A Few Words from Bob Smith

Our college continues to work on new areas of natural resource programming that will impact future generations. The Department of Geography has started an undergraduate degree program in meteorology, the first of its kind in Virginia. Water resource management is becoming increasingly more important across the world, and the college is investigating new programs in this area. And the Department of Wood Science and Forest Products is working on a new name to better reflect its future efforts as well as changes in its degree programs to better prepare students for a changing wood products industry. All of these efforts reflect the changing environment we live in. Whether it is water scarcity, a changing climate, or invasive species, the future isn’t what it used to be, and our engagement efforts with local communities, other state and federal agencies, and the private sector only become more important.

I participated in two engagement activities this past summer and fall that remind me of the breadth of our college’s efforts. Last May I joined a study abroad trip with students and faculty from our college and from Ferrum University that examined natural resource issues in Belize. Students not only studied Belize’s complex ecosystem, but also participated in research activities and service learning on the country’s barrier islands. Under somewhat harsh conditions, students from business, biology, natural resources, and ecology worked to water mangroves and pick up litter along the beaches. In the tropical rain, they assisted a research team from the Conservation Management Institute to establish plots to measure timber growth for carbon sequestration efforts.

Recently I joined Forest Landowner Education Program Director Jennifer Gagnon for one of the program’s annual forestry and wildlife field tours. Twenty landowners and forestry professionals learned where much of the curly maple for guitars comes from and the forestry challenges of working in a tornado-impacted area. Our tour ended at the American Chestnut Foundation with a review of their efforts. If everything falls in place, we may be able to plant American chestnuts in our backyards within 5 to 10 years. From the jungles of Belize to the forests of Southwest Virginia, the College of Natural Resources and Environment’s engagement programs are impacting the world we live in.
The geospatial industry, which includes the use and integration of global positioning systems (GPS), geographic information systems (GIS), remote sensing, and the emerging technologies and applications that support the collection, analysis, and interpretation of spatial data, is a rapidly growing yet understaffed field. Geospatial technologies can be used to efficiently support decision making in an array of areas, including natural resource management and conservation, planning, economic development, agriculture, public safety, and facilities management.

As a state, Virginia’s geospatial industry is one of the largest and most innovative in the nation. However, Virginia’s geospatial employers, which include local governments, planning district commissions, state and federal agencies, and an array of private industry interests, have suggested that Virginia needs to further expand its geospatial workforce. In a survey of Virginia’s geospatial industry conducted in 2007, potential employers maintained that they often found it difficult to attract enough geospatially literate employees to meet their needs. The Virginia Community College System is in an excellent position to support Virginia’s workforce needs.

The Virginia Community College System (VCCS), the Virginia Space Grant Consortium, John Tyler Community College, Tidewater Community College, Virginia Western Community College, and the Virginia Geospatial Extension Program, based in Virginia Tech’s College of Natural Resources and Environment, are partnering to ensure that the burgeoning needs for geospatial workers are met through the Geospatial Technician Education Through Virginia’s Community Colleges (GTEVCC) project.

The goal of the GTEVCC project is to support the development of academic pathways in geospatial technology at the three partnering community colleges, which serve as models for other community colleges in the VCCS. Another component of the GTEVCC project includes the design, development, and implementation of a VCCS Geospatial Portal, which encourages the sharing and dissemination of educational resources and career awareness materials in geospatial technology among VCCS faculty and high school dual enrollment educators. Another major component of the project is to support faculty development for precollege educators through the Virginia Space Grant Consortium’s OVERSpace program, and for dual enrollment high school teachers and community college faculty through the VCCS Geospatial Institute.

The Virginia Geospatial Extension Program, through its partnerships and other efforts, is working to ensure that Virginia’s future workforce is up to the challenge.

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The engagement efforts highlighted in this issue include how students and faculty protected a historic tree on campus, the work of our Extension agents with youth and teachers in southern Virginia on products that come from the woods, how John McGee is training the next generation workforce in GIS applications in partnership with our community colleges, how summer internships impact the lives of students, and how a backyard garden not only transformed the life of a family, but provided habitat for a variety of animals within the town.

Whether it is one tree, one garden, or one student, our decisions on how we manage our natural resources impact our daily lives. Our college’s engagement efforts are designed to work with individuals and communities on the best utilization of our resources.

