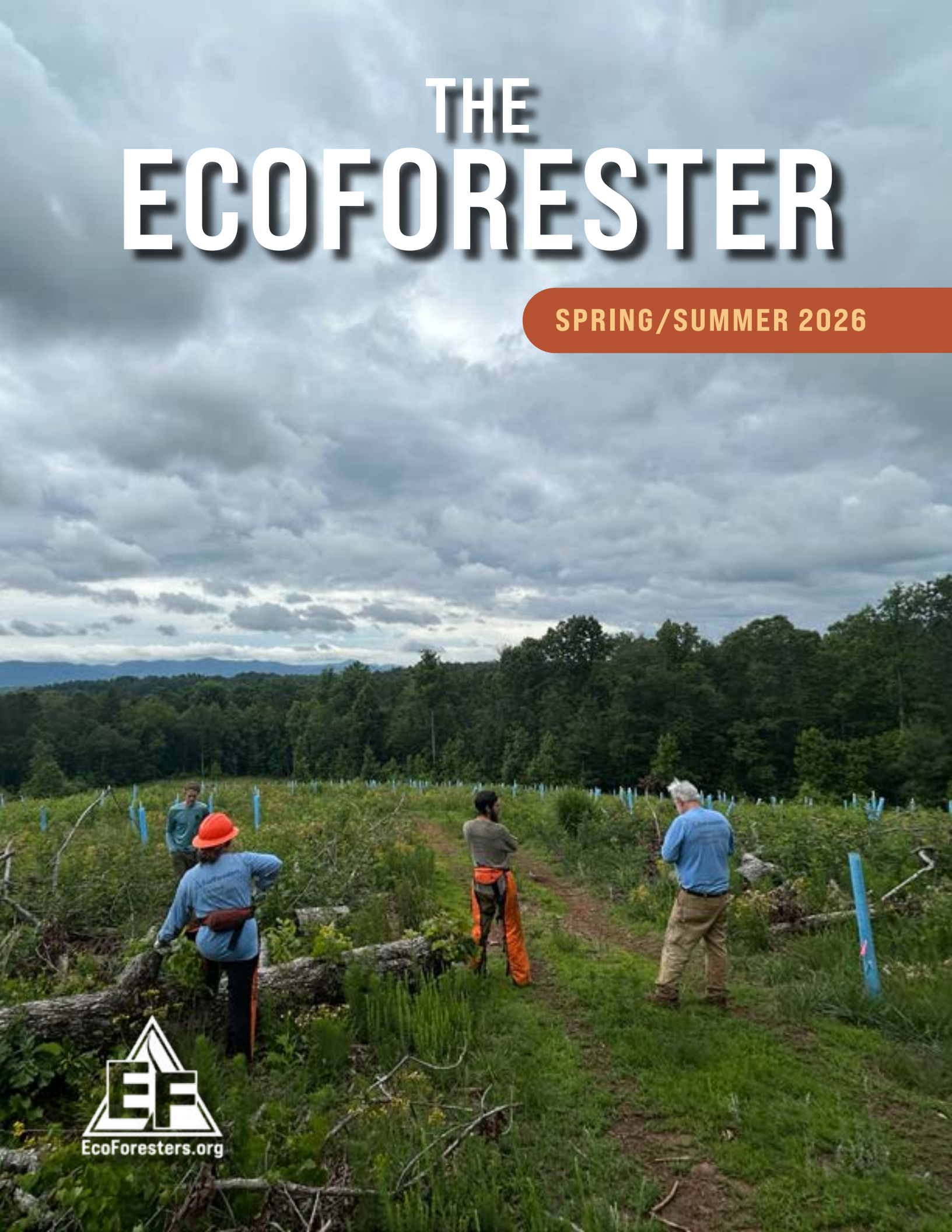
THE ECOFORESTER

SPRING/SUMMER 2026



EcoForesters.org

Our Mission

EcoForesters is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional forestry organization dedicated to restoring and conserving our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.

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Cover photo: An EcoForesters crew clearing and monitoring debris at the Foothills Conservancy's Oak Hill Community Park and Forest Oak and Hickory regeration site.
Photo Top: EcoForesters crew members moving a log on a clients property.
Photo Right: EcoForesters' Max Fowler gearing up for a days work in the field.

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DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

By: Lang Hornthal
Executive Director

IN NATURE, DIVERSITY IS THE ULTIMATE INSURANCE POLICY

An often-used concept in forestry is the notion that diversity = resilience. Ecosystem diversity refers to not only a variety of species, but also to having complexity and multiple ways to perform the same job. Think of it like a financial portfolio: if you put all of your money into one stock and that company crashes, you will lose everything. If you spread it across forty different stocks, a single failure won't ruin you. In our current changing and unpredictable world, we need to diversify our forest investments.

