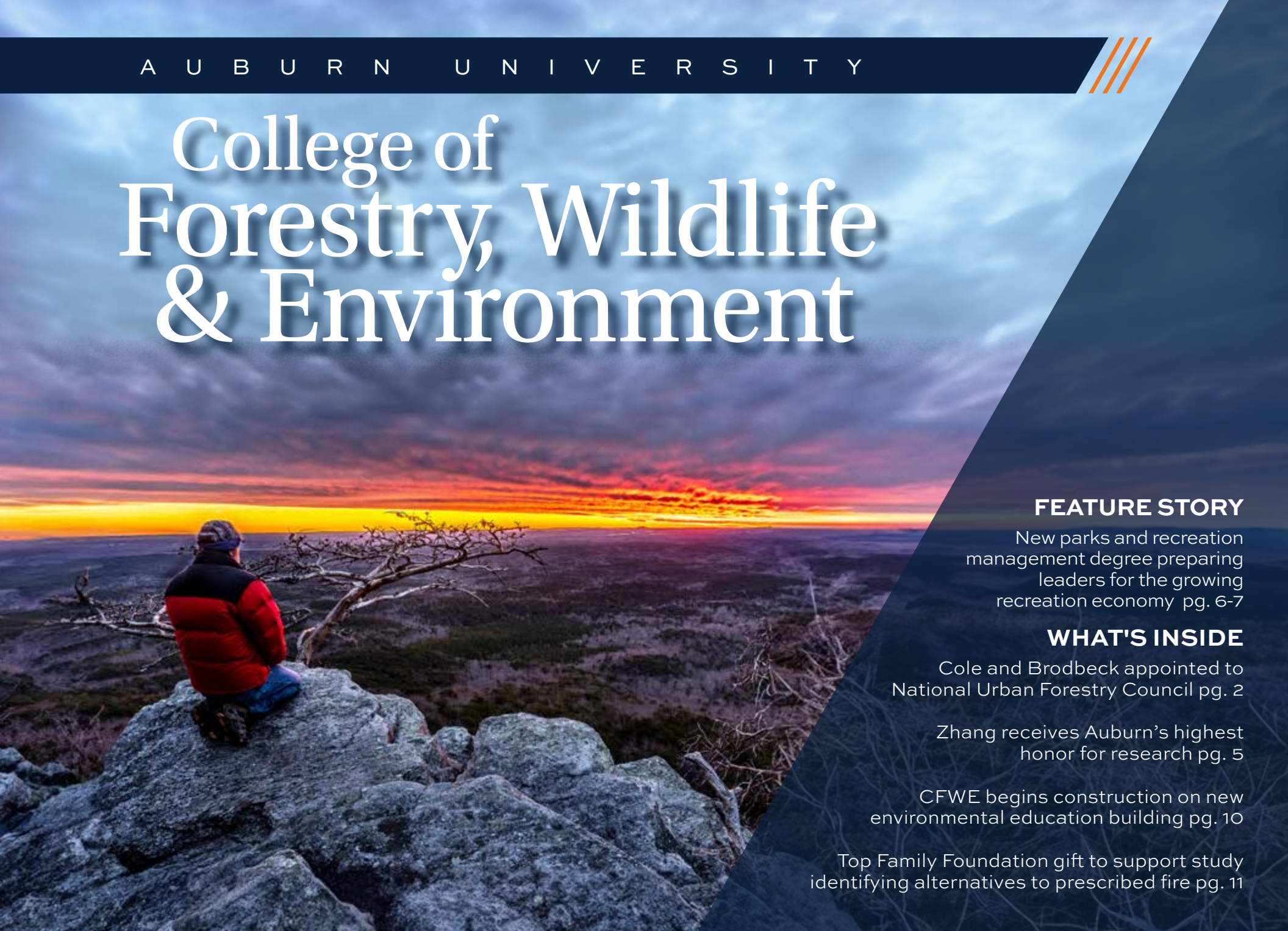




College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment



FEATURE STORY

New parks and recreation management degree preparing leaders for the growing recreation economy pg. 6-7

WHAT'S INSIDE

Cole and Brodbeck appointed to National Urban Forestry Council pg. 2

Zhang receives Auburn's highest honor for research pg. 5

CFWE begins construction on new environmental education building pg. 10

Top Family Foundation gift to support study identifying alternatives to prescribed fire pg. 11

CFWE NEWS • Fall 2023

Working with Nature for Society's Well Being

In This Issue

- Administration2-3
- Academics & Learning 4
- Research & Discovery 5, 8-9
- Extension & Outreach 10
- Alumni & Friends 11-12

Upcoming Events

- Advisory Council, 3/19-20
- Awards Banquet, 4/17



cfwe.auburn.edu/giving
Learn how you can support the CFWE.



cfwe.auburn.edu/newsletter
Visit our website to read past issues and access digital content related to stories you see here. When you see one of the icons below, you know more content is available online.



website



photo gallery



video



related articles



CFWE celebrates graduates and families
602 Duncan Drive



Career Fair provides networking opportunities for students

On Campus & Beyond

Visit our [flicker site](#) to view our photo gallery or cfwe.auburn.edu for more stories.



Scholarship event recognizes philanthropy and student achievement



CFWE welcomes new students to campus

602 Duncan Drive
1161 W. Sanford Ave., Bldg. 8
Auburn, AL 36849-0001

AUBURN
College of Forestry,
Wildlife and Environment



NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
AUBURN, AL
PERMIT NO. 9

THE DEAN



I am pleased to share that the college launched a new degree program at the close of the fall 2023 semester. The parks and recreation management degree program will provide outstanding career opportunities while serving the citizens and communities of our state and the country.

In these pages, you'll also find stories that highlight the incredible work of our faculty, such as the cat predation research by Christopher Lepczyk and Jean Fante-Lepczyk that has sparked conversation around the world. We also pay tribute to the accomplishments of Daowei Zhang, associate dean of research, whose influential research on forest economics was recently recognized with Auburn's most distinguished award.

Aubie's fans will enjoy the story about how the CFWE is working with other institutions to help study and protect tigers in the wild. We were also excited to begin construction on a new environmental educational building at the Kreher Preserve and Nature center that will enhance our educational outreach in Auburn while showcasing the beauty and strength of cross-laminated timber (CLT) for residential and commercial construction.

Some of the other highlights include the award of Youth Conservationist of the Year to wildlife student Ally Cobern; details about Aniruddha Belsare's work on modeling chronic wasting disease in deer populations is assisting policymakers; and the appointment of Michelle Cole, one of our dedicated staff members, to a national advisory council position by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

Across the board, CFWE students, faculty and alumni are hard at work making contributions to the state, country and the world. I am honored to be part of this work and cannot wait to see what 2024 brings for Auburn University and our college.

War Eagle!

Janaki R. R. Alavalapati, Emmett F. Thompson Dean

Administration

Auburn University urban forestry experts appointed to National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council

by Allison Killingsworth

Michelle Cole, an urban forestry expert and academic administrator in the CFWE, and Beau Brodbeck, assistant director of field operations for the Alabama Cooperative Extension System, have been appointed to the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council by Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack.

Operating under the direction of Congress, the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council oversees the Forest Service's National Urban and Community Forestry Program. The council provides urban natural resources recommendations to the Secretary of Agriculture and other related federal agencies.

Established in 1990, the council serves the American people by fostering the growth and management of urban and community forests. Comprising professionals, academics, citizens and government volunteers, the group aims to improve local communities' health and well-being.

As part of its responsibilities, the council formulates grant categories for the Urban and Community Forestry grant program, aligning them with the action plan's seven goals. Additionally, they recommend grant proposals to the Forest Service for funding consideration.

"I have always wanted to be able to share my urban forestry knowledge and perspective to help others on the local, regional and national levels. I am so excited that I am on the council now and will be able to leave a mark in the urban forestry field that I love so much," said Cole.