I wish you all a happy holiday season and a great 2012. If you have any questions regarding our engagement efforts, please contact me at rsmith4@vt.edu.
Geospatial continued from page 2

Sixteen community college faculty and five dual enrollment high school teachers were provided with professional development in geospatial technology over the course of a year through the VCCS Geospatial Institute. Funded by the National Science Foundation’s Advanced Technological Education Program, two workshops were held in successive summers in Cheatham Hall’s Center for Environmental Applications in Remote Sensing (CEARS). During the weeklong, hands-on workshops, conducted by the Virginia Geospatial Extension Program, participants were accommodated in residence halls at Virginia Tech. The curriculum developed through the project was driven by industry needs.

In the workshops, VCCS faculty and high school teachers were exposed to the technical knowledge required to support geospatial education. In addition to hands-on technical training, institute participants engaged with experienced professionals associated with an array of topics and developed networks to further sustain their efforts at their respective community colleges and high schools. Perhaps most importantly, participants engaged and learned from each other. Instructors also served as mentors throughout the year to provide additional guidance and support for VCCS Geospatial Institute fellows and to facilitate efforts to sustain their developing programs.

The VCCS Geospatial Institute model was designed not only to develop and promote technical skills; it emphasizes spatial thinking and analysis, and approaches to geospatial instruction. Experienced professionals from across the country, including the National GeoTech Center and Environmental Systems Research Institute, were on hand to provide cutting-edge instruction on specific topics. Guest speakers from the Virginia Association of Mapping and Land Information Systems, VirginiaView, and other organizations provided locally relevant information associated with industry needs and trends.

Since completing the VCCS Geospatial Institute, fellows have initiated a number of new geospatial technology courses and awareness opportunities at both the community college and high school levels. Geospatial curriculum has been integrated in a wide range of disciplines and fields, including architecture, natural resource management, information systems technology, public safety, geology, biology, drafting and design, oceanography, geography, and engineering. Over 100 high school students across the state are enrolled in geospatial dual enrollment courses as a result of the institute. In addition, new courses and several geospatial certificate programs have been instituted at VCCS member institutions, and several others are under development or review.

The integration of relatively new technologies and devices, including wireless Internet, smartphones, and tablets, is fueling an almost inexhaustible demand for geospatially driven applications and services by an array of stakeholders. Virginia’s geospatial workforce pool will need to continue to grow and evolve in order to ensure that the commonwealth is able to maintain a geospatially sophisticated workforce. The Virginia Geospatial Extension Program, through its partnerships and other efforts, is working to ensure that Virginia’s future workforce is up to the challenge.

Faculty members attending the VCCS Geospatial Institute were provided with hands-on training in GIS, GPS, and remote sensing.

Chris Cruz, from West Valley College in Saratoga, Calif., provided an insightful overview of remote sensing at the VCCS Geospatial Institute.
Virginia Tech Faculty and Staff Partner With Volunteer Arborists to Protect the Alwood Bur Oak

Eric Wiseman, Associate Professor of Urban Forestry
Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation
College of Natural Resources and Environment

On the Virginia Tech campus resides a remarkable bur oak that has been a fixture in the landscape for well over a century. The tree, which dominates the skyline near Burruss Hall, with branches spreading over 120 feet wide and 80 feet tall, was planted by Professor William B. Alwood in 1895. Alwood came to Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (now Virginia Tech) as vice-director of the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station and a professor of horticulture, entomology, and mycology. During his tenure from 1888 to 1904, Alwood created the horticulture department and established a fruit tree orchard where he conducted pioneering pest research that was credited with saving the Virginia fruit industry of that era.

Alwood took an interest in planting an assortment of trees throughout the abandoned pastures surrounding the burgeoning campus. He even took the time to conduct an inventory of his tree plantings, replete with photographs, in 1902. On Sept. 11 of that year, he catalogued a bur oak, the only one in the inventory, and identified it as a 7-year-old specimen. Today that same tree steadfastly overlooks the Virginia Tech Drillfield, having achieved proportions that place it among the largest living trees on campus.

