

# College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment



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CFWE NEWS • Summer 2025

## Working with Nature for Society’s Well-Being

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## THE DEAN



### A Season of Growth and Impact at CFWE

This season marked a dynamic period of growth and opportunity for the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment, as students, faculty, alumni and partners came together to advance our mission through experiential learning, impactful research and community engagement.

Students gained real-world experience through innovative programs like the inaugural Parks and Recreation Management (PARK) Practicum, which offered hands-on training in outdoor leadership and resource management. Our first-ever study abroad program in Costa Rica allowed students to pursue a minor in Tropical Conservation and Sustainable Development, while the Summer Practicum continued to provide forestry and wildlife ecology majors with essential field experience.

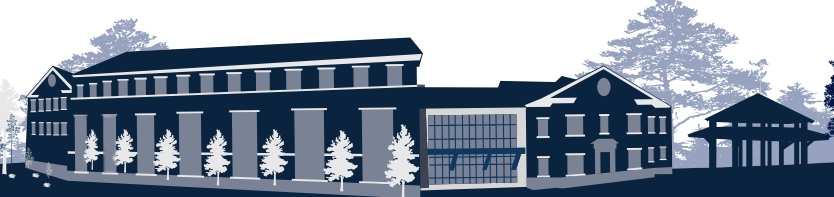
Research and outreach efforts flourished. A doctoral student's work is connecting Gulf Coast oyster farmers through communities of practice, while faculty-led genomics research is paving the way for drought-resilient bioenergy solutions. Reinforcing Auburn's leadership in forest policy dialogue, we look forward to the Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy next February, which will feature Cade Warner, president and CEO of The Westervelt Company.

Alumni and friends played a pivotal role in student success. The forestry practicum's landowner tour hosted by Gail and Phillip Jones offered students mentorship and inspiration. Auburn-affiliated leaders joined the Crooked Oaks Advisory Board to enhance operations and outreach, and the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center expanded its educational reach thanks to generous gifts, including the launch of the Emily Kling Fund for Excellence and the naming of the City of Auburn Community Classroom within the newly constructed Environmental Education Building.

Finally, we have proudly welcomed new faculty whose diverse expertise and teaching strengthen our community and the college's commitment to Auburn's land-grant mission. Together, these efforts reflect CFWE's dedication to preparing future leaders and advancing sustainable solutions for our environment.

War Eagle!

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



# Administration

## CFWE faculty achieve tenure and promotion

Please join us in congratulating our faculty on their recent promotion and tenure designations. The following achieved rank of professor: Heather Alexander and Maria Soledad Peresin. The following received tenure and promotion to associate professor: Richard Cristan, Lana Narine, Yucheng Peng and Janna Willoughby. Shown in order from left to right are Alexander, Narine, Peresin, Willoughby, Cristan and Peng.



## Crooked Oaks establishes Advisory Board

Auburn University-affiliated leaders have joined Crooked Oaks' Advisory Board to provide leadership to improve and expand Crooked Oaks' operations, community engagement and philanthropic initiatives. These efforts support the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment's teaching, research and outreach programs to advance student experiential learning, horticulture and conservation. Advisory Board members are, on the top row from left to right: Dan Moultrie, Joe Whitt, Sr., Brian Lucas; and, on the bottom row from left to right: Scott Ricks, President Kevin Savoy and James Daniel.



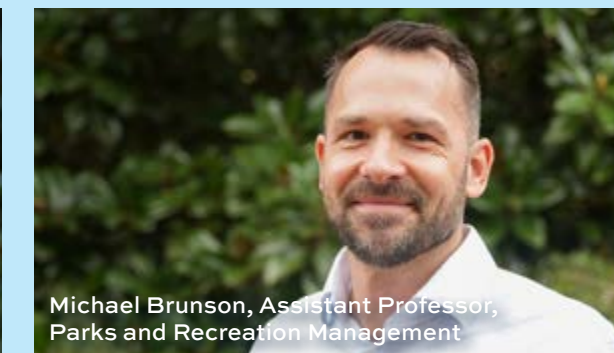
## CFWE Welcomes New Faculty *By Blair Milford*

During the last few years, the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) has recruited top academic talent for its instruction, outreach and research missions. These individuals contribute diverse perspectives, backgrounds and expertise that strengthen CFWE's dedication to Auburn's land-grant mission. Learn more about these individuals below.



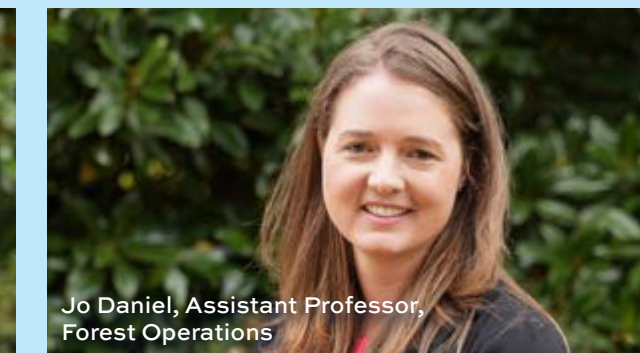
Liam Berigan, Assistant Professor, Quantitative Ecology

Liam Berigan is a wildlife ecologist who specializes in quantitative approaches to avian ecology and conservation. In addition to conducting research and teaching statistics, he provides statistical and quantitative consulting within the college. Berigan earned his doctorate in wildlife ecology from the University of Maine, where he used tracking devices to study American woodcock migration.



Michael Brunson, Assistant Professor, Parks and Recreation Management

Michael Brunson specializes in outdoor recreation, environmental interpretation and parks and protected area management. His teaching and research focus on recreational behavior, education and the relationship between visitor use and conservation. Brunson earned a master's degree in environmental studies and conservation policy from Prescott College and a doctorate in park management and conservation from Kansas State University.



Marissa Jo Daniel, Assistant Professor, Forest Operations

Marissa Jo Daniel focuses on forest operations, supply chain management and forest economics. Her teaching covers courses in forest surveying, procurement, harvesting and private sector forestry. Daniel earned a doctorate in forest operations and holds degrees in forest management, fish and wildlife biology, forest economics and policy and business administration. She has worked in forestry across the United States and internationally in countries including Senegal, Peru, Mexico, China, Canada, South Africa, Romania, New Zealand, Italy and Poland.