Cole, an alumna of Alabama A&M University with a background in forest management and a graduate of Auburn University with a master's in adult education, brings a wealth of knowledge and experience to the council. At the CFWE, she serves as an academic administrator, providing guidance to forestry and natural resource majors. Additionally, Cole advises Auburn's Minorities in Agriculture, Natural Resources and Related Sciences (MANRRS) chapter.

Cole's role on the National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council highlights the importance of civic engagement for CFWE students at Auburn University. She hopes to demonstrate the transformative impact that active civic participation can have on shaping the future of environmental and forestry initiatives, inspiring students to influence positive change within their communities and fields of study.

Alongside Cole, Brodbeck was selected to serve on the council as the USDA Extension Service representative. His areas of expertise include the care and management of trees in urban landscapes, human dimensions of urban forest management and circular labor migration programs. Brodbeck holds a doctorate from Auburn University and is also an Alabama registered forester.

"Michelle and Beau are both passionate urban forestry stewards and we take great pride in their appointment to this esteemed national advisory committee," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment.



Michelle Cole, urban forestry expert and academic administrator in the CFWE.



Beau Brodbeck, assistant director of field operations for ACES.

"Their dedication and expertise will undoubtedly contribute significantly to the council's mission, reflecting the caliber of professionals we foster within our community."

– Dean Alavalapati

Focused on tiger conservation: Auburn's Tigers United partners with institution in India

by Amy Burtch

In support of the Tigers United University Consortium, which includes Auburn University, Clemson University, the University of Missouri and Louisiana State University, CFWE leadership recently signed a new International Memorandum of Understanding (IMOU) with India's Forest College and Research Institute (FCRI) Hyderabad, of Telangana State to advance tiger conservation through research and outreach.

Priyanka Varghese, dean of FCRI Hyderabad, came to Auburn's campus to sign the IMOU.

"We have a huge population of tigers in our country, and Auburn is looking to support tiger conservation, so we thought it would be right to partner with Auburn."

– Priyanka Varghese

Tigers United University Consortium Director Brett Wright of Clemson said the IMOU is characterized by four tenets: education and training; research; application of technology; and awareness, specifically with students.

The Makings of a Consortium

The original idea for the consortium came from Clemson University President Jim Clements. At the time, Clements was chair of the board for the Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities.

From there, the idea grew into a trip of Clemson and Auburn provosts and faculty members to visit tiger reserves and sanctuaries in India, to better understand tiger conservation challenges and to consider how their universities could help, according to Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson dean of CFWE and Auburn's Tigers United coordinator.

Following the trip, the group recruited Missouri and LSU and partnered with the Global Tiger Forum (GTF), headquartered in New Delhi and spanning 13 tiger range countries.

These efforts were formalized in 2018, when the four university provosts launched Tigers United University Consortium, an initiative to promote tiger conservation in the wild.

Tigers United at Auburn

After forming the initiative, Auburn Provost Vini Nathan provided CFWE with resources to support two doctoral students studying tiger conservation; Alavalapati recruited Vasavi Prakash and Shivkumar Chennappa in 2019.

"We are thankful for the generosity of Dr. Nathan to contribute monies, but we also sought to establish a partnership with tiger range countries in which they would come to the table with resources, whether dollars, time or logistics," said Alavalapati.

Therefore, Tigers United explored options to secure partner institutions in tiger range countries to share costs of the initiative and to advance its mission and vision. Alavalapati learned in spring 2023 that FCRI Hyderabad was striving to advance tiger conservation via graduate education.

Alavalapati saw an opportunity for a partnership with FCRI Hyderabad and began brainstorming what that would look like.

How Does This Partnership Work?

Alavalapati is pleased with how the details settled in the Auburn and FCRI IMOU and believes it can serve as a model for partnerships with other global institutions.



Janaki Alavalapati (left), Priyanka Varghese (center) and Brett Wright participated in the Tigers United IMOU Signing between Auburn University and Forest College and Research Institute Hyderabad.

"We are so fortunate that we have found an institution to partner with and show the rest of the tiger range countries that there is a model."

– Dean Alavalapati

In fact, Wright believes this model could be used to approach other countries like Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand. According to Alavalapati, here is how the model works:

- The FCRI has three to four graduate students apply for Auburn's master's or doctoral program. Auburn then selects one to two students to participate in a program.
- Upon admittance, the students will be assigned one Auburn faculty member and one FCRI faculty member as co-advisors.
- The students' research objectives are agreed upon by both institutions.
- The students complete classroom education at Auburn and conduct field work in India.
- Auburn covers students' expenses on its campus; FCRI covers students' expenses in India.
- The agreement is initially in place for six years.

At the IMOU signing on Auburn's campus, Varghese praised the practicality of the agreement.

"We have the ground to protect tigers and work for tiger conservation, and Auburn is willing to take up the conservation work. So, this would be a very good area to work together," said Varghese.

Tigers United IMOU to Benefit Research and Future

Alavalapati, Wright and Varghese clearly see the benefit of the IMOU for students' research and future tiger conservation.

Potential research topics include technology-based monitoring of tigers, tiger habitat movement, tigers' interaction with herbivores, tiger's water access and tiger-human conflict, according to Alavalapati.

"In India, our partnerships with GTF and now FCRI will ensure a strong tie to the world's preeminent tiger range country moving forward. We are grateful for their support in navigating the country's logistics, permitting and culture."

– Brett Wright

Varghese foresees the partnership driving "lots of new ideas and conservation strategies from different parts of the world to promote and conserve the tiger."

Stakeholder leadership meeting fosters collaboration, enhances services



Dean Alavalapati leads a discussion at the Alfa, COA, CFWE and ACES meeting.

Leaders from the Alabama Farmers Federation, Auburn University and Alabama Extension convened for a meeting on September 29 at the Federation's home office in Montgomery. Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of

the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, was present to represent the college.

During the meeting, Alavalapati provided updates on the college's new personnel and discussed the Deer Population Study Committee alongside William Green, an

alumnus of CFWE who serves as the commodity director at the Alabama Farmers Federation.

The Deer Population Study Committee, comprising 12 individuals, was established to find practical solutions to address farmers' deer-related issues and challenges. This effort includes developing programs that make targeted use of venison, as existing regulations currently prohibit the processing of deer obtained under depredation permits.

During the meeting, attendees provided a review of the Alfa Scholarship program, among other topics. Presented by Matthew Durdin, Paul Patterson

and Alavalapati, the assessment provided insights about the scholarship's performance to enhance the educational opportunities in Alabama for individuals preparing for careers in agriculture and agribusiness.

The biannual meeting, typically held in Montgomery, provides a forum for the organization leaders to engage in discussions on pertinent topics to enhance cooperation and benefit the agricultural and educational sectors in the region through collaboration and information sharing.

College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

CFWE NEWS • Fall 2023

Emmett F. Thompson Dean Janaki R.R. Alavalapati
 Assoc. Dean of Academic Affairs.....Todd Steury
 Assoc. Dean of Research.....Daowei Zhang
 Extension CoordinatorMark Smith
 Managing Editor.....Jamie Anderson
 Contributing Editor.....Jessica Nelson
 Contributing Writer.....Allison Killingsworth
 Designer.....Kelly Knowles

Contact Us

The CFWE newsletter is distributed to alumni and friends of the college. Inquiries and suggestions concerning the newsletter should be directed to the college's Office of Communications and Marketing at the address below.

Auburn University
 College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment
 Office of Communications and Marketing
 602 Duncan Drive • Auburn, AL 36849
 334-844-9248 • cfwecom@auburn.edu

Giving

Questions concerning the college's development program, including annual and corporate giving, planned gifts and estate planning should be directed to the Office of Advancement at 602 Duncan Drive, Auburn, AL 36849. Inquiries may also be made to Heather Crozier via email at vannhea@auburn.edu or by phone at 334-844-2791.