Last winter, Professor Mike Weaver of the Department of Entomology convened a committee of faculty and staff to lead the commemoration of Alwood’s contributions to Virginia Tech by creating a permanent memorial near the bur oak that Alwood planted. Given the importance of the oak to the proposed memorial, Weaver asked Associate Professor Eric Wiseman of the Department of Forest Resources and Environmental Conservation to oversee an inspection of the tree and make recommendations to keep the tree healthy and safe. Wiseman enlisted the help of several volunteer arborists from the Mid-Atlantic Chapter of the International Society of Arboriculture as well as undergraduate student Jordan Endahl to inspect the tree and write a stewardship plan.

In March, Wiseman and Endahl joined arborists Keith Cline, Ed Milhous, Jim Martin, Luke McCall, Kristina Salzman, Kathy von Bredow, and Hugh Whitehead for an onsite inspection of the bur oak. Following this evaluation, a second team of volunteer arborists traveled to Blacksburg in April to complete the tree care tasks recommended by the first team. Arborists Brian Campbell, Justin Courtney, James Earheart, Jim Martin, and Rob Springer brought their saws and climbing harnesses to perform some preventive maintenance on the tree. In addition to pruning out dead branches, the arborists also installed several steel cables to support heavy limbs with weak crotches and a lightning protection system to reduce the threat of lightning strike.

Eric Wiseman continues to keep close watch on the Alwood bur oak and regularly consults with the Virginia Tech Grounds Department on how to best manage the tree. Jordan Endahl created a poster on his experiences with the tree and the volunteer arborists, which earned second place among over 30 entries at the university’s 2011 Engagement Showcase. Based on the stewardship plan that Jordan helped prepare, additional treatments to cultivate and protect the bur oak will be performed in the near future. For its efforts in urban forest stewardship and outreach, Virginia Tech has been recognized annually since 2008 as a Tree Campus USA by the National Arbor Day Foundation.
Youth and Teachers Explore Natural Resources in the Central District

K. Jason Fisher, Senior Extension Agent, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Central District

Materials and educational curricula abound for use with youth audiences at summer camps and outdoor settings. Project Learning Tree (PLT) and resources through Virginia Tech’s College of Natural Resources and Environment have helped provide some of these materials. However, our youth and the educators working with them may not get ample exposure to these resources with today’s public school testing standards, competition for school accreditation, and the like. This past spring and summer, the Central District Forestry Extension Program worked in collaboration with county Extension agents and master gardener volunteers in conducting three educational events focused on reaching out to these audiences to help them gain an enhanced appreciation for our forestry resources. The events included one PLT Teacher Training in a rural elementary setting in Charlotte County Bacon District, and two youth summer camp courses entitled “Goods From the Woods.” Twenty teachers and five school administrators attended the PLT training. These teachers have the potential to reach over 500 youth in a rural setting. The PLT training was conducted as the result of the need for science-based curricula stressing Virginia natural resources.

“Goods From the Woods” was taught as one of over 25 class selections during Junior 4-H Camp at the Skelton 4-H Educational Center in Franklin County during the week of June 25, and also as part of a weeklong day camp at McCollum Moore Gardens in Mecklenburg County. Over 55 youth received hands-on training in forestry and natural resources education while participating in tree identification, learning about products derived from trees, and constructing their own tree cookies while having a tasty treat of shiitake mushrooms and pawpaw fruit. One youth commented that she had “never thought of makeup and medicine coming from trees!” In a poll during the youth programs, the children were asked what they had been taught about harvesting trees. Nearly half stated that harvesting trees was bad due to the fact that trees made oxygen and they did not like to see them cut down — taken from what their respective science teachers had taught them. After hearing excerpts from Terri Birkett’s book “Truax” and participating in hands-on class and field learning activities, all of the youth understood that trees are a renewable resource and, if managed sustainably, would continue to be a crucial part of their everyday life.

Guiding the inquisitive minds of youth and teachers alike in the realm of natural resources is truly challenging yet rewarding when you consider how much of the public is misinformed about the responsible use and management of these resources. I think of it not just as a job but a privilege to assist in one of our country’s greatest challenges — to help youth and the adults working with them to become productive and responsible stewards of our natural resources.
Internships at the Matthews State Forest Offer Valuable Hands-On Experience

Michael Salyer, a wildlife science major, and Zach Shreve, an environmental resource management major, participated in a forestry internship opportunity for 10 weeks at the Matthews State Forest near Galax, Va. The internships were made possible by the generous contributions of the Claire B. and Jack M. Matthews Foundation. The foundation provided a 5-year endowment to the college to support students and faculty who work with natural resource issues in Southwest Virginia. As part of their work, each student reported on their summer internship and how it impacted their education.