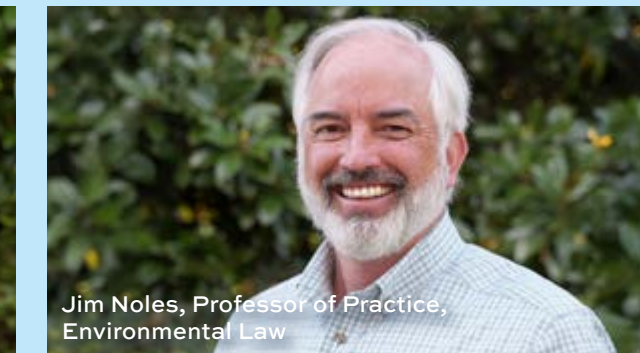
Matt Jurjonas, Assistant Professor, Conservation Social Science

Matt Jurjonas is an expert in resilience, conservation planning and community adaptation to environmental change. His research focuses on building adaptive capacity in communities responding to shifting ecological and social conditions. Jurjonas earned a doctorate in parks, recreation and tourism management from North Carolina State University. His applied perspective is shaped by professional experience as a fisheries observer in Alaska, with a watershed group in Colorado and as a conservation social science consultant in Mexico and the United States.



Annakay Newell, Extension Specialist & Assistant Professor, Forest Health

Annakay Newell specializes in plant pathology, forest health and community-focused extension. Her work examines how pests, pathogens and environmental stressors influence southern forests while creating practical strategies to help landowners and communities build resilience. Abrahams earned her doctorate in plant pathology from the University of Georgia where she investigated the life cycle, population dynamics and genomic structure of a blueberry pathogen. Her research interests center on disease ecology, forest resilience and connecting science with people.



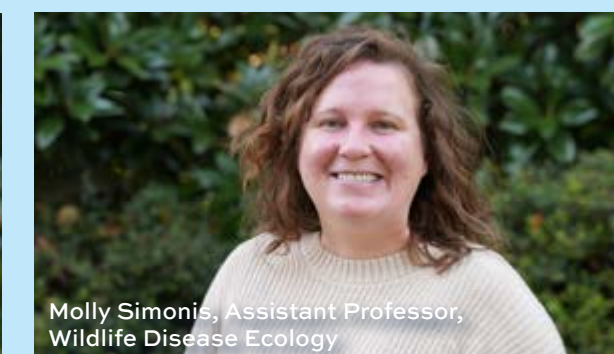
Jim Noles, Professor of Practice, Environmental Law

Jim Noles is a professor of practice in environmental law with expertise in federal environmental regulations. His teachings and professional work focus on laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Endangered Species Act. Noles earned a law degree from the University of Texas after completing his undergraduate degree in international history at the United States Military Academy at West Point. He practiced environmental law for more than 25 years before joining the CFWE to pioneer the environmental law minor program and graduate coursework.



Tim Shearman, Assistant Professor, Forest Disturbance and Resilience

Tim Shearman is an expert in forest disturbance ecology and resilience. His research focuses on how fires, hurricanes and insect or fungal outbreaks shape forested ecosystems, with an emphasis on plant traits that enable survival and reproduction after disturbances. Shearman also explores management approaches, such as prescribed fire, to maintain and restore forests while reducing wildfire risk. He earned a doctorate in forest resources from Clemson University and teaches dendrology.



Molly Simonis, Assistant Professor, Wildlife Disease Ecology

Molly Simonis is a wildlife disease ecologist whose research focuses on pathogen and immunity dynamics in North American bats. Her work combines field, laboratory and quantitative methods to explore how bats respond to infections and environmental changes, with emphasis on species in the southeastern United States. Simonis earned a bachelor's degree in environmental biology from the University of Dayton and a master's degree in biological sciences, as well as a doctorate in environmental sciences from Wright State University. Before joining the CFWE, she completed postdoctoral research at the University of Oklahoma, focusing on disease modeling and bat cellular immunity across the United States and Neotropics.



Yang Yang, Assistant Professor, Forest Soils and Biogeochemistry

Yang Yang is an expert in forest soils, biogeochemistry and critical zone science. His interests and teaching responsibilities focus on forest soils and forest biogeochemistry. Yang earned a doctorate in environmental science from the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry, specializing in nutrient cycling in terrestrial ecosystems.

## College of Forestry, Wildlife & Environment

### CFWE NEWS • Summer 2025

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### 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.

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### 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.



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## Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy to feature Cade Warner, president and CEO of The Westervelt Company, Feb. 25, 2026 By Jamie Anderson

AUBURN UNIVERSITY COLLEGE OF FORESTRY, WILDLIFE AND ENVIRONMENT

### Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy

*It Pays to Be Different: The History and Future of One of America's Most Enduring Forest Products Family Firms*

presented by,



**Cade Warner, CFA, CAIA**  
President & CEO  
The Westervelt Company

Wednesday, February 25, 2026

2:00 p.m. Lecture, Auditorium  
3:30 p.m. Reception, Legacy Ballroom

The Hotel at Auburn University  
& Dixon Conference Center

Visit [cfwe.auburn.edu](http://cfwe.auburn.edu) for  
upcoming event details.



**AUBURN**  
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Auburn University's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) will present the second annual Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture in Forest Economics and Policy and reception on Wednesday, Feb. 25, 2026, at 2 p.m. at The Hotel at Auburn University and Dixon Conference Center in Auburn, Alabama. A reception will be held immediately after.

The lecture series was established in the CFWE by the college's founding dean, Emmett F. Thompson, and his wife, ViAnn, to advance knowledge and expertise among industry professionals, faculty and students within the areas of forestry and natural resources economics and policy.

The 2026 lecture will feature Cade Warner, president and CEO of The Westervelt Company, an Alabama-based multinational timberland and forest products company. Warner will present a lecture titled "It Pays to Be Different: The History and Future of One of America's Most Enduring Forest Products Family Firms" in the hotel's Dixon Conference Center Auditorium.

During the presentation, Warner will provide a strategic overview of the Alabama forest products industry through the lens of a 140-year-old, family-owned enterprise. The lecture will explore how The

Westervelt Company has sustained long-term success by embracing differentiation, innovation, sustainability and disciplined leadership across generations.

"Mr. Warner intends to provide attendees with insights into the company's historical evolution, current operational model and forward-looking strategy for navigating market volatility, regulatory shifts and environmental imperatives," said Marc Walley, chair of the lecture planning committee, current Earl H. and Sandra H. Weaver Professor at Auburn and former president and CEO of Atlanta's Forest Investment Associates, Inc.