AUBURN
 College of Forestry,
 Wildlife and Environment



cfwe.auburn.edu

Auburn University is an equal opportunity educational institution/employer. Produced by the CFWE Office of Communications and Marketing.

CFWE appoints timber investment expert Marc Walley as Weaver Professor

by Allison Killingsworth

Registered forester and timber investment expert Marc Walley has been named the Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver Professor in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment. In this role, Walley will advance the college's forestry teaching, research and scholarship.

Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver established the professorship to recognize Auburn University's commitment to academic excellence in forestry programs. The endowment aims to support forestry teaching in the private sector, emphasizing expertise in forestry business and finance.

Walley's duties will encompass teaching undergraduate and graduate courses, coordinating seminars and symposia on pertinent topics, conducting research and interacting with students and faculty on diverse forestry-related subjects.

After earning a bachelor's degree in forestry from Auburn University, Walley joined Scott Paper Company in Mobile, Ala., contributing to its timberland management and strategic operations. In 1994, he joined Forest Investment Associates (FIA), advancing the company's

expansion and eventually assuming the role of President and CEO. Under his guidance, FIA emerged as a global leader in forestland investment advising, managing over two million acres of timberland investments.

As Weaver Professor, Walley will teach "Forestry in the Private Sector," a course designed to educate students on wood purchasing, timber harvesting, timberland management and essential business skills. Walley's experience in the industry, including his tenure at Scott Paper Company and leadership at FIA, positions him as an asset to this professorship.

Walley has also held several leadership roles in service to the forestry industry. He is a longtime member of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment's Advisory Council and previously served as chair of its campaign leadership team. In 2017, Walley was nominated and received the college's Outstanding Alumni Award.

"Marc Walley's appointment as the Weaver Professor marks a significant milestone for our college. His wealth of experience and leadership in



the forestry industry aligns seamlessly with our commitment to academic excellence," said Dean Janaki Alavalapati.

"We are confident that his expertise will elevate our programs, providing students with unparalleled insights into the dynamic world of forestry."

– Dean Alavalapati

The forestry program at Auburn University integrates cutting-edge theory and hands-on field practice, preparing the next generation of professionals with the knowledge and practical experience necessary for success in various career fields. For more information on Auburn University's forestry degree program, visit cfwe.auburn.edu/forestry.

CFWE wildlife student awarded Youth Conservationist of the Year by the Alabama Wildlife Federation

by Allison Killingsworth



Alli Cobern, a wildlife ecology and management senior, was awarded the Youth Conservationist of the Year Award at the 2023 Alabama Wildlife Federation Governor's Conservation Achievement Awards banquet. The Alabama Wildlife Federation (AWF), in conjunction with Alabama Power Company and PowerSouth Energy co-sponsored the event which took place on Friday, August 4, 2023, at The Marriott Legends at Capitol Hill in

Prattville, Ala. Governor Kay Ivey commended the awardees through an exclusive congratulatory video prepared for the occasion.

Cobern served as a summer camp counselor for two years at the Alabama Nature Center. In 2020, she interned at the center and aided in the rain garden installation and habitat design for educational animals. She also crafted and installed educational displays at the facility.

As a lifelong Alabama resident, Cobern has a deep appreciation for the state's biodiversity. At Auburn, her undergraduate research involves studying the impacts of feral and free-ranging dogs on native species, allowing her to explore invasive species management and species conservation.

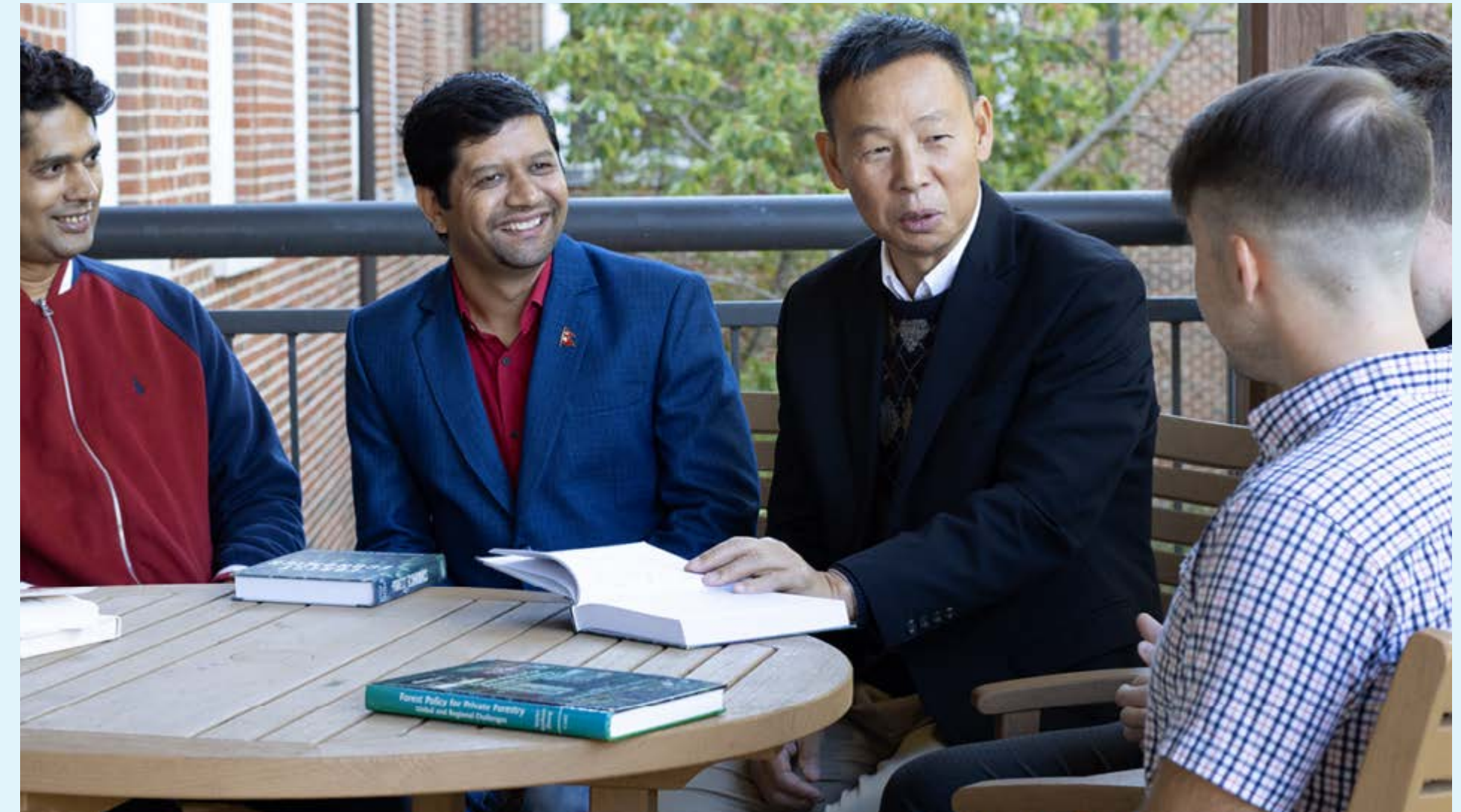
She serves as a CFWE student ambassador, is an inductee of the Honors College, and is a

member of the student chapter of The Wildlife Society.

Upon graduation, she intends to pursue a master's degree with the long-term goal of providing research-based solutions to policymakers and enhancing both conservation awareness and practices.

Zhang receives Auburn's highest honor of research excellence

by Allison Killingsworth and Jessica Nelson



Daowei Zhang is shown with current graduate students from left to right: Sariful Islam, Ghanashyau Khanal, Michael McIntosh and Mathew Fletcher.

