



Times-News

The Natural Assets We Own

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ECO NOTES



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Humans have a tremendous capacity to adapt to any situation and as a result, we sometimes forget the tremendous natural assets at our doorstep. Naturalists estimate that over 100,000 species of plants and animals coexist with us in the Southern Appalachians. It's hard to imagine then, that this rich tapestry of watersheds and 500 million year old mountains, and breathtaking viewcapes are rapidly disappearing. Statewide 400 acres of our natural heritage *everyday* are turned into parking lots, condos, and strip malls to feed the insatiable desire for growth and consumer comforts.

Sometimes the best way to understand what we've lost (and what is still possible to protect) is to travel back in time before MallWarts and cookie clutter development dominated our landscape. What did the frontiersmen find when they arrived in WNC?

Part of the backbone of the native woodland forest in WNC was the American chestnut which was a crucial part of our ecosystem. It became an important food source for a wide variety of wildlife from bears to birds to people. Rural communities depended upon the annual nut harvest as a cash crop to feed livestock and the chestnut lumber industry was a major sector of the rural economy.

Hemlocks also provided critical habitat for birds and other animals; their shade helped maintain the cool water temperatures required by trout and other aquatic organisms in mountain streams. Also hemlocks played a crucial role in the update of water which has an effect on streamflow and soil moisture. Their loss due to the wooly adelgid could have a dramatic effect on watersheds and the proliferation of life in our waterways.

Both chestnut and hemlock loss are a byproduct of global commerce whose effects brought us both the invasive insect and fungus that have eradicated our chestnuts with blight and are rapidly decimating our hemlocks.

The cultural heritage of a community is also an integral part of its history. Apples were one of the first signs of frontier settlements. During early settlement in some parts of the country, land grants were not approved until landowners could demonstrate that they had at least 50 apple trees on their land. Historians believe that it was likely that the first white settlers to Henderson County already found apple orchards blossoming; planted and maintained by the Cherokee.

Ralph Waldo Emerson called the apple "the American fruit" because its history parallels the history of civilization in America. Apple seedlings were an extension of the pioneers, following the trails of exploration through the forests and waterways, over the plains and through the mountains. Apples were an essential part of homesteading used in every season for sugar content and hard cider. Apples also define the direction of American civilization both through their rapid proliferation as well as their industrialization. The USDA catalogued over 6,000 varieties of apples in the period from 1804 to 1904. However, only a handful of apple varieties remain available to consumers today.

Heritage apples are not easy to make commercially available because they ripen at different times, are notoriously fragile, and can be difficult to harvest. They do not lend themselves to large scale orchards, do not pack well, and come in strange shapes which some consumers, conditioned to perfectly round, red hybridized apples, find distasteful.

Yet many natives of the mountains can still describe the taste, texture and uses of the apples they grew up with that were passed down for generations. Often the gastronomic value of culture, the food and flavors of the past, are the last to go when our cultural legacies evaporate into the heavens. ECO is working to restore the biodiversity of the apple tree through its annual heritage apple tree sale. For more information about apple trees available this year log onto our website at www.eco-wnc.org or call 692-0385.

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