

Students Impact Conservation...

By Debbie Shetterly, WAC-HNG coordinator

It's a gorgeous, late spring day, and Pool Creek is stunning in its clarity as it gurgles its way toward Lake Lure through lush forest. The peaceful setting is interrupted by the boisterous exuberance of youthful voices, those of students hard at work along the town-owned portion of the creek. Tommy Hartzog, president of the Hickory Nut Gorge Chamber of Commerce, hears the commotion and wanders outside his office to check out the action. As he approaches, he asks me if this is a WACHNG (Weed Action Coalition of Hickory Nut Gorge) project. I answer that indeed it is, that the Lake Lure Classical Academy Appalachian Naturalist elective class is conducting their final workday of the school year, removing non-native invasive plant species from along Pool Creek. David Lee, Americorps Project Conserve Member and HNG steward for WACHNG, is supervising this student effort.

Tommy is a member of the WACHNG steering committee, so he's fully aware of the monumental movement afoot in the gorge to rid the area of pesky kudzu, bittersweet, and many other threatening plant species. These species increase fire and flood danger, increase erosion, lower property values, and use up precious water resources. Possibly the most critical threat is the danger they pose to native wildlife, both plant and animal species. When invasive species take over, biological diversity is lost. Biological diversity is the intricate web which keeps life as we know it functioning. Without each species playing its role, the entire network unravels.

Mike Knoerr, instructor for the elective class, understands this issue and much of its complexities. He views the natural world as one large super organism, with each species playing merely a small role in the functioning of this super being. As small parts of the organism are damaged or die off, it ceases to function at its optimum capability. Mike also recognizes that the future of our natural world depends on this next generation, that represented by his students hard at work. I introduce him to Tommy, and Mike expresses to Tommy his deep-seated belief that he has a huge responsibility in making sure that this generation understands and is engaged in conservation efforts.

"The opportunity to guide so many young minds in a profoundly positive way is a responsibility I take very seriously. And for me, it's the greatest gift of teaching. To impart a strong conservation ethic and scientific understanding in this small window of time I have with them truly means the world to me. I'm so thankful to help them get to know the wonders of their backyard!"

Because of Mike's understanding and because of the Lake Lure Classical Academy's flexibility in their approach to learning, the Appalachian Naturalist elective class has been able to work approximately one day per week, either sampling water or removing invasives, all in an effort to not only contribute to the gorge, but to tie their classroom study to real life activities which help the gorge. And these students get it. During the work day, I'm repeatedly asked about other species along the river and about whether we can turn the invasives that have been pulled into fertilizer. The answer is no, because if not handled exactly right, they could spread to any area where the fertilizer would be applied. Instead the students bag all the pulled weeds, and throw the bags into the back of a Lake Lure town truck. Melody, with the town landscaping crew, has offered to haul off the bags so that David can later burn the pulled weeds. This is truly a coordinated effort!

The students finally take a well-deserved break, and we marvel at the amount of work they've accomplished. The class has decided to "adopt" this town portion of Pool Creek, to make sure that it remains weed-free. It will entail repeated effort for years to come, meaning that as younger students come through the school, each will have the opportunity to contribute to this project. As project coordinator for WACHNG, I'm thrilled that the Lake Lure Classical Academy recognizes the value of this type of learning, and is such a willing partner for such a critical project in the gorge. I fervently hope that the majority of landowners in the gorge will be equally as willing to do their part.

It's time for the students to return to school. After all, it is yearbook-signing time! Mike ends the work session with a final quote for the students from Margaret Mead, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." I have no doubt that this small group of students can, indeed, change the gorge.