Daowei Zhang, the Alumni and George W. Peake Jr. Professor and associate dean of research in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, has been honored as the recipient of Auburn's 2023 Creative Research & Scholarship Award in the Sciences, Medical Sciences, Engineering and Agriculture.

Auburn University established the Creative Research & Scholarship Awards to honor faculty who have demonstrated excellence through research, scholarly work and creative contributions in their respective fields.

From the beginning of his career, Zhang focused on the world's big questions. When he began his undergraduate studies at age 16, he was interested in photosynthesis, which he saw as pivotal to the world's greatest problems, from timber shortage to food insecurity. He wanted to work in tree physiology, studying whether the basic mechanisms of tree growth could be improved and made more efficient. Even a small difference, he reasoned, could have staggering implications for this once abundant but diminishing natural resource.



In 1983, during his senior year, a one-month study trip through historically forest-rich areas of southern China changed the course of his career.

Zhang saw huge swaths of land that could grow trees but were not. These regions had the climate, land, labor and capital to grow productive forests, yet the land was barren. This question haunted him, and he realized that the technical side of forestry wasn't the path of inquiry that would lead him to answers.

From China to Auburn, A Life's Work Begins

Working in China's Ministry of Forestry confirmed his idea that politics and economics had a far greater impact on the volume of the world's forests than tree physiology. Inspired by this philosophy, Zhang pursued two graduate degrees in forest economics and policy from universities in China and Canada.

Since then, Zhang has emerged as one of the world's leading experts on forest economics and forest policy. Beginning with a series of articles published in the late 1990s, his work on promoting forests through secure property rights has influenced policy not only in China, Canada and the United States but around the world. The global influence of his research spans topics ranging from deforestation, environmental regulations and forest land ownership to political economy, trade and finance.

After earning his doctorate from the University of British Columbia, Canada, Zhang

accepted an assistant professor position at Auburn University in 1994 and attained full professor in 2003. His tenure has included over 130 publications, including eight books, and more than \$4.7 million in extramural research grants. His 2021 book, "From Backwoods to Boardrooms: The Rise of Institutional Investment in Timberland," received the 2022 Outstanding Achievement Award from the Renewable Natural Resources Foundation.

Although this award may seem like the culmination of a stellar career, Zhang has no thoughts of slowing down. "The accomplishment I'm most proud of is the next one," he said.

Mentoring a Culture of Excellence

Zhang also takes pride in the success of his former and current students. His approach is to treat his graduate students as colleagues and to try to pass on the lessons he felt were critical for his own success. "I tell my students always to go higher, tackle the bigger problems," he said. "And be guided with honesty and integrity in everything; sacrificing integrity is the one mistake you cannot make."

In his 29 years at Auburn, Zhang has mentored 28 graduate students specializing in forest economics and policy, including 19 doctoral candidates.

Joseph Godwin is a senior model validation manager at Regions Bank and a former Auburn student.

"What sets Daowei apart is his unique skill in seamlessly integrating economic theory and methods, addressing crucial issues in forestry."

– Joseph Godwin

Yanshu Li, an associate professor at the Warnell School of Forestry and Natural Resources at the University of Georgia, appreciates the emphasis on problem-solving she learned from Zhang, but even more, she remembers his encouragement.

"I had received a rejection letter from a journal for my first research manuscript," she said. "He said, 'Put it aside for the moment. If the research idea is sound, just keep polishing it.' His words have been a source of inspiration for me when facing research obstacles, giving me the courage to overcome them."

As the award recipient, Zhang will represent the CFWE on the Creative Research & Scholarship Award Selection Committee, commencing in the 2024 program year. His portrait will be displayed alongside previous award recipients in Samford Hall.

"We are immensely proud of Dr. Zhang's remarkable achievements," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of

"We strive to cultivate a culture of innovation and excellence in research in our college. His recognition is a testament to our commitment to advancing knowledge and making a positive impact on the world."

– Dean Alavalapati

/// THE COLLEGE OF FORESTRY WILDLIFE & ENVIRONMENT'S NEW PARKS AND RECREATION MANAGEMENT DEGREE: Preparing leaders for the growing recreation economy

by Jessica Nelson



The College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment is launching the state's first parks and recreation management undergraduate degree program to prepare students to lead an industry that is increasingly recognized as vital to well-being, community growth and diversification.

"As access to parks, recreation facilities and programs has become more widely understood as a marker of health and wellness, faculty in the CFWE developed the new major to address a growing demand for professionals with expertise in these areas," said Wayde Morse, professor of conservation social sciences and faculty lead of the new major.

"One of the things that distinguishes this program from similar majors at other regional universities is a focus on recreation access and human health, which are critical issues for Alabama and major topics in the field."

– Wayde Morse



ADDRESSING HEALTH AND ACCESS THROUGH PARK MANAGEMENT

Being outdoors is a vital component of human health, both mental and physical, says Morse. Not only the well-known benefits of being active and a healthy dose of vitamin D, but also the simple relaxation and de-stressing effects.

However, some communities have fewer opportunities for outdoor recreation, further widening the health differences between populations. "So this was one of the themes we tried to build on," said Morse. "How can our program work to increase access to outdoor recreation?"

With coursework on health and access, the program aims to address these issues specific to Alabama but applicable to many areas nationwide. One of the ways they tried to answer that question is the addition of a concentration in community park and recreation management, a unique feature among comparable programs.



Michael Brunson, CPRP, was newly hired as a professor of practice for the degree, and will lead courses in programming and interpretation.

Recreational opportunities not only benefit the individual; there are systemic ripple effects for local communities, governments and society at large.

"In protecting a park, you're protecting the ecosystem services that land provides," Morse said.

He points out that recreation also draws visitors, along with tourism dollars, and helps communities attract more employers and industries.

"Water quality, climate, biodiversity and often social and cultural attributes are also provided as you visit sites like Gulf State Park or the Great Smoky Mountains National Park."

– Wayde Morse

EXPANDING RECREATION INDUSTRY DRIVES OPPORTUNITY

Outdoor recreation is big business. According to the U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, the outdoor recreation economy represented



Located in Notasulga, Ala., Crooked Oaks is a 415-acre property recently gifted to Auburn University's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment. The former homestead of Auburn football coach Pat Dye, the farm is the most recent addition to the college's experiential learning laboratories that will be available to students pursuing the new parks and recreation major.

almost 2% of the total U.S. GDP in 2021. Local parks and recreation agencies supported more than 4.3 million jobs in 2019.

From 2012 to 2022, the Alabama Department of Labor reported a 13.7% increase in the number of recreational workers' jobs, which is projected to increase by 10% over the next ten years. With this growth in high-quality outdoor recreation opportunities, the state is anticipated to attract more high-tech and other industries to Alabama.

"We are making significant investments throughout our state parks, including improving campgrounds and adding mountain biking trails, kayak launches and infrastructure. These enhancements are attracting new visitors and creating an increased need across the state for trained personnel to operate and manage these properties," said Matthew Capps, deputy director of Alabama State Parks.

In recognition of the role of outdoor recreation in attracting new industries, the Innovate Alabama Commission recently established the Council on Outdoor Recreation to focus on expanding these opportunities statewide.

The new degree will provide professional workforce training to capitalize on this movement to expand and enhance Alabama's outdoor recreation industry.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING AT WORK

The CFWE is well known for the experiential learning experiences it offers students within its core majors, which will also be a foundational pillar of the new parks and recreation management degree.

"To expand on the curriculum, program leaders are working with local and county governments, state and national parks and organizations like YMCA summer camps to create internship opportunities, but many opportunities are available in Auburn and even within the college itself, such as within the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center," said Todd Steury, CFWE's associate dean of academic affairs.