*"Mr. Warner will leave participants with a deeper understanding of strategic resilience, stakeholder alignment and the unique challenges of leading a legacy business in the modern economy."*

– Marc Walley



He is also expected to share his outlook on timberland and forest products markets, including key opportunities and risks shaped by policy, consumer behavior and global sustainability movements.

The Thompsons established the educational lecture series with the goal of fostering engagement between the distinguished lecturers and forest economics faculty, acquainting the speakers with Auburn's teaching and outreach activities and encouraging future collaborative research opportunities.

Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE, says that the lecture series embodies the Thompsons' dedication to land-grant education.

"Emmett and Vi exemplify Auburn University and its creed," said Alavalapati.

*"They are always willing to contribute to something larger than themselves and continue to be friends of the college and its endeavors. We are excited and privileged that they established this educational lecture series in the CFWE."*

– Dean Alavalapati

The Emmett & ViAnn Thompson Lecture series is a key venue for industry professionals, faculty and graduate students to gain up-to-the-minute forestry and natural resources economics and policy knowledge from national and internationally renowned topic experts.

Invited lecturers encompass diverse expertise in forest economics, forest markets, forest policy and global trade. As part of the multi-day event, opportunities for networking and discussion will foster speaker engagement and knowledge transfer among attendees.

Members of the Auburn community and forest industry professionals from across the region are invited to attend the lecture and reception at The Hotel at Auburn University and Dixon Conference Center Auditorium and Legacy Ballroom.

Admission is complimentary and pre-registration is not required. Parking is available adjacent to the conference center in the South College Parking Deck. For more information, contact Marc Walley, chair of the lecture planning committee, at [mwalley@forestinvest.com](mailto:mwalley@forestinvest.com).

To learn more about the lecture series and the 2026 Distinguished Lecturer Cade Warner, visit [cfwe.auburn.edu](http://cfwe.auburn.edu).



Photo taken on Oct. 11, 1951. More than 430 years service to Gulf states are represented in the above group. They are: front row, Mary Duggan, Mildred Westervelt Warner, Herbert David Warner, Olivia Heinz and Isobel Andrews; middle row, W. E. Penfield, Wagner Thielens, George Thompson, Carl Andrews, L.M. Champagne and Lampkin Burton; back row, H.H. Yoder and J. M. Armstrong, Sr.

## Coastal Connections: How one student is uniting Gulf state oyster farmers By Kelley Young



Under the guidance of co-advisor Professor Christopher Anderson, left, Sower has built relationships with farmers, resource managers and other stakeholders.

from the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine's Gulf Research Program.

### FROM ONE GULF STATE TO ANOTHER

After witnessing the collapse of Mississippi's oyster reefs, Sower, who holds a bachelor's degree in wildlife conservation from Virginia Tech and a master's in coastal science from the University of Southern Mississippi, knew she wanted to continue her research. With support from the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant Consortium, she enrolled in Auburn's doctoral program and put her knowledge of bivalves and coastal science to work as she developed expertise in the political and economic aspects of the Gulf Coast oyster farming industry.

"I knew I wanted to come back to the Gulf because I love it," she said. "And I wanted to become a more well-rounded scientist and get experience in both the quantitative and the qualitative side of things."

### THE 'QUALITATIVE SIDE OF THINGS'

Under the guidance of co-advisor Professor Christopher Anderson, Sower built relationships with farmers, resource managers and other stakeholders.

*"Jill's research is really focused on a natural resource management issue — it's as much about the people as it is the oysters."*

– Christopher Anderson

Sower has traveled the coast, visiting Alabama oyster farmers in areas of Mobile, Dauphin Island and Bayou La Batre. While farmers are used to regulators and resource managers stopping by, Sower's visits stood out. Hugh McClure, owner of the Point aux Pins oyster farm in Grand Bay, Alabama, said a conversation with her makes him feel like someone is really listening.

"It's so nice to know I can reach out to Jill with a concern and she will respond quickly," McClure said. "It has been wonderful how she's brought attention to Point aux Pins, as I'm sure she has done for other farms."

### BUILDING COMMUNITY

Beyond her fieldwork, Sower developed the first Gulf Coast oyster industry community of practice, bringing together oyster harvesters, seafood processors, researchers and government leaders. Their discussion topics ranged from oyster mortality and water quality to crop insurance, public health regulations and food safety.

*"The whole point of a community of practice is to share knowledge, tools and experience and to increase communication and collaboration across different stakeholder groups, and I think we've achieved that."*

– Jill Sower

### LOOKING AHEAD

This fall, Sower defended her four-chapter dissertation, which includes a comprehensive policy analysis,



Doctoral student Jill Sower has traveled the coast visiting oyster farmers like Hugh McClure, owner of the Point aux Pins oyster farm in Grand Bay, Alabama.

62 stakeholder interviews and strategies for mitigating challenges like hurricanes, drought and flooding.

She hopes to publish all four chapters soon so her research is accessible to regulatory authorities. While wild oyster harvesting has been going on for generations, Alabama's commercial farming industry wasn't launched until 2009. Sower believes the industry's growth calls for updated regulations — and that her findings can help.

"Once I get those published, they can help spur some change," she said. "I hope it will bring awareness to the issues the farmers face, challenges that can hopefully be resolved through regulations that are more conducive to farmers keeping and growing their businesses."

Regarding the oysters Sower once studied on the Mississippi Sound, there is new evidence this year that they're returning. It's that resilience — and the dedication of those who care for the species — that continues to inspire Sower's work.

## Chen charting genetic map for more sustainable, resilient bioenergy By Cole Sikes



An Auburn University professor is using genomics to uncover and harness the genetic traits of drought-tolerant species to map the future of more sustainable and resilient bioenergy resources.

Auburn College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment Assistant Professor Hao Chen, is an expert in forest genomics. He focuses on molecular, biochemical, genetic and genomic research, as well as the skills to integrate various omics data to model plant processes, including the transcriptional regulation of wood formation.

Recently, Chen's research has been based around poplar trees, a critical bioenergy crop as designated by the United States Department of Energy (DOE), the federal agency tasked with ensuring the country's energy and environmental security through science and technology. His latest project will address the fundamental challenges of gene-regulated drought tolerance and woody biomass production in poplars.