Nature is unpredictable and can be messy at times, but that same mess is also in the beginning stages of a young forest. Trees may have fallen, but the forest is still there. When trees fall, opportunities abound; not only for those trees waiting for sunlight to appear and their chance to reach the canopy, but also for wildlife that need the mess. Hundreds of thousands of acres of new habitat were created by Helene, providing places for wildlife to raise their young and take cover from predators. This new diverse structure will benefit these populations for decades to come. Our job now is to keep it healthy.

Sometimes, resilience can come in the form of a smile. I write this coming on the heels of our Modern Forestry Revisited event that featured author Ethan Tapper (check out our YouTube page if you missed it). For those of you not familiar with him, I recommend seeking out his Instagram feed (@howtoloveaforest). His positive nature is infectious. For three days, he spent time with our staff and members sharing optimistic reflections of his experiences that were rooted in hope. His perpetual smile served as a reminder that while the challenges that confront us are serious, we get to choose the attitude we have while solving them. Our attitude will remain optimistic as we adapt and thrive despite the adversity we see each day.

The greening of spring is a good reminder of the resilience of nature. As we venture back into the woods, I hope we will witness this renewal with appreciation for the shared responsibility we have to steward the earth–maybe even with a smile on our faces.

WHAT IS RESILIENCE?

By: Willow McNeil
EcoForesters' Development Assistant

In a post-Helene setting, the idea of resilience is more relevant than ever before. Prior to the storm, the mountains of Western North Carolina were often referred to as a "climate haven"; far from the rising seas of the coast, and high enough in elevation to maintain cooler temperatures. Yet it has become increasingly clear that, as global temperatures continue to rise, nowhere is completely safe from climate threats. While we don't have the power to influence the number or severity of threats we face, we can increase our resilience to future events. But what exactly is resilience, and how do we improve it?

The National Academy of Sciences defines resilience as, "the ability to prepare and plan for, absorb, recover from, and more successfully adapt to adverse events." To make our communities more resilient, we also have to understand the threats to our communities (such as flooding, wildfire, and extreme heat) and our vulnerability (or the degree of potential damage to important assets) to these threats. In order to make a community or ecosystem more resilient, we combine threats and vulnerability to determine risk, helping us assess what actions should be prioritized.

Let's use our forests as an example. Wildfire is a significant threat with the increase in downed wood from Helene. Some areas of WNC are more vulnerable to wildfire–they might have more storm debris, drier conditions, or invasive species (like miscanthus) that would increase fire severity. Using this information, we can identify communities with the highest wildfire risk and prioritize mitigation efforts, reducing the impacts of future fires.

Photo Top Left: EcoForesters' Executive Director, Lang Hornthal.
Photo Bottom: EcoForesters' crew members working with the Southern Blue Ridge Prescribed Burn Association on a prescribed burn at Bailey Mountain.
Photo Top Right: EcoForesters' crew member, Gabe Boortz, de-barking a Black Locus log to create a habitat for Golden Winged Warblers.

HEALTHY FORESTS IMPROVE OUR COMMUNITY'S RESILIENCE TO FUTURE THREATS

The benefits that humans derive from nature are called ecosystem services. Appalachian forests offer numerous ecosystem services that our region relies on, such as clean air and water, forest products, and space to recreate. They also play an important role in flood mitigation, intercepting rainfall to reduce peak flow, and reduce extreme heat by providing natural cooling effects. As flooding and extreme heat increase in frequency, conserving these benefits will be essential.

Unfortunately, disturbances from non-native invasive species and past mismanagement, along with development pressures, have resulted in reductions in both forest health and ecosystem service benefits. This increases our region's vulnerability to future threats; a study from 2007, for example, found that a 10% loss in forest cover is associated with a 4-8% increase in flood frequency and total flood duration1.

EcoForesters is committed to keeping these ecosystem services on the horizon, for the benefit of current and future generations. We're helping our forests and riparian areas become healthier through removing invasive species and reducing fuel loads in damaged stands. By encouraging the regeneration of oak trees–which are the keystone species of our region, and more drought tolerant than maples and polars–we're shaping the species composition and resilience of our future forests. Our community's resilience is intertwined with forest health, and our ability to withstand future threats relies on their prosperity.

1Bradshaw et al. (2007) Global evidence that deforestation amplifies flood risk and severity in the developing world.