Michael Salyer’s Report

Everyone wants to graduate college and be successful. It is almost impossible to find a quality job without internships. I was lucky enough to be selected along with Zach Shreve this past summer to work for the Virginia Department of Forestry at the Matthews State Forest. The job description I was given described hard work balanced with educational experiences. I couldn’t have asked for anything better. Work started at 7:00 a.m. and went until 5:30 p.m. with a 30-minute lunch break. Some of the many things we did included yard maintenance, maintaining and taking a survey of the American chestnut orchard, prescribed burns, herbicide and pesticide training, educational programs, timber stand improvement, planting trees, and installing two gates.

As a wildlife science major, I was very eager to learn as much as I could about forestry outside of the classroom. I always knew that healthy populations of animal species were directly related to healthy forest conditions; however, after this summer I realize this couldn’t be more true. I learned early on that after I graduate I will be qualified to be a forest technician, which I did not know previously. I was able to really brush up on my dendrology skills and now feel more confident than ever in my ability to identify trees. I was able to participate in the landowner educational program at the Matthews State Forest, which was very educational for me. The class covers a variety of subjects, all focusing on improving land management. It was interesting getting to work with the public and seeing a different side of forestry.

One of my most rewarding experiences this summer was participating in two educational programs for kids. I taught a few macro-invertebrates to the kids and explained which bugs were associated with clean water and which ones were indicators of poor water quality. Zach and I also taught the kids an assortment of native animal furs. I didn’t know what to think when I asked the group if they knew what kind of deer fur I was holding and one girl replied “a reindeer.” I was quick to let her know we hadn’t killed Rudolph! Zach and I also assisted in helping the kids fish at the pond located on the state forest. I couldn’t believe that some of the kids had never been fishing. Hopefully now they are “hooked” and want to continue fishing and being outdoors.

One of the more interesting things I was able to participate in this summer was timber stand improvement. I had no idea how simple yet effective improving a stand of timber can be. The method we used was hack and squirt, in which you hack the bark with a hatchet and spray some herbicide in the cut. Trees with a diameter larger than six inches require a hack and squirt on each side of the trunk in order to properly kill the tree. This technique is simple yet effective; the tree dies slowly and takes years to decay. This method, opposed to actually cutting the trees down, limits the amount of sunlight that reaches the forest floor. This is important because the Matthews State Forest is overrun with invasive species such as Oriental bittersweet and Ailanthus (tree of heaven). If sunlight were able to penetrate straight to the forest floor, this would result in fresh browse and seedlings sprouting up of various species, and the fast growing invasive species would flourish.

One of the most time-consuming tasks that my supervisor, Zachary Olinger, and the rest of the employees at the Matthews State Forest face is dealing with invasive species control. Grayson and Carroll counties seem to be a hot spot for Oriental bittersweet. Although it can grow in sunlight, Oriental bittersweet, unlike other plants, has evolved to grow toward shade and to climb
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anything around it, outcompeting the host species for what little sunlight is available. This makes it a tree’s worst nightmare. The vine will climb to the top of the tree, choking and eventually killing it. The Oriental bittersweet’s vine can be amazingly thick and hard to cut. One of the most effective methods of getting rid of the bittersweet is to manually cut the vines with a machete or hatchet, which can be difficult and time consuming.

While we were primarily stationed at the Matthews State Forest, we were privileged to explore other state forests as well. The one I found most intriguing was the Channels State Forest. Anyone who has the chance to take a trip there should definitely take the opportunity. It was amazing to see the rock formations on top of the mountain that have taken millions of years to form. They are large enough for you to walk between them. I had the opportunity to paint boundary lines at the Old Flatts State Forest, a beautiful state forest located at the base of Mt. Rogers. The Old Flatts State Forest offers great views and pristine natural trout streams; there are even wild horses that call the land home.