Steury said these experiences will enhance the career readiness of students who will benefit professionally from the real-world situations they encounter.

"A lot of this hands-on learning will be service based," said Allie McCreary, assistant professor of parks and recreation.

"Our students will be engaging with organizations in the community to create and implement programs that connect people in the region to recreation resources and opportunities."

– Allie McCreary

Like other CFWE majors, the curriculum will feature an immersive summer practicum experience that may be held at one of the college's properties, such as the recently gifted Crooked Oaks, the former homestead of Auburn football coach Pat Dye. The practicum will expose students to outdoor skills like recreation activity programming and wilderness exploration, emphasizing program themes of health and accessibility.

In addition to regular coursework, students will earn micro-credentials in subjects like wilderness first aid, Leave No Trace, adventure guiding, trail building, interpretation, environmental education, camping essentials and ropes courses. "These classes teach hands-on skills, but they're also about team-building," Morse said. "They are often the classes that students remember long after graduation."

ONE DEGREE, TWO CAREER PATHS

Students began enrolling in the major for the spring 2024 semester with options to specialize in either nature-based park and recreation management (i.e. within state and national parks, forests and other public lands) or community-based parks and recreation.

One of the textbooks that will be used across courses is published by the National Recreation and Park Association, with its core competencies built into the coursework. The integration of these competencies will prepare graduates to sit for a national exam to become a Certified Park and Recreation Professional by the end of their first year of employment.



Auburn faculty Wayde Morse and Allie McCreary will lead the new parks and recreation management major in the college. Here they are shown at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, an outreach facility of the college that will be a location for student internships and experiential learning.

After graduation, students can look forward to plentiful career opportunities with public agencies or private industry. Community parks and recreation professionals will manage facilities, run programming in local recreation centers, parks, trails and sports facilities, and plan public events like festivals, parades, farmers markets and races.

Graduates of the nature-based concentration are prepared to help administer public and private recreation lands like state and national parks, forests, reservoirs and refuges, manage facilities like trails, campgrounds and visitor centers, and offer interpretation and adventure programs and guiding.

"The diverse resources in Auburn and around the state provide the ideal training ground for this field of study."

– Dean Alavalapati



Auburn faculty involved in establishing the new major, Allie McCreary and Wayde Morse, examine a piece of accessible play equipment at the City of Auburn's new Town Creek accessible playground. The new major will feature coursework on health and access to address societal issues specific to Alabama but applicable to many areas nationwide.

"The college is uniquely prepared to provide students and employers a level of career preparedness unrivaled by other programs in the country," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment.

The new parks and recreation management bachelor's degree was approved by Auburn University's Board of Trustees at its June 9 meeting and approved by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education in December 2023.

For more information about the degree, scan the QR code or contact the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment's Office of Student Services at workingwithnature@auburn.edu.



Promoting solutions: Belsare's model drives disease management in deer

by Amy Burtch



Belsare is pictured with Kayla Alston, a graduate student in his research lab.

established in the population. The verdict is still out as to whether CWD can infect humans.

Belsare's History with CWD Research

Belsare began studying CWD as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Missouri. In 2012, the Missouri Department of Conservation discovered its first CWD case and sought the best strategy to promptly detect cases in its deer populations.

"I had the idea that we should not limit the scope of modeling to just one state when we can instead make a framework which other agencies would be able to use."

– Aniruddha Belsare

The agency asked Belsare to develop a modeling framework for the state.

Belsare went on to develop a customizable and portable modeling framework, OvCWD, that any state or county could use to understand CWD threats and predict how the disease would spread in regional populations.

How Does Computer Modeling Work?

Agent-based modeling is a relatively new approach that can be used for other disease systems, not just CWD, but how does it work?

Belsare developed OvCWD, a mechanistic simulation model that generates a realistic artificial computer population of a host species like white-tailed deer. Agent-based models are formulated using detailed knowledge about individuals, their behavior and the landscape they occupy to simulate population dynamics and community interactions. These models facilitate virtual experimentation that is difficult to perform in the real world.

This helps wildlife agencies since many will need to manage wildlife diseases even when information about those diseases is limited.

Belsare's Model Facilitates Decision-Making

Wildlife agencies use adaptive resource management, meaning they make decisions based on the current best available knowledge, and as that knowledge improves, they add it to the decision-making process to make better decisions.

This is where Belsare comes in. For CWD management, he provides a tool that uses the best available data for regional deer populations to run the simulations. Insights gained from the simulations then inform disease control strategies. Wildlife agencies can thus make defensible decisions for managing diseases like CWD.

So far, OvCWD model has been used by the Missouri Department of Conservation and the Michigan Department of Natural Resources to evaluate locally relevant harvest strategies for managing CWD in their respective deer populations. OvCWD model was also used to assess CWD surveillance of reindeer populations in Norway.

Everything's Bigger in Texas

Belsare has been working with the Texas Parks and Wildlife Division (TPWD), which has double the problem with CWD because it has two deer populations of concern: deer in high-fenced properties and wild deer in the landscape. Belsare adapted OvCWD to simulate the combination of the high-fenced property deer and wild deer populations to improve the chances of early detection of CWD.

Thanks to a USDA grant this year, Belsare now has funding to focus on CWD surveillance in high-fenced breeding facilities in Texas.

Hands-on Learning is Best

Belsare uses a hands-on approach to help users become comfortable with his models.

Through a Safari Club International Foundation grant, Belsare organized sensitization workshops with several wildlife agencies, including the TPWD.

In this scenario, Belsare serves as a troubleshooter while users work directly with the model interface. The model starts making sense when the user plays with it; they then ask relevant questions and start thinking about adapting the models for their situations.

"That's when we get collaborative or participatory modeling," said Belsare. "I need agency personnel with mud on their boots — who have real-world experience working with deer populations — to interrogate and use the models."

Proactive Prevention

Belsare's goal is clear: he wants to convince agencies to take a proactive approach to get ahead of CWD.

"Do not wait until you first detect CWD in your state — agencies must employ a preemptive strategy to prevent the establishment of CWD in their populations," said Belsare.

"This is where the model comes into play. We can design strategies to prevent or delay the establishment of the disease in regional deer populations."

– Aniruddha Belsare

CFWE study reveals impact of free-ranging cat predation on global diversity

by Allison Killingsworth

Researchers in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment have co-authored a study about the dietary breadth of free-ranging cats and the impact of their predation on global biodiversity.

Recently published in Nature Communications, the study unveils the global impact of free-ranging house cats (*Felis catus*) on biodiversity by comprehensively assessing the species they consume. The research study, co-led by Auburn professors Chris Lepczyk and Jean Fantle-Lepczyk, drew from over 150 years of data across hundreds of studies from around the world.

"Cats are generalist predators responsible for significant population declines and several species going extinct.

Thus, we wanted to develop as complete a picture as possible of all the species they affect through predation and scavenging," said Lepczyk.

Outdoor cats have been documented to consume 2,084 species, including 9% of all birds and 6% of all mammals in the world, which the researchers found surprising. Among the noted species, nearly 17% are recognized as being of conservation concern by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN).

While cats are sometimes believed to consume only common species or pests, such as rats, the authors discovered that cats are eating a diverse range of mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and insects of all sizes and abundances.

Cats consume the broadest array of species of any predator known. To compound the issue, their research suggests that more species are likely to have been consumed than have been documented so far, implying that the actual number of species consumed by cats is significantly larger.

Cats have long been known as predators, but this research illustrates that cats are not just eating a small set of species or are only problems on islands. Rather, cats are eating species in all the ecosystems of the world in which they are found. In revealing this impact, the study emphasizes the need to address the adverse effects of cat predation.



"Having a greater understanding of the species that cats affect can aid in both policy and management initiatives."