ECOFORESTERS' PILLARS OF LANDOWNER ENGAGEMENT

ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS

EcoForesters' approach is rooted in personalized, thoughtful engagement with each landowner. Recognizing the diversity in values and goals of WNC's landowners–as well as varying forest types and community needs–improves the chances of successful engagement. Our initial outreach includes a wide array of methods such as newsletters, postcards, social media, and leveraging existing partnerships. Through our workshops, we convene landowners, residents, and stakeholders to identify shared concerns, goals, and knowledge of local forest conditions. Here, landowners connect common challenges to their own parcels and begin the process of identifying their next steps.

PERSONALIZED CONSULTATIONS

After a connection is established, our natural resource staff provides a one-on-one consultation, walking them through the challenges their forest is facing and discussing their needs as a forest owner. Building relationships with landowners takes repetition, time, and occasional hand-holding through the nuances of management. Beyond that, helping landowners depends on their forest condition as well as their financial condition. We know that forest management is not one-size-fits-all, so these personalized consultations allow us to work towards solutions that best fit their forest, values, and capacity.

FOREST PLANNING

Creating a forest management plan provides landowners with an ease of understanding on how to put stewardship into practice. With the knowledge gained from the boots-on-the-ground consultation, our foresters make scientific prescriptions based on land history and current forest conditions, considering both immediate and future challenges. Depending on the landowner's needs, this can take the form of a full forest management plan or a practice plan tailored to non-native invasive species (NNIS), wildlife, or Helene damage. These plans are often needed to access and utilize cost-share funding.

FUNDING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Once a plan has been set, we help landowners access funding to implement stewardship practices and reap the benefits of active management. Resources such as the Environmental Quality Incentives Program and the Present Use Value Program offer landowners cost share funding and tax incentives to reduce the burden of management. Outside of these programs, we help create and advocate for new financial incentives for good stewardship. Any help must be rooted in financial realities and what landowners can afford. When possible, we train landowners to do the work themselves, further reducing financial barriers.

CASE STUDIES:

SWEAT EQUITY PILOT PROGRAM

The cost of invasive plant control is a significant barrier to stewardship, so we must empower landowners to do the work themselves. In response, EcoForesters launched the innovative Sweat Equity Program, addressing financial barriers and empowering rural landowners to take an active role in restoring native forest ecosystems through direct, hands-on stewardship.

A dedicated Madison County landowner became the first participant to pilot this effort. Already invested in stewarding her land, she played a vital role in shaping the program's structure, refining best practices, and demonstrating the potential of landowner-driven restoration.

EcoForesters' crew spent two days on-site, providing training in invasive species removal best practices and working side-by-side with the landowner to clear pre-determined target areas. After initial entry, she matched the crew's labor with her own, ultimately contributing more than 80 hours of personal, physical effort. Between April and November, the landowner addressed a wide variety of invasive plant species, such as Oriental bittersweet, Kudzu, and Tree of Heaven. Her work included root excavation, seed head removal, and strategic cutting, guided by the practices introduced during training. She thoroughly documented her efforts with before-and-after photos, providing visual evidence of progress and ecological change.

By combining professional field training with committed landowner action, the Sweat Equity Pilot Program successfully demonstrated the power of shared stewardship.

The project built long-term restoration capacity and ownership in a way that traditional one-time interventions rarely achieve. This pilot now serves as a compelling model for expanding sweat equity-based restoration across Western North Carolina and beyond, supporting more landowners ready to restore their forests.

EASTERN BAND OF CHEROKEE INDIANS

EcoForesters is honored to work together with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians (EBCI) to steward the Kituwah Mountains (aka Southern Appalachian Mountains). We continue to learn from Tribal leaders of their relationship with the earth and how to best support their relatives in the natural world. Their intentional approach and objectives made EBCI ideal partners for our LSR project.

Priorities for the Tribe were stewarding their Tribal Reserves in support of wildlife and native species of importance to Tribal members. This included non-native invasive species control and forest stand improvements that support ecosystems of cultural and ecological significance to the EBCI. A forest management plan for Lickstone Ridge was developed, ensuring a strategic approach to conservation, habitat restoration, and forest resilience.

This project also supported Tribal members with possessory holder property that were interested in managing timber and for tribal objectives. EcoForesters prepared forest management plans and conducted targeted treatment of non-native invasive plants.. Our staff also worked with Tribal Conservation Corps members to exchange knowledge and accomplish more together. These efforts build on previous years of work to restore the forest's natural balance and prepare the site for future sustainable use.

STEWARDING CONSERVATION LAND

While focusing on private lands, this project sought to encompass all lands that contribute to NC's forest ecosystems and in alignment with the NC Forest Action Plan. Public and private lands that are permanently protected are important neighbors and partners. The land managers responsible for conservation land management can bring resources to private landowners and provide a valuable example of action that improves forest health.

