were cut down in their prime. They speak their story to me with their last breath and gently pass on. I learned that it takes at least two hundred years for your tree body to break down, or decompose, a slow process of breaking down all that they struggled to become back to the elements which made them. "First, I must express my gratitude for letting me record your story. I am so sorry that you lost the fight, but you will carry on. You will decompose and fade away, but you will travel by organism, air, and water to your next home. I did not get to see you stand tall but know that you two did. When my days near their end, I will come back to see you. We will tell our stories to one another about the days from here to then until I finally go. Together, my friends, we will find peace as we break down and return to the world."

-- Allen Utterback

A Under a Blanket of Stars: Reflections on the Fernow

On our last evening in the Fernow Experimental Forest we spent the night in an open field and had time to reflect on our trip. The ground was level and soft, and the only thing louder than the crickets was the sound of the Elklick River, feeding into the Black Fork, both making their way to the sea. The moon slowly rose over the ancient hills and filled the eastern sky. The last time I'd spent an evening under the stars was much the same, but under vastly different circumstances. The ground was rougher, and the night filled with concerns of a different kind, but the moon and mountains of Eastern Afghanistan were just as beautiful. I always slept better like this. Even under the threat of danger with a rifle by my side, the smell of the night air, and the warmth of a sleeping bag is one of the best ways to fall asleep. Thankfully, no such concerns occupied me here. The comforting sounds of Elklick and Black Fork rushing past lulled me into that realm between sleep and wakefulness where all things are possible. In it I could almost make out the elk, the wolf, and the buffalo walking through the moonlit field. Off they marched, into the darkness, knowing they would never return.

Before sleep overtook me, my mind returned to the Fernow in the present day. I thought of the many observations made by the Forest Service staff that will help shape future decisions in regards to forest management in the long term. Finally, I thought about the many threats facing our forest and about the selfless devotion of those working to minimize and reduce those threats if possible. I remind myself to thank them, and hope we listen to what they have to say.

-- Blaze Rogers

Delivering the Message of the Fernow: Song of Hope & Loss

Watching the Elklick run past, I think of playing in the creek by my childhood home, building up dams, trying to catch the flashing minnows. In the winter, I would skate across the frozen water, light on my feet and small enough to not break through the ice. Now, the streams of Appalachia are tainted by the mines. Gold stones fill our creek beds, but not the sort that will cause flocks of prospectors; the rocks are coated in yellow boy — iron hydroxide, a result of acid drainage.

From where I sit, I still can't see the future of the forest, but I can't help but imagine my own: my daughter scampering across the wet rocks, wandering further down the rivulet, her curls forming in the damp air. I don't want to call out to her to stop, to come back to me, where it is safe. I don't want to have to bath her after, coax the chemicals from her hair. And when we search for relics of the past buried in the ground, for seashells and arrowheads, I don't want to show her the fossils of a chestnut. I want to hold one in my hand and watch as she investigates, let her feel the velvet of its skin. I want the forest and waterways to remain a place of exploration, open to those willing to enter.

Reunited, and It Feels So Good

Let me tell you what it is like to run into the arms of God. And no, I don't mean to find him in your heart or in a book. I mean to find him at the edge of a stream in Appalachia, his hands dipped in the cool water. And as it passes through his fingers and touches the acid-stained rocks, they brighten. He washes away our sins in this way, like running his hands through our wet hair, a massage to the temples. No, I don't mean to find him in a temple, but sitting in the branches of one of the last American chestnuts. He will hold his hand down to you, and you will never have felt such sureness, not even from the limb that suspends you.

-- Isabelle Shepherd