I would never have imagined my first internship would have been working for the Virginia Department of Forestry. It turns out this internship was a great experience; I had a great boss who was easy to work with and I also made a great friend in Zach Shreve. It was easy to get up and go to work every day with an appreciative boss and somebody who was going to work just as hard as me. I learned many forestry skills that I might not have since I am not a forestry major. This internship was very educational and it was different every day. I couldn’t have asked for a better summer internship. I would like to thank everyone that made it possible; I truly had a remarkable summer.

Zach Shreve’s Report

This summer I worked as one of two interns on the Matthews State Forest, where I was involved with hikes, forestry based work, and educational programs. I had an opportunity to gain valuable fieldwork experience while benefiting from a great mentoring staff.

I began my summer with some trail work and maintenance. As a forester, I have learned some simple BMPs (best management practices) for trails such as adjustments in slope, bumps, etc. My supervisor, Zach Olinger, walked us through a few trails he had wanted to do maintenance work on and frequently pointed out all of the techniques they had focused on to help reduce erosion and runoff.

I was also involved with watershed management practices and stream/buffer zone improvement. Many of the streams on the forest needed improvement. We planted tree saplings, using species appropriate to each site, along the streams that ran through the Matthews property. We also did inventory and repairs on many of the established sapling buffer zones.

Michael Salyer and I also conducted educational programs over the summer. We worked with children to help them identify environmental quality indicators (specifically in streams) and discussed a few common animals one might identify in forest habitats. We also helped with adult programs. We had a meeting once every few weeks with many local forest landowners to discuss better management practices. We usually cooked a meal for our guests and gave a PowerPoint presentation discussing matters such as invasive species, timber stand improvement, and pest management/indicators and threats.

Timber stand improvement and invasive species management also consumed a large amount of our time on the Matthews. I spent time working on eastern white pine stands and a few hardwood sites, “weeding out” unhealthy trees and trees that don’t offer a lot of ecological or timber value. While doing so, we constantly battled invasive species; bittersweet, tree of heaven, and autumn olive proved to be popular on the majority of our sites.

My summer was ideal for any student looking to gain educational value and ideal field experience. My labs and courses at Virginia Tech had proven to be very applicable to my internship. While working I also used forestry tools and learned measurements I am now using in labs. I couldn’t be more thankful and appreciative of the dynamic educational work experience I gained on the Matthews State Forest this summer.
Suzie Leslie’s Garden: Naturally Beautiful

Su Clauson-Wicker, Writer for the Communications Office
College of Natural Resources and Environment

Suzie Leslie, coordinator of academic advising for the College of Natural Resources and Environment, had her garden showcased on the 16th Annual Friendly Garden Tour sponsored by the Friends of the Montgomery-Floyd Regional Library.

As one of seven Blacksburg-area properties featured on the July tour, Leslie’s garden was selected for its ability to attract wildlife as well as its botanical beauty. Some 600 people from around the state traipsed through her garden in a single day. In June, Leslie also used her yard to teach a class in gardening for wildlife habitat enhancement for experienced master gardeners from all over Virginia.

“I love showing people how to plant and maintain a pesticide-free garden and attract wildlife year round,” Leslie said. “We’re so removed from the earth these days, but gardens can change that. You don’t have to get into a car to experience the restorative values nature can provide on a daily basis.”

Leslie and her husband, Randy, began converting their formal, tree-shaded lawn into a nature retreat in the heart of town when they purchased their home 11 years ago. They selected native plants to provide food and cover for birds, butterflies, and amphibians throughout the yard. A scavenger hunt for caterpillars there is likely to yield various species of swallowtails (zebra, giant, black, pipevine, spicebush, and tiger), as well as monarchs, sulfurs, and other lepidoptera larvae munching on a profusion of host plants. The water garden has attracted more than 70 species of birds, including 18 species of warblers.

Leslie’s garden is as attractive to humans as it is to wildlife. She grows ornamental species that work well in flower arrangements she shares with friends. With the aid of countless loads of leaves, pine needles, and scavenged organic matter, and an almost effortless “drop-and-kick” composting method, the Leslies manage to blend Suzie’s need for a verdant backyard wildlife habitat and nature retreat with Randy’s desire for an attractive, manicured landscape.
# Directory of Natural Resources Extension Staff

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