WHY YOUR SUPPORT IS NEEDED NOW

The forests of the Southern Appalachians are among the most biologically diverse in North America, home to hundreds of tree species and thousands of plant and animal species. These forests are not only ecological treasures, they also provide clean water, store carbon, provide timber resources, and recreational opportunities.

Yet our forests are in trouble. Decades of fire suppression, unregulated logging, invasive pests (like hemlock woolly adelgid), and fragmentation have reduced their health and resilience. Extreme weather events are exacerbating these pressures and without intervention, many forested landscapes will transition to lower-diversity, less-productive ecosystems. Through intentional, science based restoration, we can reverse this trend. **The time to reinvest in forest health is now.**

BUILDING COMMUNITY WILDFIRE RESILIENCE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

By: Jennifer Gustafson
Wooden Eye Resource Management LLC

It begins with neighbors

When we talk about wildfire resilience, the conversation often begins with agencies such as state forestry departments, federal land managers, and local fire districts. These partners are essential. But lasting community resilience does not begin in an office or on a jurisdictional map. It begins with neighbors.

Over the past year, I have had the privilege of working alongside the Haw Creek community in East Asheville as they move toward Firewise USA recognition and strengthen their long term wildfire resilience. What stands out most is not a single workshop, risk assessment, or grant opportunity. It is a shift in mindset from waiting for outside assistance to building internal capacity.

Why resident driven work matters

Across the country, agency capacity is stretched thin. Post disaster recovery, staffing shortages, and expanding wildfire risk mean that even the most dedicated public servants cannot meet every need at once. If communities depend entirely on external response, they will always be reacting.

Resident driven models change that dynamic. When neighbors organize, information travels faster. Trust deepens. Participation increases. Work continues beyond funding cycles. Most importantly, ownership changes. Mitigation is no longer something being done to a community. It becomes something the community chooses to lead.

In Haw Creek, residents voiced concerns about dead and down debris along the Blue Ridge Parkway boundary following Tropical Storm Helene. Rather than waiting for a solution, they formed a Firewise committee, hosted a community workshop, and began creating systems to track home risk assessments and mitigation accomplishments.

With support through a City of Asheville Neighborhood Matching grant, the Haw Creek Community Association hired Wooden Eye Resource Management LLC and Old Mountain Management LLC to provide technical leadership in getting the program started. That early technical support helped establish structure, training, and coordination, but the momentum has come from the residents themselves.

Seventeen community members stepped forward to be trained as Home Ignition Zone assessors. A shared workflow and tracking system were created so the effort could continue long after outside technical assistance winds down. Residents now lead outreach, coordinate assessments, track mitigation progress, and communicate directly with partners such as the North Carolina Forest Service, Asheville Fire Department and Mountain Valleys RC&D.

Resilience is relational

This approach strengthens landscapes and relationships. When neighbors attend workshops together, they build trust. When someone conducts a home assessment for a neighbor, they become an informal educator. When residents coordinate debris removal or vegetation reduction projects, they are not just reducing fuels. They are building a culture of shared stewardship. Those relationships matter during an evacuation. They matter during recovery. They matter long after a grant closes.

Where communities can begin

Communities often ask where to begin. The answer is simpler than it seems. Start with a conversation about shared risk. Form a small core team of committed individuals. Create a repeatable system for tracking progress. Connect strategically with local forestry staff, fire departments, and nonprofit partners. Small wins build confidence. A cleanup day. A handful of completed assessments. A well attended workshop. Progress becomes visible and participation grows.

The long view

Wildfire resilience is not built in a single season. It develops over time through steady engagement, skill building, and relationship cultivation. Programs like Firewise USA provide helpful structure, but resilience itself is cultural. It is neighbors recognizing that they share risk and that they also share responsibility.

In a time of increasing wildfire intensity across the Southeast, we cannot rely solely on institutional response. We need communities that understand their risk, track their progress, and support one another. The encouraging truth is that this work does not require perfection. It requires participation. Wildfire resilience is strongest when it is built from the inside out.

Wooden Eye Resource Management LLC provides community-based wildfire resilience planning, Firewise USA® support, and wildfire mitigation coordination for communities across the region and nationally. Learn more at www.woodeneyerm.net.

