

Reconnecting

Recently I have been working in a small woodland on the south side of the university campus, on the highest, oldest floodplain of the river. Once the focus of active faculty and student research projects, 20-60 years ago, it is like an abandoned mansion now, full of intriguing ghosts and potential.

My ecology students today want to do turtle surveys in the Woods. Some of the turtles they find could bridge the gap to that earlier time fifty years ago when senior faculty, Charles Carpenter, President of OAS 1970, and others caught the same turtles, measured them, marked their shells, found their burrows, held them up to teach a generation of young college students in the 1950's and early 60's about natural history.

The world has changed and moved on. The Woods has a busier highway on its northern edge; but the small herd of four or five white-tailed deer still call it home; as do opossums, raccoons, owls, armadillos, hawks, skunks, coyotes, cottontail rabbits, bobcat. The students of the 1950's and early 1960's left, grew up and did not return to the Woods. The faculty of that time retired. The new biologists went indoors to labs with their electrophoresis gels or DNA sequencing; or south to glamour research in the tropics: Costa Rica, Brazil, the Galapagos. The 70 acres of Woods kept its seasonal cycles, trees growing each spring, rains falling and flooding the lower marshy area. Owls flew the Woods looking for mice to feed their young and old burr oaks broke or fell in the cold winter storms with freezing rain and ice. Green ash seedlings germinated on the flooded forest floor; some took hold and grew.

I first ventured into the Woods briefly in 2003, looking for field trip and collecting locations for the fall entomology class I was teaching. I wandered into a hot, dry, uninspiring disturbed forest that dropped sharply down to an interesting cattail marsh ringed with a wall of poison ivy and briars. After a tentative half hour foray, I backed out, deciding the place would not work for a class.

I don't remember why I returned to the Woods a few years later. It was early spring and I was hungry to explore a natural area and commune with life. I entered a different corner of the Woods and after battling briars along a shallow stream, I found a beautiful open forest of tall older trees. I realized here was still a treasure, a great resource I could use in my classes to connect students to life, to the things that were still living in the same Woods.

I started visiting the Woods more frequently then. The place still was not easy to navigate and I often became so turned around I would be lost and have to carefully think about how to find my way out near where I had entered. But the more I saw, the more I realized the Woods had great potential as a classroom for students to investigate living things. I found two ponds with permanent water (a great find for field labs!) and began to understand the two different drainage systems that separately spilled water across portions of the Woods in steep banked intermittent streams or in a braided shallow sheet moving across the forest. I found the big old trees at the base of the tall escarpment along the edge of the floodplain; and the biggest cottonwoods on the raised ground in the center of the Woods.

In 2008 driving around the Woods with botanists we spotted what looked like an overgrown gate. I crawled on hands and knees under honeysuckle and greenbriers to the old fence and found the gate, with an inviting woods of large trees beyond; and two small trees growing on either side in front and behind the gate, freezing it in place.

I returned later that week and cut through the vines and bushes and small trees blocking the gate, opened it and stepped into a burr oak woodland with large diameter oaks, hackberries, elms and older senescent junipers. It was like finding the key to the secret garden.

Since then, I have spent many hours getting to know the Woods; and crucially now I am taking scores of students into the Woods each semester. Some of them return to conduct their group projects there, keen to find their own new discovery and to document the Woods they encounter.

Equally important, young and mid career faculty now go to the Woods. They can see the intriguing research questions this place offers and the potential as a great outdoors lab. As they bring to bear their perspectives, knowledge and questions, the Woods will return to the potential it has always had.

William Cronon U. Wisconsin-Madison, in a thoughtful essay in *The American Scholar* (1998) on the goals of a liberal education describes the importance of teaching is to “only connect”.

“More than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways.”

Richard Louv in his clear-sighted and thought-provoking book, “Last Child in the Woods”, argues that in our society today children do not connect with the natural world. He describes the effects of this disconnect for children and the adults they become; as well as the environmental implications of the divide.

I believe that one of the most important functions of organizations like the Oklahoma Academy of Sciences is to connect society with the natural world. Whether this be by studying the lives of box turtles, observing the fine structure of cell membranes or investigating principles of optics and electromagnetism; our respective areas of study have the power to ground people in the real world, to connect them, to “make sense of the world” and empower them to act in right-minded ways in their lives.

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