As part of the DOE's Joint Genome Institute, or JGI, 2025 Functional Genomics Awards, this study will directly support the DOE's Biological

and Environmental Research mission to create resilient bioenergy feedstocks, materials that are typically used to fuel machinery and industrial practices. Chen will be the principal investigator (PI) for this project with assistance from CO-PIs and professors Jack Wang, North Carolina State University, and Zongliang Yue of Auburn's Harrison College of Pharmacy.

*"Understanding the transcriptional regulatory network underlying these traits is essential for developing resilient bioenergy feedstocks that can thrive under climate stress while maintaining high biomass yields."*

– Hao Chen

The researchers' work will utilize DNA affinity purification sequencing (DAP seq) technology to observe poplar trees' transcriptional regulatory network within their cross-section, a downward view of a tree's stem structure. By using this method, Chen and his team will be able to identify the DNA transcription factors, or "genetic switches," that enable poplars to be drought resilient while still maintaining steady growth rates.

A successful project will yield a genetic 'map' that will showcase how these genes can potentially be

engineered in other DOE-designated critical bioenergy species.

"Environmentally, this research will reduce the vulnerability of bioenergy systems to climate variability," Chen said. "Economically, it will help ensure stable biomass production for bioenergy and bioproducts, reducing reliance on fossil fuels."

Chen adds that this effort will also serve as a unique platform for recruiting and training graduate students studying genomics and bioenergy-related research. In turn, this project supports workforce development within the fields of biotechnology and genomics while preparing the next generation of scientists for DOE mission areas.

"Dr. Chen is the leading voice of the CFWE's forest genomics research and instruction program," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE.

*"We are proud of his work and the contribution he is making to renewable energy security and sustainable forestry."*

– Dean Alavalapati

Learn more about the CFWE's forestry research on its website.

# KPNC bolstered with gifts to support environmental education

## Emily Kling Fund for Excellence established

By Cole Sikes



Auburn University's Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC) has been bolstered with ongoing educational assistance thanks to generous donations and a planned gift from a distinguished environmental educator. The Emily Kling Fund for Excellence leverages existing, successful youth education programs to enable the KPNC to expand upon these opportunities to reach more children. Kling is an Alabama native and alumna of Principia College in Illinois, holding a Bachelor's degree in Forest Biology. After graduation, she pursued a master's degree at the University of Michigan. She then returned to The Plains to complete her doctorate in education from Auburn University.

Always an advocate for environmental education, Kling's 30-year career in youth leadership, natural resources and environmental education with the Cooperative Extension System on the county, state and national levels reinforced her commitment to outreach. Since 2010, Kling has served as president and member of the KPNC Advisory Board and an educational instructor. She also has served as president of Auburn's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) Advisory Council and a volunteer at the Auburn Alumni Association and several youth camps across the Southeast region.

"The main goal of this gift to the KPNC is to provide more experiences for youth to get outside and have opportunities to appreciate the world," Kling said.



*"I went to many summer camps and was involved in the Girl Scouts. This ultimately allowed me to find my love for the environment, and my hope is that this fund will allow other children like me to also find that same love I did."*

– Emily Kling

The youth camp series included in this endowment consists of Spring Break, Summer Ecology, Woodland Wonders and Summer Adventure camps, all hosted at the KPNC. Cumulatively, these camps help hundreds of children learn more about the natural world around them. The Emily Kling Fund for Excellence is particularly beneficial for these KPNC camps because it will provide funding for a supplemental full-time educator. This educator will primarily focus on education strategy and implementation for elementary, middle and high school students as well as adults. The role will also involve curriculum development and coordinating school field trips, summer day camps and staff training for environmental outreach.

"Emily has secured the future of the KPNC's environmental education offerings by creating a permanent, full-time position that will be solely focused on providing high quality environmental education," said Michael Buckman, KPNC manager.

*"As our community grows, more and more students are in need of critical nature-based experiences. Integrating environmental education into curricula helps prepare students to be proactive stewards of the planet, capable of making informed decisions that contribute to a sustainable future."*

– Emily Kling

The Emily Kling Fund for Excellence provides an impactful example of how one experience can lead to a lifelong commitment to public service. The KPNC's mission of serving as a beacon of environmental education and outreach aligns with the Auburn College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE). Paying it forward to the next generation of environmental stewards is at the heart of their land-grant mission.

"Dr. Kling has always been a friend of the KPNC and a selfless contributor to the mission of Auburn University," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE.

*"Her kindness and generosity will forever reinforce the KPNC's potential for education and outreach. We extend our heartfelt gratitude to her for paying it forward in the name of environmental education."*

– Dean Alavalapati

For more information about the KPNC and other giving opportunities, please contact Heather Crozier, CFWE director of development, and visit the KPNC website.



Kling shows reptiles to Summer Ecology Camp students at the KPNC.

## Kreher Preserve's new City of Auburn Community Classroom, an invaluable resource

By Jamie Anderson

It was only last winter that the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center, an outreach facility of Auburn University's College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE), celebrated the dedication and ribbon cutting of its new Environmental Education Building located on North College Street in Auburn, Alabama.

Yet the building, which had become a dire need for the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center's (KPNC) growing programs and visitors, has already had a profound impact on the university and the Auburn community.

Joining KPNC donors, friends and staff at the building dedication, Auburn University leadership and City of Auburn Mayor Ron Anders, extolled the KPNC's value to the city.

"Since it first opened to the public as the Louise Kreher Forest Ecology Preserve, the KPNC has provided our community with much-needed parkland on the north side of Auburn," said Mayor Anders. "More recently, the KPNC has not only provided our citizens with free and open access to nature, but it has also served as an invaluable educational resource for our schools and teachers, who supplement their science curricula with field experiences offered by the KPNC."



The Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment and Kreher Preserve and Nature Center celebrated the opening of its new Environmental Education Building in December 2024. Shown at the lectern is City of Auburn Mayor Ron Anders providing remarks at the dedication and ribbon cutting, along with other Auburn and CFWE leadership.

### PROVIDING ACCESS TO NATURE AND EDUCATION

At the heart of its mission, the center promotes a sense of stewardship towards nature through quality environmental education, recreation and outreach programs with Auburn University and its community partners.

Throughout its evolution from a passive-use forest preserve to the fully staffed nature center it has become today, the KPNC has diligently pursued its purpose, offering free entry for visitors and educational programs throughout the year.