BEFORE THE FIRE STARTS: WHY COMMUNITY WILDFIRE PROTECTION PLANS MATTER IN BUNCOMBE COUNTY

By: Dustin Bradley
Firefighter and Wildland Specialist

Spend enough time working in the woods around Buncombe County, and you start to see past the color green. A lot of what looks healthy isn't. Storm damage, invasive species, and years of fire exclusion have left many of our forests dense and full of fuel. Hurricane Helene didn't create that problem, but it made it worse. Blowdowns added fuel across the landscape and opened canopies allowing aggressive new growth of non-native species to spread rapidly.

Now let's consider where most people live. Homes are tucked into slopes, built along ridges, and backed up to large tracts of unmanaged forests, all susceptible to wildfire impact. Around here, the Wildland-Urban Interface isn't a small pocket, it's most of our community. That's where wildfire risk becomes reality.

While this isn't a new problem, recent conditions have made risk factors more visible and more urgent to mitigate than they have been in the past. Right now, there's no shortage of effort. Many agencies, nonprofits, contractors, and homeowners are doing work to reduce their risk. Much of it is happening independently with different priorities, approaches, and areas of focus.

The problem isn't a lack of effort. It's a lack of coordination. That's where a Community Wildfire Protection Plan becomes a critical tool. CWPPs were established under the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003 to help communities deal with exactly this kind of challenge. In North Carolina, CWPPs are developed with guidance from the North Carolina Forest Service, but they are built locally by the people who live and work on the landscape.

Wildfire risk doesn't follow property lines or jurisdictions. It crosses boundaries, responsibilities, and ownership. Without a shared plan, even good work can end up scattered, uneven and ultimately less effective.

A CWPP brings structure to that effort. It asks simple questions that don't have simple answers. Where are we most at risk? What actions will actually make a difference? Who is responsible for getting that work done? From there, it builds something most communities don't already have: a coordinated path forward.

A CWPP identifies priority areas and outlines practical steps like reducing fuels, improving access, and education. It then connects those actions to the partners responsible and capable of carrying them out. It brings people to the same table. Fire departments, emergency management, land managers, nonprofits, local governments, contractors, and residents are no longer working in parallel, but together.

In recent years, some Buncombe County communities have already started this work. Plans are being developed, updated, and put into motion. Now is the opportunity to build on that momentum, to raise the level of clarity, coordination, and follow-through so that communities are able to see measurable and effective results in their mitigation and planning efforts

Wildfire risk here is a community level issue. Community issues get solved when people decide to work together ahead of time, with a plan they can actually implement. When a CWPP is built well, it doesn't just check a box. It becomes the foundation for how our region collectively builds fire resilience.

Dustin Bradley is a local firefighter and wildland specialist focused on wildfire mitigation and community risk reduction. He is the owner of Old Mountain Land Management LLC and regularly collaborates with landowners, agencies, nonprofits, and community partners across Western North Carolina.

Photo: Southern Blue Ridge Prescribed Burn Association on a prescribed burn at Bailey Mountain.

COMMUNITES' RESPONSE TO DISASTER

By: Laura Legnick
Cultivating Resilience

BULL CREEK VALLEY AFTER HURRICANE HELENE

I've spent the last few days doing the slow and difficult work of opening up, pulling apart and disposing of a giant ball of storm debris - small trees and shrubs, wire fencing, leaves, branches, roots, fence posts, shingles, plastic bags, landscape fabric, road gravel, plastic drainage pipe, a flattened soccer ball - deposited in a stream that runs through my backyard. It took me this long to tackle this clean up partly because it wasn't high on my "to do" list, but mostly because I wasn't ready to face such a painful reminder of the helplessness and fear that I felt as a flash flood roared through my backyard during Helene. Carefully peeling away layer after layer of that ball of storm debris gave me plenty of time to reflect on how my community's participation in Helene response, cleanup and recovery has changed over time.

I live in Bull Creek Valley, one of the many communities in the Asheville area completely cut off by a bridge failure during Helene. Without power, communications or drivable roads, a group of about 20 neighbors worked together to create a centrally-located community response hub that was home to a working camp kitchen, free drinking water and food supplies, a medic office and a hot meal every day at noon, followed by a community meeting. We also made a map of our community and used the map to do welfare checks on all our neighbors and create a list of debris cleanup needs. Slowly but surely, as disaster services made their way into our valley over the course of three weeks, we handed off the response and recovery work we had taken on as a community.

After the community hub was discontinued a smaller group of residents got together to talk through practical ways that we could protect and grow the new sense of community created in those early days following Helene. We soon learned that many in our community felt the same way, so we planned and managed a year-long series of workshops and work parties to share resources and learn new skills needed to support our recovery needs. Resources like contact info for public and private storm recovery assistance and recommendations for how to process and use woody debris on site, rather than just hauling it all off to the dump. Skills that require community cooperation to be most successful like small-scale stream bank repair, invasive plant management, and wildfire risk assessment and mitigation.

