

Land of the Pines | Uncommon Good | A Secret Language

A S O U T H E R N S O P H I S T I C A T I O N

PINEHURST

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2019

LIVING



PINEHURST | SOUTHERN PINES | ABERDEEN



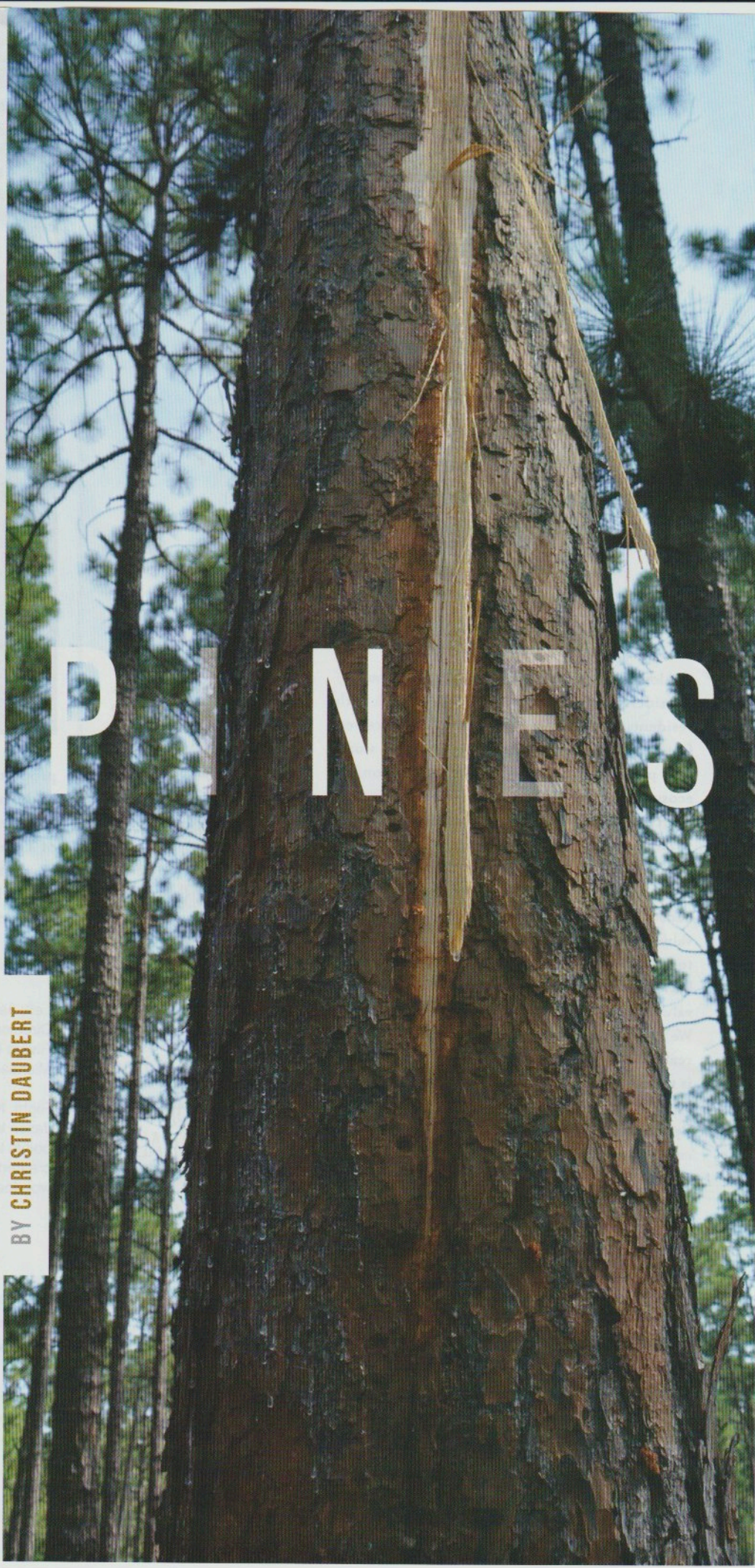
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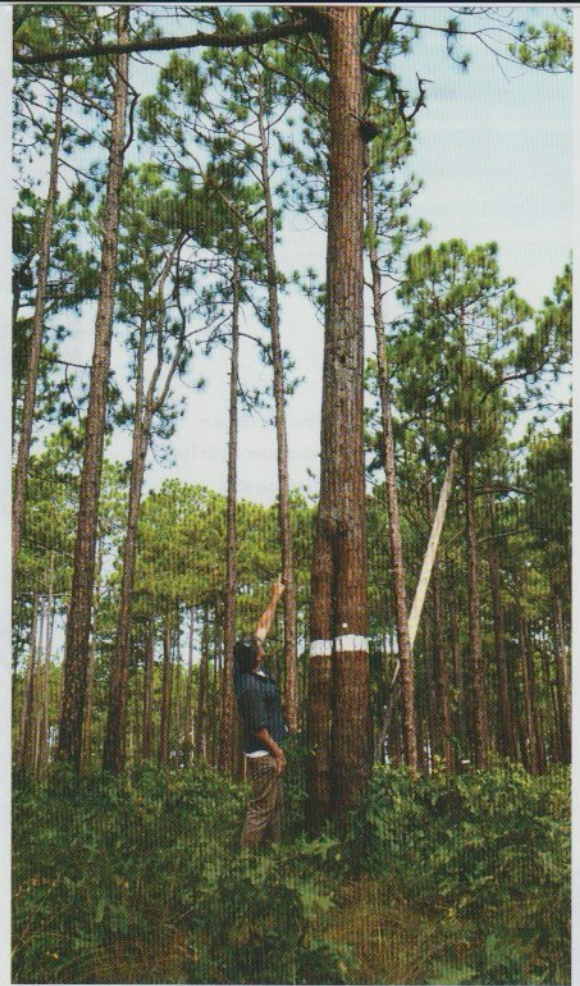
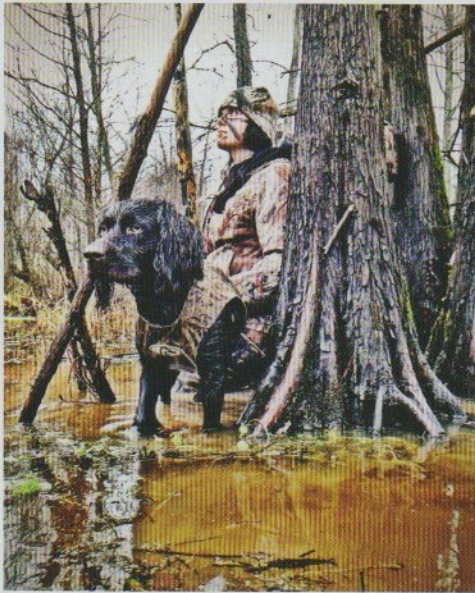
The pine trees are hard to miss. If you do somehow overlook them, the town names—Pinehurst, Southern Pines and Whispering Pines—clue you in on their ever-towering presence. Forestry brought expansion to the Sandhills, then came tourism for health and recreation, followed by the military and its need for expansive and seclusive training grounds. In other words, the trees brought people to the “Land of the Pines.” Without them, what would our community look like?