Open every day from dawn to dusk, over 40,000 annual visitors enjoy more than six miles of marked walking and running trails, the area's first and largest nature playground, a stream with pond and waterfalls, the wildflower, sensory and butterfly gardens and improved facilities including pavilions, restrooms, drinking fountains and benches throughout the property.

The KPNC's diverse spectrum of educational programming serves area schools, churches, clubs, college students, families

and adults with an array of activities such as field trips, workshops, special events, classes, guided hikes, camps and much more.

However, lacking a covered, temperature-controlled building, the KPNC's programs are impacted by Alabama's warm climate and often inclement weather.

### BUILDING A NEW CHAPTER

Thanks in large part to gifts from the City of Auburn and several other generous philanthropists, the new Environmental Education Building became a reality in 2024, allowing the KPNC to significantly expand its program offerings.

Constructed using the mass timber engineered product, cross-laminated timber (CLT), the building is a showcase of innovative engineering, architecture and construction, promoting Alabama's robust and vigorous natural resources and timber industries.

Featuring two large classrooms, a discovery corridor that houses live animal exhibits, bathrooms and office space, the building design includes exposed natural wood throughout with floor-to-ceiling windows that blur the boundaries between indoor and outdoor spaces.

"Juxtaposed with the natural wood veneers, the modern amenities of the building integrate within the classrooms to ensure a comfortable, yet functional and versatile environment for teaching and other gatherings," said Michael Buckman, the KPNC's manager.

With the new sheltering space of the building's dedicated preschool classroom, the KPNC has advanced the educational footprint of its Woodland Wonders Nature Preschool as an Alabama First-Class Pre-K, the first of its kind in the state.

It has also ushered in a new chapter as the area's most unique special event venue.

Named in honor of the City of Auburn, the Environmental Education Building includes an expansive 973-square-foot multi-purpose classroom that serves as an important resource for the community.

Jana Poirier, leader of Auburn's Wildwood Forest School, says the building's unique indoor/outdoor design is the ideal setting for the homeschool collaborative's diverse classes, which include music, pottery, fine art, engineering, woodworking and nature studies.

Using the City of Auburn Community Classroom as the school's central teaching space, the children can work on projects inside, while others take their activities to the decks, courtyard, or the forest just behind the building.

"The setup fosters self-directed education, enabling multiple projects to unfold simultaneously in various environments, all while keeping the kids within earshot," said Poirier.

*"The physical space has been perfectly suited for our Wildwood kids, supporting creativity, exploration and a deep connection to nature."*

– Jana Poirier

### AN INVALUABLE COMMUNITY RESOURCE

Since its opening, the City of Auburn Community Classroom has been heavily utilized by area civic groups, scouts, garden clubs and other organizations who gather there to enjoy the light-filled, dynamic space for meetings and other special events.



Children, such as the students of Auburn's Wildwood Forest School, benefit from the community classroom as a dynamic space to connect with nature through learning.

Having struggled to find a venue that would meet their needs, Assistant Director of Auburn Outdoors Keli Berkman felt the classroom checked all the boxes for their student employee training courses.

"We needed a space that had classroom capabilities like tables, chairs, Wi-Fi and whiteboards, but also had access to space that created a feeling of being outdoors so that students were able to practice wilderness first aid in a pseudo wilderness context," said Berkman.

Upon discovering the KPNC classroom, the group has since hosted two Wilderness and Remote First Aid training courses, certified nine Auburn Outdoors Trip Leaders and eight CFWE students and staff members.

*"We are so thankful for our partnership with the KPNC. I'm hopeful that we can continue to work together to provide this opportunity to Auburn University students, and, looking forward, to the Auburn community."*

– Keli Berkman

### A VITAL PARTNERSHIP

The City of Auburn has long been a vital partner of Auburn University and the KPNC. Each year, the city appropriates funding that supports staff and programs, markets those programs through the city's communications and co-hosts signature events such as S'more Fun, the HoHoHo Hike & Holiday Celebration and many others.

Representing KPNC's ward within the City Council, Beth Witten has been an important advocate for the city's extensive partnership and support of the nature center and feels the programming that will be housed in the education building will be paramount for all citizens of Auburn.

"The KPNC is a gem located in the heart of the north side of Auburn," said Witten.

*"Its offerings that connect people with nature and learning through a hands-on approach is vital in a digital-centric world. I am proud that the KPNC resides in Ward Three and is available to the whole community."*

– Beth Witten

During the past decade, the KPNC has become an important asset to the community, with visitation numbers growing exponentially.

"The City of Auburn's continued support and most recent gift have been instrumental in enabling the KPNC to fulfill its mission," said Janaki Alavalapati, the Emmett F. Thompson Dean of the CFWE. "We are honored they have chosen to invest in the important work of the KPNC in service to Auburn's citizens."

For rental information, contact the KPNC manager at [kpncmanager@auburn.edu](mailto:kpncmanager@auburn.edu).



## Stone reflects on a career kick-started by the CFWE By Cole Sikes



Dana Stone has enjoyed a prosperous and rewarding career in forestry stemming from her experiences at the Auburn University College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE). From a metropolitan background to a forestry lifestyle, Stone is a testimony to career success gained through discovery, unyielding work ethic and robust experiential learning. After more than three decades since her graduation, she reflects on her passions, responsibilities and accomplishments.

Stone was raised in an urban area that provided limited opportunities to experience the intrinsic value of natural resources; that is until a breakthrough moment in her career exploration that intrigued her and fit her math-and-science-focused skillset.

"My senior year at Spelman College, I wanted to have a career that was meaningful to me," said Stone. "I love math and science, but I did not have an idea how to apply this academic area into a career. When I was reading about the Peace Corp and environmental science, I noticed specific information about forestry. I thought this would be a great career for me."

### FINDING NEW FAMILY AT THE CFWE

Taking a career leap, Stone departed for Auburn in 1991 to pursue a Master of Forestry degree. Stone recalls her first experiences with forestry after attending Forestry Practicum at the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center (SDFEC) located in Andalusia, Alabama, an academic requirement at the time for graduate students pursuing a Master of Forestry who did not hold an undergraduate degree in a similar program.

*"The college quickly exposed me to forestry," Stone said. "My first classes were at the SDFEC when I attended the summer practicum session. The classes at the center combined academic work with practical applications to make sure students learn forestry. The experience was a 'surge' in me learning and preparing for a career in this field."*

– Dana Stone

Stone experienced the family culture of the CFWE for the first time while taking a wildlife sciences class on Auburn's main campus. A non-forestry-track student noticed that Stone was having difficulty in the class, so she shared her test preparation and studying methods. Because of the fellow student's selfless assistance, Stone was able to land a high grade on the exam and increase her overall grade point average. To this day, she cannot recall the name of the student, nor did she see the student again, but Stone always remembers her generosity and kindness.