As the year went on, participation in these events slowly dwindled and it became clear there was not enough community interest to continue. As our lives slowly returned to normal, it seemed that many in our community just wanted to put Helene in the past - even though some of our neighbors were still facing a massive job of forest cleanup and restoration, streams throughout our watershed remained damaged from flash flooding and debris cleanup, all of the fire roads in the forests that surround our valley were blocked by storm debris, and our community was still threatened by unprecedented wildfire risk from the large numbers of dead and dying trees in our forests. Frustrated and disheartened, we wondered if other communities were struggling to stay involved in recovery and what we could do about it.

With just a little bit of digging, we learned that it is typical for the broad community participation experienced in the first few months after a disaster to decline rapidly as life returns to normal. So common, in fact, that this change in behavior is recognized as one of five phases in a widely recognized pattern of community behavior following a disaster.

THE IMPACT PHASE

The Impact phase is characterized by initial reactions of shock, panic, confusion and disbelief followed by a focus on self-preservation and family protection.

THE HEROIC PHASE

The Heroic phase quickly follows as individuals band together to meet immediate response and recovery needs in their community. Altruism is prominent in this phase and people expend major energy to help others survive and recover. The most important resources in this phase are family, neighbors and emergency teams of various sorts.

THE HONEYMOON PHASE

As reliable recovery resources begin to flow in the weeks following the disaster, the community enters the Honeymoon phase which features community bonding created by a strong shared sense of having lived through a catastrophic experience and feelings of optimism that the community will return to normal in time.

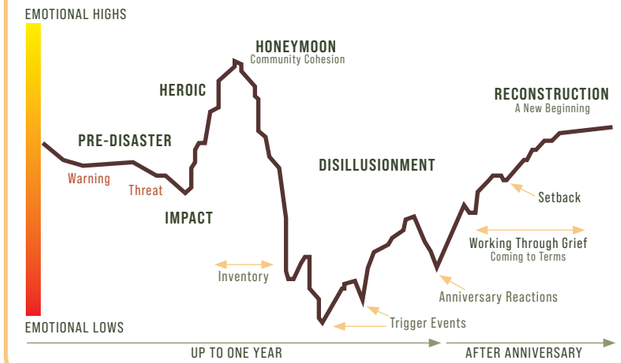
THE DISILLUSIONMENT PHASE

As the recovery drags on and the larger community returns to normal, optimism declines and the community moves into the Disillusionment phase as the stress, fatigue, and setbacks of the recovery process begin to take their toll. Strong feelings of disappointment, anger and resentment may appear as promises of aid are not fulfilled, outside recovery organizations end their work and move on to the next disaster, and local community organizations struggle to meet continuing needs. In this phase, which can last for several years after the disaster, there is a gradual loss of the strong sense of community enjoyed in the Honeymoon phase as survivors concentrate on rebuilding their own lives and solving their individual problems.

THE RECONSTRUCTION PHASE

A community enters the Reconstruction phase as survivors come to realize they will need to solve the problems of rebuilding their own homes, businesses and lives largely by themselves and gradually assume responsibility for this work. As progress is made, people begin to adjust to new circumstances, and feelings of optimism and a sense of new opportunity reaffirms individuals' belief in their own and their community's capabilities. Community groups with a longer-term investment in the community become key players during this phase, which can last for several years following a disaster.

PHASES OF DISASTER



Learning about these Phases of Disaster helped us see with new eyes the value of our community work in the last year. Rather than a disappointing failure, our workshops, work parties and other gatherings actually served our community well by addressing immediate recovery needs, lengthening the Honeymoon phase, and slowing the inevitable slide into the Disillusionment phase. Our work also inspired cooperative efforts led by our neighbors including the development of a community skill-share directory, a quilting circle, and a day-long Helene remembrance that included a grief sharing circle and a potluck supper followed by a community square dance.

We understand now that the activities we organized last year served to create a foundation for a new kind of work that is particularly well-suited to the Reconstruction phase. This new work is taken on by individuals in our community willing to share - neighbor to neighbor - the repair and reconstruction strategies they selected to repair their own properties. Several such projects are already underway this year. One resident has invited neighbors to get involved with a small-scale stream bank repair project and hosts a community garden entering its second year. Another plans to host regular dances and other community gatherings in an old barn that was completely rebuilt after it was destroyed during Helene. We continue our work this year with new confidence these home-grown skill-share and work party gatherings will enhance the well-being of our community both now and into our uncertain future.