– Chris Lepczyk

The self-funded research study, conducted over 20 years, was co-authored by scientists including Kylee Dunham, a former CFWE graduate student now employed at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and international ecologists from France and Australia.

Valente awarded project to assess Alabama's biodiversity

by Jessica Nelson

The Alabama Department of Conservation of Natural Resources (ADCNR) has awarded the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment a five-year project to examine the effects of habitat management on wildlife communities using Alabama's Wildlife Management Areas (WMAs).

Most land in Alabama is privately owned, with only 4% of its lands protected. As ecologists are staring down the ongoing global biodiversity crisis, the state continues taking action to ensure conservation efforts are as effective and efficient as possible.

"We have to be fastidious about taking care of public lands in Alabama," said Jonathon Valente, an Auburn assistant research professor in the CFWE and assistant unit leader for USGS' Alabama Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, who will lead the multidisciplinary research team conducting the study.

The project builds on previous work funded by ADCNR for the first Inventory and Conservation Planning Project (ICP) conducted on ADCNR lands between 2008 and 2010. The goal of the original project was to examine the habitat characteristics preferred by different species and use that information to build a plan for maximizing wildlife habitat for all species on WMAs.

"We will go back to those same state lands to evaluate how landscapes have changed as a function of management, assess how wildlife communities are responding and evaluate outcomes."

– Jonathon Valente

"You might call this ICP 2.0," said Valente.

One of the big questions this project hopes to answer is how habitat changes on WMAs since the last study compare to the goals outlined in ICP 1.0. In other

words, Valente said, "Did our management actions match the intended outcomes?"

Valente's team also plans to leverage remote sensing technology to assess the relative importance of these WMAs in supporting biodiversity compared to nearby private lands.

"The world is changing around those WMAs — ownership changes, development comes in — so we are thinking about how their relative importance has changed compared to the lands surrounding them."

Five CFWE graduate students will be hired to work closely on the project with Valente and other faculty with relevant expertise, including Robert Gitzen, Lana Narine, Chris Lepczyk and Janna Willoughby.

The other four graduate students will examine how the populations and communities have changed for birds, bats and mammals. Sampling will include human

observers recording bird songs and sightings, humane traps and cameras to examine mammals and specialized high-frequency audio recording devices to record bats.

The research team will receive support from ADCNR through collaboration with Amy Silvano, the assistant chief of wildlife for ADCNR who also worked on the first ICP project.

"We appreciate her institutional knowledge and enthusiasm for implementing this project," said Valente.

Monitoring the effects of management activities often isn't feasible because of budget and personnel restraints, Valente says.

"I applaud ADCNR and their effort to monitor how their actions have played out so they can better evaluate the impact of their management actions or change course where needed."

– Dean Alavalapati

Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative to unite interdisciplinary faculty for research, education, outreach

by Kelley Young



The CFWE actively promotes the use of cross-laminated timber, or CLT, a mass timber product made of southern pine and other soft woods abundantly found in the region. Using CLT has numerous benefits economically and environmentally, thereby showing promise for many industries, including developers and contractors, architects and engineers, as well as foresters and landowners.

A new interdisciplinary collaboration between colleges is set to make Auburn University a leader in the rapidly growing mass timber industry.

The Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative will work to advance research, education and outreach in mass timber design and construction with a focus on the forestry, architecture, engineering and construction industries in the Southeast.

"Mass timber building technologies represent some of the most promising solutions to the challenges associated with how we build in the 21st century," said David Hinson, associate dean and the R. Hugh Daniel Professor in the College of Architecture, Design and Construction (CADC). "Helping advance and expand the use of advanced wood building systems will translate to economic growth and jobs throughout Alabama and the region."

The Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative is comprised of faculty from across disciplines in CADC, the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) and the Samuel Ginn College of Engineering.

The organization will offer coursework, certificates and research initiatives for undergraduates, with the goal of ensuring all students in related areas of study are introduced to mass timber. Graduate students will have the opportunity to work with faculty to research mass timber production, performance, design and application, aiming to expand and accelerate the adoption of mass timber construction in the Southeast.

In terms of outreach, the collaborative plans on offering workshops and conferences both on campus and regionally,

as well as online learning resources. Faculty will share experience-based knowledge, perspective and expertise with industry professionals, taking a Southeastern forest-first approach to mass timber and aligning the construction industry with the local forest ecology.

Members of the Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative have already received more than \$12 million in extramural funding to support research in this growing field.

With some of the top research facilities in the region, Auburn University is well-equipped to dive into this collaboration. Available resources include the Advanced Structural Engineering Laboratory, the Forest Products Development Center's wood science laboratory, the CADC Research Shop's CLT press and fabrication equipment, the Robins & Morton Construction Field Lab and Rural Studio, a design-build studio in rural Alabama that allows for full-scale prototyping and performance research.

"We're getting the opportunity to test the limits of mass timber here in our Advanced Structural Engineering Laboratory for everything from designing blast-resistant structures for the Department of Defense to advancing hybrid steel-timber floor assemblies in low- and mid-rise structures," said David Roueche, a Ginn Faculty Achievement Fellow and associate professor in civil engineering. "We are excited to be pushing the boundaries

with this research, not only for the direct research benefits, but also for the talented students it is attracting to our university and the opportunity to integrate it into our timber design courses."

The Auburn Mass Timber Collaborative features expertise spanning the full spectrum of the mass timber supply chain. As the team members gear up to begin research operations, they are applying for grants, engaging industry stakeholders and reviewing campus projects that have the potential to utilize mass timber. The group is also planning the 2024 CLT Conference at Auburn.

"I'm looking forward to seeing how my colleagues' disciplines fit together," said Brian Via.

"We start with forestry, where we provide expertise on wood as a material, followed by engineering, who ensures structural safety. Then architecture helps to make these structures more functional and appealing, and the end product is a mass timber material that opens up new pathways for nonresidential construction in Alabama."

– Brian Via

CFWE begins construction of new innovative environmental education building

by Allison Killingsworth



Construction recently commenced on a new environmental education building at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC). Situated near the North College Street entrance to the nature preserve, the structure is designed to be a focal point for the community, offering an engaging space for students and visitors to experience the wonder of nature.

At the forefront of environmental education in the region, the KPNC annually welcomes tens of thousands of students of all ages to participate in a variety of programs. Featuring state-of-the-art technology resources and educational and interpretive displays, the new building will enable the KPNC to expand its diverse array of educational offerings, which include classes, workshops, events, programs and school field trips.

“We are extremely excited about the addition of the environmental education building to the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center,” said Michael Buckman, manager of the KPNC.

“For the first time, Kreher will have an interpretive hub for our visitors to explore and learn about the natural world. It will be a meeting place, a learning space and a gateway to the rest of the Kreher forest.”

– Michael Buckman

With two dynamic classrooms, the new building is anticipated to be a transformative addition to the KPNC. One classroom will be a multi-purpose space and the other will house the Woodland Wonders Nature Preschool, providing the potential to expand the Woodland Wonders catalog to include kindergarten, after-school programs and more. The building’s Discovery Corridor will exhibit KPNC’s beloved live animal collection, which often complements its education programs.

Designed with an emphasis on connectivity to the natural surroundings with modern teaching methods and practices at the forefront, the new center will feature expansive portals

that blur the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces, said Buckman.

The building will be constructed of cross-laminated timber (CLT), a mass timber product often created using southern yellow pine, as a showcase of its use as a sustainable alternative to traditional building materials. The lightweight and prefabricated attributes of CLT enable precision manufacturing, reduced on-site waste and an accelerated construction process.

CLT, classified as “renewable,” allows for the growth of new forests and trees when additional materials are needed—a stark contrast to concrete and steel, which cannot be replenished. CLT, when manufactured and utilized in construction, stores carbon within the building’s structure, preventing its release back into the atmosphere. This dual characteristic emphasizes the environmentally sustainable nature of CLT in construction.