Her love for forestry grew while progressing through her academics at the CFWE. It grew so much that she decided to focus her master's degree on forestry biometrics. She states that the forestry curriculum was challenging, but it was by design. Each class enticed students to work hard to achieve positive results.

### STONE'S IMPECCABLE ROLE OF SERVICE

Today, Stone serves the citizens of Alabama as the director of the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC) Forest Management Division. In this role, she supervises and manages employees who assist stakeholders with sustainable forest management practices. Stone ensures the division maintains program quality standards and meets grant application and report deadlines. She also represents the AFC with partner agencies and organizations such as Auburn University, the U.S. Forest Service, Southern Group of State Foresters, the Alabama Forestry Association and the State Board of Registration for Foresters.

*"Everything that I was exposed to at Auburn prepared me for my future and my career. In order to achieve and improve as a person or as a professional, I had to embrace my experiences, understand their value and proceed forward with my endeavors."*

– Dana Stone

Prior to her promotion to Forest Management Division director, Stone also served the AFC as Forest Health Program coordinator. This job entailed many hours of fieldwork and studying forest insects, pests and diseases across the state. This is where Stone discovered helping others would become one of the most rewarding parts of her career.

"Every day is different with responsibilities that can range from using geographic information system (GIS) technology or reviewing grant budgets to talking with landowners or examining forest stands," Stone

said. "However, what I really enjoy the most is assisting landowners in reaching their forest management goals. When landowners are implementing sustainable practices and can showcase their land as an example of responsible stewardship, I understand the importance of my job."

Stone reinforces the necessity for foresters in Alabama because of the industry's lucrative nature and contribution to the state's economy. Underscored by the fact that approximately 90% of forestland in the state is privately owned, Stone is confident the field will continue to have a vital role within the state.

### ENCOURAGEMENT FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

For the next generations of CFWE students, Stone has a bit of advice. She encourages each student to understand their self-worth, maintain their confidence and not be too hard on themselves if disappointment strikes. Beyond achieving excellence in the classroom, Stone encourages students to perfect "soft" or "intangible" skills such as respect, professionalism and kindness that will yield innumerable benefits for themselves and others.

For those who would benefit from the career development opportunities experienced by Stone, she leaves current and prospective CFWE students with a reassuring sentiment.

*"If you have the opportunity to attend the CFWE, take full advantage of it because this means you were meant to be there," she said. "Work hard, study a lot and learn immensely. These qualities will ultimately help you succeed."*

– Dana Stone



## Andalusia couple brings Auburn forestry students "full circle" By Jamie Anderson



Gail and Phillip Jones are shown during a recent event held for Auburn forestry students at their property, Full Circle Farm, located in Andalusia, Alabama.



Gail Jones provides an oration and photo history of the land management practices of Full Circle Farm for the students.

For the past 15 years, third-generation forest landowners, Gail Jones and her husband Phillip, of Andalusia, Alabama, have felt called upon to support and inspire Auburn University forestry students.

During the last weeks of the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment's (CFWE) Forestry Practicum held each summer at the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center in Andalusia, the rising juniors visit the Jones' property, Full Circle Farm, located in western Covington County. Here, the students take part in a tour of the Joneses' 166-acre farm and enjoy a homestyle meal, breaking bread and gaining sage words of advice from landowners and agency pros that may likely shape their future careers.

*"We try to encourage them, but I guess they encourage us as well, because we see the future of what forestry can be and that they represent that hope."*

– Gail Jones

Inspired by their lifelong love of learning, Gail Jones, an educator, and Phillip Jones, an accountant, have benefited from programs offered by Alabama Extension and the Alabama Forestry Commission (AFC). They also engage other experts and forestry consultants for guidance, who have helped the Joneses with their decision to preserve the property, returning it "full circle" from row-cropped fields to cattle pasture, and back to longleaf pine savannah.

### GIVING BACK AND PAYING FORWARD

The Joneses have a profound sense of gratitude to the people and agencies who have helped them manage their property over the years, and a growing concern that there is a dwindling pipeline of forestry professionals to assist small-scale private landowners like themselves.

This concern led Phillip Jones to propose an idea to his wife. He said, "We're the only forestry committee with the Dixon Center in our backyard, and we're not doing anything to encourage students. We need to do something. They come, and they get this wonderful hands-on experience, but we also need to recognize what they're doing and to encourage them."

Phillip Jones, who is a member and now president of the Solon and Martha

Dixon Foundation Board, reached out to Joel Martin, the newly hired director of Auburn University's Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center, to propose their plan. During the final week of the CFWE's forestry summer practicum experience, the pair agreed that Martin would bring the students to Full Circle Farm, where the couple could meet the students before the conclusion of the immersive nine-week program.

Martin feels it's essential that the students understand the diverse needs and goals of private landowners, large and small, and appreciates that they can gain this perspective from their visit to the Joneses' farm.

*"Everything about a private landowner's property is special to them, and that's what these students have to realize. It doesn't matter if they own five acres or 5,000; that property is their heart and soul."*

– Joel Martin

During the past 15 years, the Joneses' program has evolved to include a historical oration by Gail Jones and a tour of the Full Circle Farm gopher tortoise burrows with Ray Metzler, an AFC wildlife biologist, who teaches the students about wildlife conservation policies and techniques. Several of the Covington County Forestry Committee members are also present to discuss career skills with the students, emphasizing the importance of networking, good communication and accountability. After the program, the students play lawn games and enjoy a satisfying meal donated by the Joneses.

"They provide a unique opportunity for the students to learn from them, and the others that attend, including all of the friends and other citizen partners that they bring to the table," said Metzler.

*"It really does provide a good opportunity to develop future students and future workers in the forestry field in Alabama."*

– Ray Metzler

Indeed, the Joneses' mission has come "full circle."

Cooper Horn, a 2025 graduate of Auburn's forestry program, who participated in the Joneses' program only two years prior and again this

year as a newly hired forester with the AFC, describes how valuable the experience is for students.

"I think what they're doing is great. It's a wonderful educational opportunity for the students to go out there and work with the landowners, to understand their perspective and their point of view, and especially with the gopher tortoise habitat as well," said Horn.