Above Graph Source: Zunin/Meyers, as cited in Training Manual for Mental Health and Human Services Workers in Major Disasters, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2000)

PLANNING AHEAD: A LANDOWNER'S PERSPECTIVE

By: Ellie Peterson
EcoForesters' Engagement Coordinator

We reached out to a few active woodland owners whom we work with to ask two questions:

1. What are landowners' concerns for the future of their forest?

2. What are they doing to reduce their forests' vulnerability?

For Sheri Smith, non-native invasive species are the primary concern, particularly Asiatic bittersweet (Celastrus orbiculatus). "Now that I can recognize it, I see it everywhere, and it feels incredibly daunting." Ben Ball of Madison county agrees; "Multiflora rose, 'pampas grass', spirea and tree of heaven all seem to be fighting for every old pasture, roadbed and clearing on the property."

he primary concerns moving forward post-Helene are the increased risk of severe wildfire, managing and preventing erosion, and invasive species taking advantage of the disturbance and openings in the forest canopy. "While the scale of the work can feel overwhelming, we're committed to continuing this effort and doing what we can, step by step, to support the health of the land for future generations" says Smith, who is hoping to replant trees in areas where they lost significant canopy due to Helene, with the aim of strengthening the forest's resilience over time.

"It feels like a responsibility we carry as stewards of the land. There's something almost spiritual about caring for it, even in the face of such a difficult and ongoing challenge."

Most of the woodlands in western North Carolina have been changed in some way by past land use. A forest that has regrown after being clearcut decades ago, for example, will be mainly comprised of same-aged trees, and fast-growing species like tulip poplar (Liriodendron tulipfera) might be overrepresented. Some forests have been highgraded, a practice that can be summed up as "take the best, leave the rest," in which the largest, healthiest–most profitable–trees are harvested. With every harvest, the forest is disrupted, and the strongest genes are removed, leaving the forest in a 'degraded' state. The more a forest has "been through"—from past management to natural or human-caused disturbances—the more complex planning for its future becomes. This is a reason why many forest landowners decide to have a management plan made.

Ball listed overall forest health, maximizing wildlife habitat, aesthetics, and revenue as his primary goals. The Balls' property is steep, and maintaining access roads involves managing waterflows and erosion. "We try to utilize every resource available. Our county NCFS agents helped us get started with our first plan 30 years ago and they still are a key resource for us.EcoForesters has been our go-to resource for invasive species assessment and management for several years." Ball & his family are putting in the time themselves. "Cost share programs help a lot with professional treatments, but a 20 gallon sprayer filled with the appropriate herbicides in the bed of your UTV can go a long way."

Photo: Landowner, Sheri Smith, and her friend enjoying a hike around Smith's property.

MOUNTAIN MIA

By: Pat Barcas
EcoForesters' Crew Member

Mia Shipp has found her mountain legs. Although the newly-minted Ecoforesters assistant crew lead's past assignments included Colorado, Idaho, and Yellowstone National Park, she said she was a little wobbly upon being hired right after Hurricane Helene struck. In the years since, she's sharpened her plant ID, become an expert on steep slopes, and has learned to clear large downed trees with a chainsaw.

She clarified what she meant by mountain legs. "I've now got the muscles to climb straight uphill and not injure myself coming downhill," she said. As a field forest restoration technician, the job requires walking almost exclusively off trail in search of invasive plants to eliminate in all seasons and all weather. "Just the physical strength you build working a job like this has changed me a lot. You get conditioned depending on what type of sites you go to, andyour body is required to do things it's not used to doing in any other job setting."

Shipp recounts the unique skills she has honed on the job with EcoForesters. "I have learned to ID both native plant species of the region and the most prolific invasives; how to use herbicide safely, how to run a chainsaw" (Shipp is certified A bucking/felling.) Growing up in Louisiana, Shipp has gone through a few hurricanes. After Helene, she was thrown into a shell-shocked crew that was tasked with cutting trees that had fallen on people's homes, trails, yards and spaces. Having just moved here and with limited communication with EcoForesters' managers right after the storm, it was quite the start.

"If I could go back and redo my start at EcoForesters, I wouldn't change anything. I showed up at a time when people needed support, and I think that I was able to offer support in the only way that I knew how, which was grabbing logs, moving them, getting them out of people's way so they can access their land again," she said.

She was happy to be a fresh face and shoulder to cry on during the immediate recovery."I've been told it was nice to have a new person to work with that wasn't so struck down by the tragedy that everyone had just gone through. I arrived right after the storm, I was ready to go," she said. "Seeing everyone checking on each other and really caring about their neighbor, it was great to see."