It is important to understand the Sandhills’ past to recognize what’s possible for the future. “Presettlement, before European invasion, the longleaf was the largest ecosystem in the United States,” says Jesse Wimberley, a fourth-generation North Carolina educator and conservationist whose love for this state runs as deep as his knowledge. “It went from Virginia down to Florida and over to Texas. Preindustrial, the longleaf was harvested for its high tensile strength and used in construction for that very reason.”

During the colonial period, the British Naval industry needed the tar from the longleaf pines, as they had depleted their own. Then in the late 1800s, when tourism was introduced to the Sandhills, Northern travelers escaped the industrialization of big cities for the clean air of Vineland, later renamed Southern Pines. The “resort destination” seed was planted, and growth was inevitable. The Village of Pinehurst closely followed, securing tourism as a major economic driver for the area.

BY CHRISTIN DAUBERT





Along with tourism, the military has brought considerable growth to Moore County with both residents and revenue. Wimberly, who receives funding from the Department of Defense, works with private landowners on restoring the longleaf ecosystem so the military can continue training exercises without further encroachment.

Land around Fort Bragg isn't the only appealing property. Large tracks of pines on the fringes of our towns, and surrounding farmland, have become a financial burden to some owners. As land values rise (along with property taxes), the appeal to sell also rises. "There's really no separation between the conservation value and economic value," says Wimberly. "We're at a dilemma now. We've seen the rural economy of North Carolina really take a dive. For a lot of families, their land is their greatest resource. They're sitting on land, but it's underperforming as a revenue generator. By returning value to the land with the help of conservation easements, we will lift the economy of rural North Carolina while supporting and conserving our ecosystems."

In the simplest definition, a conservation easement is a voluntary legal agreement between a landowner and a land trust or government agency that permanently limits uses of the land in order to protect its conservation values. As of July 1, the Sandhills Area Land Trust (SALT) merged with Three Rivers Land Trust, making Three Rivers Land Trust the second largest land trust in the state.

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"WE WORK A LOT WITH LANDOWNERS ON CONSERVATION EASEMENTS, WHICH ARE FLEXIBLE AND TAILORED TO EACH PROPERTY AND RUN WITH THE LAND, SO FUTURE OWNERS OF THE PROPERTY MUST ALSO ADHERE TO THE TERMS OF THE EASEMENT."



property and run with the land, so future owners of the property must also adhere to the terms of the easement," says Michael Fulk, associate director of Three Rivers Land Trust. "They protect against development and intensive industrial or commercial use of the property."