During their brief time at Full Circle Farm, the students gain valuable advice and insights about their future forestry careers, and the Joneses hope they also appreciate the professional rewards and immense value of supporting the diverse goals of private forest landowners.

CFWE Emmett F. Thompson Dean Janaki Alavalapati is appreciative of the unique insight the students gain during their experience at Full Circle Farm.

"Each year, this visit inspires our students to recognize the professional fulfillment and lasting impact that comes from serving the diverse needs of small-scale private landowners," said Alavalapati.

Visit [cfwe.auburn.edu](http://cfwe.auburn.edu) to read more about the history and land management of Full Circle Farm.

*"The Joneses' efforts are testimony to the transformative power of engaging CFWE's deeply connected network of alumni, friends and stakeholders to elevate learning beyond the classroom and into the heart of real-world forest management."*

– Dean Alavalapati



Ray Metzler, a wildlife biologist with the Alabama Forestry Commission, instructs a forestry student as he scopes a gopher tortoise burrow at Full Circle Farm, a technique used for surveying the tortoises and other species inhabiting the burrows.



## CFWE students spend summer gaining real-world knowledge, experience By Blair Milford

### Inaugural PARK practicum builds students' knowledge, field skills and professional networks



Professor of Practice Michael Brunson is shown instructing PARK practicum students on the Leave No Trace initiative at Crooked Oaks the former homestead of Auburn football coach Pat Dye.

The inaugural Parks and Recreation Management (PARK) Practicum provided Auburn College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) students with hands-on experiences in outdoor leadership, environmental education and resource management across multiple sites in Alabama. The practicum was designed to help bridge classroom learning with real-world application by allowing students to experience first-hand the challenges and rewards of managing natural resources and recreational spaces as well as gain nationally accredited professional certifications related to outdoor recreation and environmental education. Over the course of two weeks in the summer, PARK students rotated through workshops, field activities and collaborative projects designed to build their skills as future parks and recreation professionals.

volunteer groups and community partnerships play in maintaining Alabama's trail systems. From this experience, students learned about sustainable trail building and the ways public recreation areas depend on shared community. Trail maintenance activities included clearing debris, overgrown roots and invasive species and assisting in the maintenance of mountain biking and hiking trails.

Later that week, at the Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest, students had the opportunity to engage with Project Learning Tree, a national program that uses forests as "windows on the world" to promote environmental literacy. This collaboration not only strengthened students' understanding of natural resource education but also provided them with confidence in facilitating lessons for diverse audiences. Through hands-on lessons, PARK majors practiced teaching methods that can be adapted for K-12 audiences, which prepares students to educate future generations about sustainability and conservation. The PARK practicum also featured a combination of classroom learning and different applied practices in the field.

At the Donald E. Davis Arboretum, students began coursework on Leave No Trace Level 1 certification, learning essential groundwork for minimizing

human impacts in natural environments. Students put this knowledge into practice with two days of immersive field training at Crooked Oaks, the former homestead of Auburn football coach Pat Dye, where they were able to demonstrate techniques for leading low-impact outdoor recreation programs.

By the conclusion of the PARK practicum, students fostered bonds with their peers as a cohort and developed a wide range of professional skills. From first aid and outdoor safety to teaching environmental education and working alongside community partners, students had opportunities to build their professional networks while growing their skill sets in real-world settings. The practicum not only offers practical skill building and the obtaining of professional certifications, but also a chance to reflect on the importance of maintaining and protecting public lands," said Michael Brunson, Auburn professor of practice and lead instructor.

*"Students finished the practicum with a deeper understanding of the balance between recreation and conservation, better preparing them for careers in parks, recreation and environmental stewardship."*

– Michael Brunson



PARK practicum students participated in wilderness first aid training facilitated by Auburn Outdoors at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC).

The PARK practicum began at the Kreher Preserve and Nature Center (KPNC), where students participated in Wilderness First Aid training. Facilitated by Auburn Outdoors, the certification program equipped students with the knowledge to respond to injuries and emergencies in outdoor settings. These skills are especially important for those pursuing careers in outdoor recreation and resource management. Students also visited Chewacla State Park to complete trail maintenance projects and meet with members of the Central Alabama Mountain Pedalers (CAMP). This collaboration highlighted the critical role



At the Mary Olive Thomas Demonstration Forest, PARK students engaged with Project Learning Tree to practice teaching methods to educate future generations about sustainability and conservation.

## Tropical conservation, sustainable development study abroad to Costa Rica offered students minor, and life-changing experiences



Students and faculty learned about private conservation and community-run ecotourism at the waterfall reserve in La Fortuna.

For the first time, Auburn College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment (CFWE) students and others had the opportunity to participate in a seven-week study abroad program in Costa Rica to complete a minor in Tropical Conservation and Sustainable Development. This interdisciplinary program brought together 14 students from six different colleges and ten majors, offering a unique opportunity for collaboration. The program was hosted at the Tropical Agricultural Research and Higher Education Center (CATIE) in Turrialba where students lived, studied and completed their courses.

Led by faculty members Wayde Morse and Latif Kalin in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment; Chandana Mitra, in the College of Science and Mathematics; Yaniv Olshansky, in the College of Agriculture; and Miriam Wyman, in University College Sustainability Studies, the course topics included climate change, tropical soils, protected area management, ecosystem services and watershed

management. These classes blended lectures with hands-on field research and collaboration with CATIE faculty and local experts.



Students were able to participate in fieldwork at organic farms, cattle and poultry operations and other national forests while in Costa Rica.

A highlight of the program was the travel course, where students toured the country's protected areas, engaged with local managers and community members and visited some of Costa Rica's most significant ecological and cultural sights. In Yorquin, within the Bribri Indigenous Territory, students learned about traditional cacao farming, medicinal plants and community-run ecotourism programs.

At Cahuita National Park, students explored a model of community co-management where local guides and park rangers collaborated to protect coral reefs and coastal ecosystems.



Students had the opportunity to learn about community co-management from local guides and park rangers at Cahuita National Park.

Other highlights included a stay at La Selva Biological Station, managed by the Organization for Tropical Studies, where students studied biodiversity conservation during lectures and guided day and night hikes. In La Fortuna, students toured the waterfall reserve and Mistico Park's hanging bridges, learning about private conservation and community-run ecotourism. In Monteverde, students were immersed in the world-famous cloud forest, studied Quaker-led conservation history, attended lectures on cloud forest conservation, went birding, learned about coffee cooperatives and intercropping and had fun ziplining.