Additionally, CLT panels exhibit strong thermal performance and fire resistance, enhancing both functionality and aesthetic appeal.

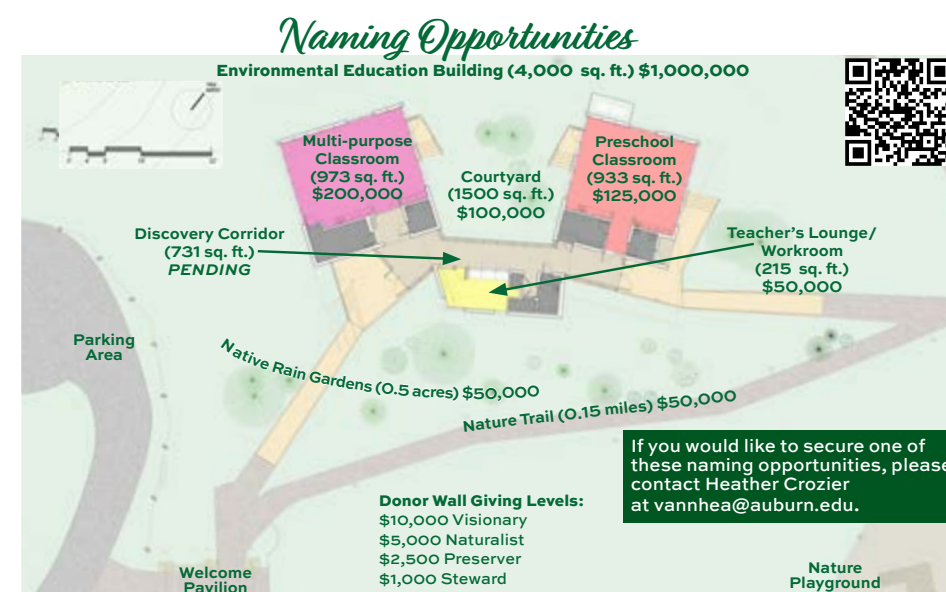
“We are thrilled that we’ll have the ability to enhance the KPNC as a community resource,” said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment.

“The building’s integration with nature and enhanced features will undoubtedly contribute to our shared mission of fostering environmental stewardship for those of all ages.”

– Dean Alavalapati

“We look forward to the positive impact the Environmental Educational Building will have on shaping a sustainable and ecologically conscious future for our community,” said Alavalapati.

For more information scan the QR code.



Matthew Chad Blankenship Endowed Scholarship

by Jessica Nelson

Patricia and Bruce Blankenship of Scottsboro, Ala., have established the Matthew Chad Blankenship Endowed Scholarship in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) in honor of their late son.

Born in 1979, Matthew Chad Blankenship was the youngest of the couple’s three children. Blankenship graduated from Scottsboro High School in 1997 and had his senior photos taken with his hunting and fishing gear.

“He had a love for the outdoors and a heart just as big,” said his mother, Patricia Blankenship. In Blankenship’s senior year of high school, she remembers, his teachers made sure he would be at the awards ceremony to receive a brand-new award: Most Time Spent Staring out the Window and Dreaming of Hunting. She notes that as much as he loved hunting, he was equally careful about responsible practices and cared about the animals he harvested.

Blankenship attended Southern Union Community College after high school with plans to enroll at Auburn University the following fall. However, he put his educational goals on hold to prioritize marriage and family. That year, Matthew Chad Blankenship married the love of his life, Abbie Mathis Blankenship. The couple was blessed with two sons—Beau and Tyson—while Blankenship founded and built his company, Landscape Design by Chad.

Even though he had a thriving business, Blankenship had always wanted to work in game and fish industry and to earn a degree from Auburn. He was in the process of enrolling for online courses in 2007 to complete an undergraduate degree when his time was cut short by a motorcycle accident. A third son, Storm, was born after Blankenship’s death.

Family and friends remember Blankenship’s love of sports, hunting and Auburn University —

and most of all they remember the enormous amount of love he held for each member of his large extended family. “He left a great legacy of family and friends who will ensure that he will never be forgotten,” said Patricia Blankenship.

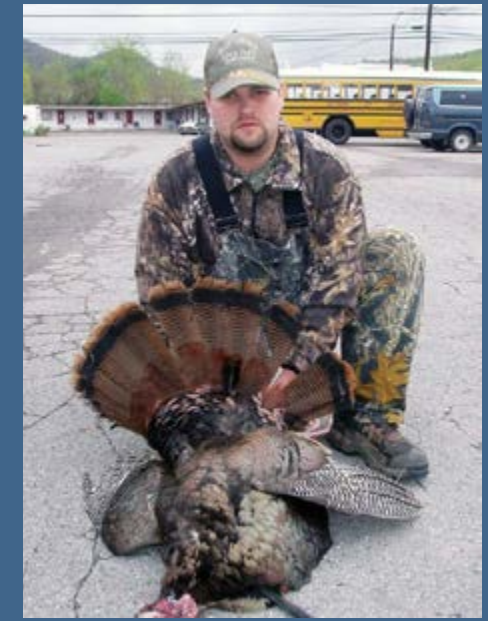
“Patricia and Bruce Blankenship have chosen a beautiful way to remember their son’s legacy of loving the outdoors and valuing education.”

– Dean Alavalapati

The Blankenship family chose to establish this scholarship in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment so other students can carry on the work Blankenship dreamed of doing—protecting and working with wildlife and the outdoors. The Matthew Chad Blankenship

Scholarship will be available to students of good academic standing enrolled in the CFWE.

“We are honored to help the Blankenship family invest in a deserving student’s education in the name of Matthew Chad Blankenship,” said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE.



Top Family Foundation gift will support Auburn University efforts to identify alternatives to prescribed fire

by Jessica Nelson



Gulsby’s project will study the effects of winter mowing, mechanical soil disturbance, and two different herbicides on understory plant communities in loblolly pine plantations throughout the Piedmont and Upper Coastal Plain of east Alabama and west Georgia and compare them to prescribed fire and to an untouched control plot.

The researchers will compare results with published information on wildlife habitat preferences to estimate the suitability of each treatment for selected wildlife. For example, wild turkeys and white-tailed deer are economically important game species that drive land management decisions across the Southeastern landscape, whereas Bachman’s sparrow and prairie warblers are songbirds of conservation concern that require grassland communities preferred by a number of declining species.

“My ultimate objective is to get helpful information into the hands of land managers to benefit the landscape.”

– Will Gulsby

“This gift from the Top Family Foundation furthers research that is needed to update land management practices for southeastern ecosystems,” said Janaki Alavalapati, Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE. “The project has the potential to benefit landowners and wildlife across the region.”

Will Gulsby, associate professor of wildlife management in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), received a gift from the Top Family Foundation to study alternatives to prescribed fire to manage early successional plant communities within ecosystems in the eastern United States.

The Top Family Foundation offers support for selected projects east of the Mississippi River that advance and support the conservation and restoration of unique habitats, natural ecosystems and wildlife corridor systems and/or ensure the diversity and abundance of

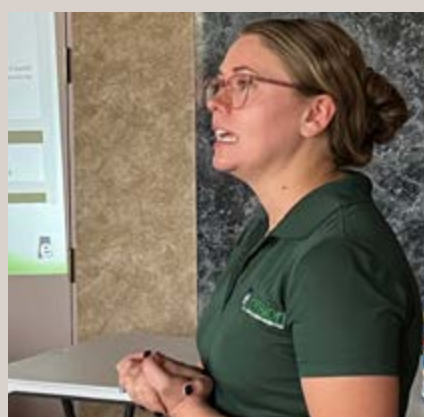
wild populations of animals and plants for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations.