She clarifies that protection from development doesn't mean a house site can't be built, only that it ensures large scale development is restricted. Monetary

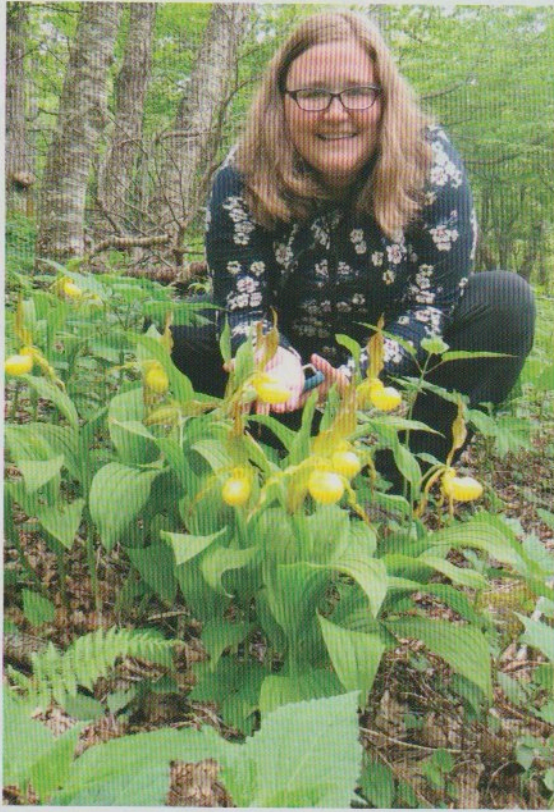
Left: Associate Director of Three Rivers Land Trust Michael Fulk

Right: Naturalist Jesse Wimberly points to a hole created by a woodpecker.

incentives, such as grants, can come with these conservation easements to help the financial burden tied to land ownership.

For example, Wimberly sold the development potential rights to his property in perpetuity as a conservation easement. He uses the land to harvest pine straw, as well as to protect Drowning Creek, the primary water source for southern Moore County.

"Our economic and future development hinges on the conservation of our longleaf ecosystem. One cannot exist without the other. We must find ways to incentivize landowners to protect and sustain their properties, ensuring a prosperous future for this area," Wimberly stresses. These necessary land and water easements and protections serve the environment; they may also potentially provide



tax incentives and/or funds for landowners to purchase the easements.

So what is a next smart step in both conservation and development? Both Wimberley and Fulk agree that education focusing on our distinct landscape and its habitat will foster a connection to the land. This can be seen, for example, during the Weymouth Woods-Sandhills Nature Preserve annual Party for the Pine—a community birthday celebrating the oldest known longleaf pine (it's 471 years old, but doesn't look a day over 182).

When Wimberley began funding this event, he insisted an educational prescribed forest burn be part of the festivities, noting that our unique ecosystem's survival hinges on fire. While you may think Smokey the Bear would be appalled, Wimberley isn't talking about uncontrolled wildfires, but, rather, prescribed burns, which will keep "the pines" thriving. This is where education plays a crucial role.

"You can't talk about longleaf without talking about fire, as it is a fire-dependent ecosystem," says Crystal Cockman, director of conservation at Three Rivers Land Trust. "In order to restore longleaf you need to have frequent prescribed fires.

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Historically that happened with lightning strikes."

"Here in the Southeast, fire has become a huge management tool in the longleaf ecosystem," Fulk adds. "Fire is pivotal to each stage of the tree, from seed germination to regulation of the trees' natural fuel stores. [Prescribed burns are] something we at the Land Trust use on our properties."

When done correctly, prescribed burns remove brush along the ground that inhibits growth of young trees. An increase in vegetative diversity attracts a wider variety of birds and animals. It also helps perpetuate many endangered plant and animal species. Wimberley stresses, "Fires are a prescription. That is why it's called prescribed burning. Humidity, temperature, topography—it's science mixed with art. Go back one generation before us, they knew exactly what to do, because fire has always been on the landscape."

The longleaf ecosystem is one of the most at-risk ecosystems in the U.S., and there is considerable funding to help its restoration. "The Uwharrie National Forest is looking to restore acreage of longleaf," says Cockman. "What was once 90 million acres is now down to 3 percent of that; and of that, most is restored longleaf."

While conversation focuses heavily on trees, it also benefits the abundant animal life in this dynamic ecosystem, especially the red-cockaded woodpecker. This endangered bird is not the only animal to call the longleaf home; the tree is a keystone species that 27 other animal species rely upon for survival.

The Three Rivers Land Trust also acquires land for conservation. They partner with organizations like the U.S. Forest Service, state parks, as well as the N.C. Wildlife Commission. The majority of their funding comes from state and federal grants, as well as private donors. More often than not, the lands acquired are transferred to public ownership so everyone can have access to these natural areas for public enjoyment, Fulk says.

"There are tangible effects for keeping our land natural for our overall benefit. Not just economies. It keeps us sane when we go into the woods," says Wimberley. "Longleaf pine and its related ecosystem are what started our community and what can sustain us—only if we make prudent decisions about how we grow. When you look at agriculture, military and tourism—the three legs of our economic stool—they're all dependent on the preservation of the ecosystem. So it behooves us, not just from an environmental standpoint but an economic one, to have these conversations." R