Once they returned to CATIE's campus, the students concluded the minor with courses on ecosystem services and watershed management. Fieldwork included visits to organic farms, cattle and poultry operations implementing Costa Rica's climate-smart agriculture program (NAMA) and forests managed through the nation's Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) system. Students also had the opportunity to climb Volcan Turrialba, tour CODEFORSA's reforestation projects and learn traditional cheese-making at a local farm.

These transformational experiences have provided the students with an exceptional interdisciplinary perspective on tropical conservation. They had not only earned 15 academic credits and acquired valuable field skills in conservation and agriculture but had also gained a greater appreciation for how communities and ecosystems intertwine, and a deeper understanding of Costa Rica's standing as a global leader in sustainability.

## Forestry and wildlife practicum, the bedrock of career readiness



Assistant Professor Ajay Sharma analyzes longleaf pine regeneration site maps with forestry practicum students.

Summer practicum for Auburn Forestry and Wildlife Ecology and Management majors serves to provide students with critical field experience, bridging classroom knowledge with applied practice in natural resource management. Held at the Solon Dixon Forestry Education Center in Andalusia, Alabama, this immersive field experience allows students to apply skills gained through their coursework within Alabama's forests, wetlands and wildlife habitats at a critical stage in their academic journey.

Forestry students have summer practicum between their sophomore and junior years, and wildlife students attend practicum between their junior and senior years. The Dixon Center, which serves as a 5,350-acre living laboratory, offers a unique combination of educational facilities and diverse ecosystems that are ideal for hands-on learning and applied training.

During the nine-week summer practicum, Forestry students practice timber cruising, forest health assessments, silviculture

techniques, fire management and landowner interactions, preparing them for the diverse challenges of forest management.

Wildlife Ecology and Management students complete their session focusing on wildlife sampling, population monitoring, habitat evaluation and conservation strategies. Faculty rotate the students through different exercises, mimicking the work of professional biologists while gaining firsthand experiences in balancing ecological health with land use. By the completion of summer practicum, both cohorts leave with a stronger grasp of field techniques, a greater sense of teamwork and direct exposure to the day-to-day activities of natural resource professionals.



Wildlife Ecology and Management students analyzing deer jaw bones to determine different age classes of deer.

# Academics & Learnings

## Study abroad to Africa shapes student views on forestry, wildlife management policy

By Michael McIntosh



Led by Daowei Zhang, the Auburn University Alumni and George W. Peake Professor of Forest Economics and Associate Dean for Research, eight undergraduate and graduate students in the College of Forestry, Wildlife and Environment traveled to Kenya and Uganda this year. Located in the ecological crossroads of Central and Eastern Africa, the countries have rich forest and wildlife resources, affording the students valuable opportunities to develop a global perspective in forest and wildlife management and governance.

During the two-week long trip, the students met with leaders from FAO Kenya, Kenya Wildlife Services, Kenya Forestry Service, Kenya Wildlife Research and Training Institute (WRTI), Nabiosho Conservancy, FAO Uganda, Makerere University and WWF Uganda to discuss the increasingly pertinent issues of deforestation and human-wildlife conflict (HWC) in Sub-Saharan Africa. The students' limited free time was spent visiting national reserves and field stations to potentially see the animals along with the communities

impacted by these issues. Such reserves and field stations included: Masai Mara National Reserve in Kenya and Budongo Conservation Field Station, as well as Ziwa Rhino, a wildlife sanctuary in Uganda.

Upon their return, the students had gained a clearer picture of global forest and wildlife resources and their management challenges, and a deeper appreciation for the importance of these resources to local communities and the global environment.

"We wanted the students to have a better understanding of the various policy tools applied to the management and conservation of forests and wildlife, to gain the necessary knowledge and experiences to successfully meet these challenges as natural resource professionals, and to have a global perspective on the sustainability of natural capital," said Zhang.

Katie Boone, a wildlife management senior, said, "On this trip, I have learned how important it is to have transparency between the communities and government about wildlife

regulations. I am so happy to get on the ground, talking to community members and seeing how they live and how they have to live with the rules and regulations of wildlife that the government is implementing in their societies."

The study abroad course, funded by a grant from the U.S. Forest Service, gave the students an opportunity to witness how stakeholders, from local to federal, approach HWC and deforestation issues.

"This is a great experience. My favorite part of this trip is seeing how federal, local governments and NGOs, as well as communities, tackle deforestation here in Kenya and Uganda," said Matthew Flecher, a master's student.

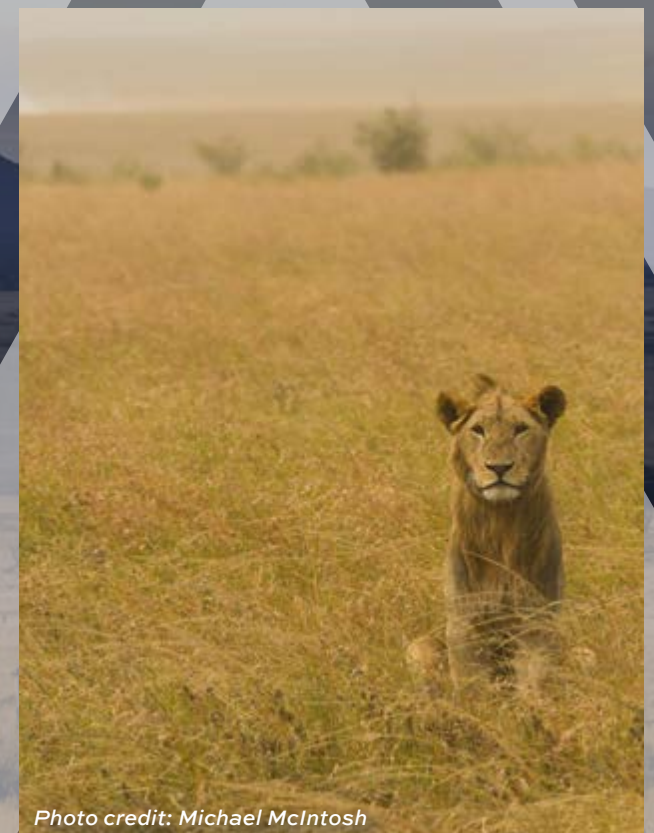


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