The gift will support Gulsby’s research involving early successional plant communities comprised of native grasses, shrubs and wildflowers. These communities have declined by 98% in eastern North America in the 20th century, and many of the wildlife species dependent on those plant communities have declined with them, especially grassland birds like the northern bobwhite.

To thrive, these ecosystems require frequent disturbance, including human- and lightning-

Extension Spotlight Meet Kerry Steedley, regional extension agent for the Northwest region

Kerry Steedley is a regional extension agent serving the 11-county Northwest region, and her primary office is in the Colbert County courthouse in Tusculumbia, Ala. She has been employed with Alabama Extension since 2020 but shifted her role in 2022 to focus on providing education and resources to landowners and others interested in forestry, wildlife and natural resources. Whether answering client questions or providing presentations, Kerry strives to equip landowners, communities and citizens of northwest



Alabama with research-based information on how to be better stewards of their environment while meeting their land management objectives.

“My favorite part of the job is the learning something new every day. From fishponds to invasive plants, timber harvesting methods and early succession vegetation for wildlife, there’s always new knowledge to be gained and shared.”

– Kerry Steedley

John Kush wins W. Kelly Mosely award

John Kush, a research fellow in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) was recently chosen to receive the W. Kelly Mosley Environmental Achievement Award for his volunteer efforts to advance responsible natural resource stewardship in Alabama.

His leadership in educating and training volunteers on the importance and application of prescribed fire in forest management, native plant restoration and wildlife habitat creation have benefited Auburn University and extended to various areas across Alabama.

The Mosley Award for Achievement in Forestry, Wildlife, and Related Resources recognizes achievements that have resulted in the wiser use of Alabama’s renewable natural resources.

Within his role in the CFWE, Kush performs research related to forest stand dynamics, fire ecology and restoration ecology and teaches undergraduate and graduate classes related to these areas.



Kush was nominated by fellow CFWE employee Kelly Knowles.

“Through his work to enhance, develop and maintain demonstration areas at the Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest and the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, Kush has significantly bolstered the educational value of these properties, visited annually by thousands,” said Knowles.

For over three decades, the Mosley Environmental Awards Program has recognized “unsung heroes” who have substantially contributed to the responsible stewardship of Alabama’s natural resources in areas such as forestry, wildlife, fisheries, soil, water, air, wildflowers, non-game wildlife, environmental education, conservation and urban forestry.

CFWE Alum, Chuck Sykes, elected president of the international Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies

Adapted by Jessica Nelson



Chuck Sykes, Director of the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries, and an Auburn University alumnus, was elected president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, or AFWA, during its 113th Annual Meeting in Calgary, Canada.

At the meeting, Sykes expressed his gratitude and commitment to fish and wildlife conservation.

“My life has always been about conservation. This job is often not glamorous and not thanked. But the work our state agencies do is extremely important, and I am honored to be selected to serve as President of AFWA.”

– Chuck Sykes

Sykes is an advisory council member in the CFWE and has been a public voice for sound wildlife management in Alabama for many years. With this appointment, Sykes will bring his extensive experience and passion for wildlife conservation and management to the national stage.

Sykes says his focus as president will be supporting the AFWA’s legislative priorities.

One of the organization’s chief legislative priorities is a proposed Recovering America’s Wildlife Act, which would provide funds annually to state fish and wildlife agencies as well as Indian Tribes for proactive conservation, ideally securing species of concern before the need to list them under the Endangered Species Act. Other priorities focus on preventing wildlife-vehicle collisions, funding for outdoor recreation infrastructure projects that would spur economic development and action to combat the spread of animal diseases that jump to human populations.

“We are proud to see Chuck Sykes representing our college and the state of Alabama at the international level,” said Janaki Alavalapati the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE.

“His knowledge and experience will make him an excellent leader in the face of today’s challenges.”

– Dean Alavalapati

Chuck Sykes has been the Director of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries at the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources since December 2012. An avid hunter since age six, Sykes earned a degree in wildlife management from CFWE and began his career as a hunting guide before graduating. Over the years, his career path has included management of commercial hunting lodges, founding a full-service natural resource consulting firm and the creation and hosting of a television show dedicated to wildlife management and habitat restoration.

The Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies represents North America’s fish and wildlife agencies to advance sound, science-based management and conservation of fish and wildlife and their habitats in the public interest. In the organization’s 121-year history, Sykes is the fourth president to serve from the state of Alabama.

Sykes is committed to conservation, Alabama’s hunting heritage and protecting our wildlife and related natural resources. Among his notable achievements has been the inclusion of new participants in hunting and fishing through the creation of Special Opportunity Areas and the Alabama Adult Mentored Hunting Program. He involves young people, non-hunters, men and women in sharing and promoting conservation efforts. Sykes has lived in the Montgomery area for over 20 years, is happily married to his wife Gigi, and is the proud father of Syd, a 12-year-old miniature Australian Shepard. He also assists his father, Willie Sykes, with their family Charolais farm.

NEWS PROVIDED BY



ASSOCIATION of
FISH & WILDLIFE
AGENCIES

Dobson alumni profile: Building a business with the CFWE’s FBI master’s program

by Allison Killingsworth

Meet Bobby Dobson, a 2023 graduate of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment’s Forest Business and Investment master’s degree program and the owner of Taproot Investments.

A native of South Carolina, Bobby Dobson grew up on a farm raising thoroughbred horses and went to college intending to continue the family business. However, he found in college that he was more drawn to working with the land than livestock.

With this in mind, Dobson was inspired to earn a real estate license and became a broker, working with ranch real estate properties in Texas. Noticing an opportunity to restore properties his clients were passing over, Dobson formed Taproot Investments to purchase, improve and flip ranches.

Dobson credits his father-in-law, Phillip Hardee, a 1967 Auburn graduate, for his interest in timber. It resonated with his own background as well.

“He doesn’t believe in the stock market as much as he believes in things he can see and touch. And he’s always invested in timberland. I grew up in a family business that sees things through a long lens. Being able to be patient and seize opportunities when they arise spoke to me.”

Dobson and his wife, Caroleene, moved to Alabama to be closer to her family when they learned they were expecting their first child, and Dobson enrolled in an MBA program soon after. He worked on his first timberland deal right before he graduated from that program but had to rely heavily on his partner’s knowledge of timber valuation.

“I intended for Taproot Investments to become a vertically integrated timber company, owning the land, the logging and manufacturing,” said Dobson. “To achieve this vision for the company, I needed a program rooted in both business and the forest industry.”

After graduating, Dobson worked with forest management company Larson and McGowan for a time, and a colleague there showed him an Auburn brochure.

Recognizing he had found a program suited to his goals, Dobson first enrolled in the Forest Finance and Investment graduate certificate program and then built upon this course credit to earn the Forest Business Investment (FBI) master’s degree.

“The flexibility that this program had really made a difference. It’s extremely customizable, and you can adapt it according to your needs. The key is finding the right



pace, even though there might be tough times, but if I can get through it, I believe anyone can.”

One of the key aspects of the program for Dobson was the convenience of the online format. He and his family live in a 19th-century farmhouse in Pine Apple, Ala., with their two young daughters. They both work from home offices, so flexibility was imperative.

“For anyone considering the program, I would say to be honest with yourself about the amount of time you have in terms of your course load and pacing. But you can make it into exactly what you want it to be.”

Through specialized programs like the CFWE’s forest business and investment program, forestry

professionals can acquire essential business expertise, enhancing their ability to navigate the landscape of the forest industry successfully.

“I got everything I wanted out of it and more,” Dobson said. “The FBI program has accelerated the growth and direction of my business.” His five-to-ten-year plan has become a right-now plan, and the program highlighted growth areas he wouldn’t have known about otherwise.

“By the end, I felt as well-prepared to go out and build my business as anybody else. I learned at least a little about every part of the industry and how it is all interconnected”

– Bobby Dobson