Much time was spent indoors tagging fish at a hatchery in Idaho during her last job, hence the loss of the mountain legs, but they're back after traversing some very challenging terrain. Shipp has helped plant trees, clear trails, eliminate invasive species, rebuild habitats, manage crews, perform consults, and so much more since joining EcoForesters.

Visiting client sites multiple times to treat invasive species allows the impact to be seen, something Shipp says is rewarding. Another perk is the office- a front row view of some of the nicest forests and mountains around. "I get to see parts of Western North Carolina that maybe people living here their entire lives don't get to see," she said. "We go to some pretty remote spots- I've seen some crazy views and a lot of cool wildlife. I have a lot of praise for this area. I love it here, I love the people and the community. There's an ancient feel to these mountains," she said.

Photo: Mia Schipp helping a landowner manage their with fallen trees after hurricane Helene.

HELP US BUILD RESILIENT APPALACHIAN FORESTS!

Our forests have become increasingly vulnerable to threats like invasive plants, wildfire, and severe weather events. These threats are not new, but their impacts have been exacerbated by past management practices and the disturbances caused by Helene. Though the second anniversary of the storm is fast approaching, the ripple effects of its damage will persist for years (if not decades) to come. Appalachian forests will continue to degrade in the face of inaction, diminishing the ecosystem services our region relies on.

HEALTHY FORESTS ARE RESILIENT FORESTS

By supporting sustainable forest management, controlling non-native invasive plants, and encouraging oak regeneration, EcoForesters helps improve our forests' ability to bounce back from future threats. We're bringing help where it's needed most: the 70% of Appalachian forests that are privately owned, and the family forest owners that steward them.

Our approach begins with outreach and education, building both forest and community resilience. Through training sessions and our sweat equity program, we empower forest owners with the tools they need to mitigate non-native invasive species, supporting long-standing stewardship on their land. Our workshops bring local communities together, encouraging landowners to collaborate and learn from one another in the face of future challenges.

Ecological stewardship of family forests benefits us all, maintaining air and water quality, biodiversity, and climate mitigation. **But we need your help!** Your donation can help us reach landowners in need of financial and technical assistance, support non-native invasive species control on both private and public land, and place thousands more acres of forest under management, helping shape our future forests.

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FORESTS OF FORTITUDE

By: Mia Schipp
EcoForesters' Forest Restoration Assistant Crew Leader

"What goes too long unchanged destroys itself. The forest is forever because it dies and dies and so it lives."
-Ursula K. Le Guin

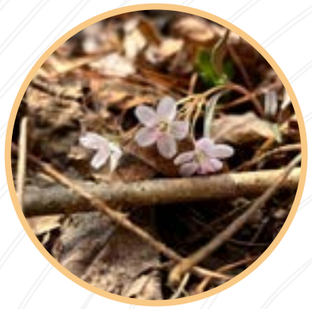
Western North Carolina is no stranger to hardship and adversity. In the past two years, the region has overcome physical and emotional challenges through grit and communal support. Though the humans who live here are without a doubt unyielding, there is no greater example of resilience than that found in the heart of an oak forest. With the effects of climate change rapidly rising to the forefront of the collective consciousness, humans must clamber to meet it, and struggle to outpace it; the ecosystems they inhabit, however, will do what they've always done– adapt and overcome.

Disturbances are beneficial, even necessary, to forest health. Wildfires often control forest undergrowth, encouraging biodiversity. Floods bring new water and nutrients to the soil and to animals living in that habitat. High winds often result in tree loss and increase habitat availability. Living trees in the presence of fallen trees may take advantage of the sunlight provided by the new canopy openings and the soil nutrients that become available over time as the fallen trees decompose. Any one of these disturbance events potentially bring about new seed dispersal and production.

In addition to natural disturbance events, humans have shaped the world's landscape on the largest scale. We disrupt the natural order through activities such as urban development, unsustainable logging, industrial agriculture, and the introduction of invasive species. In an effort to correct the side effects of such disruptions, environmentalists attempt to restore these affected spaces through a multitude of land stewardship practices, including prescribed burns, gap-phase dynamics, invasive species control, and erosion control. These positive impact practices sometimes mimic natural disturbance patterns to enhance species biodiversity and forest structural diversity.

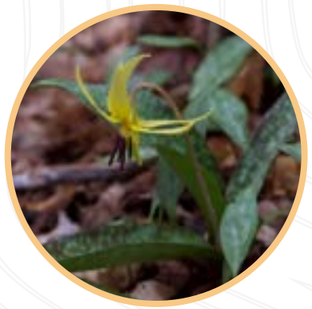
Plant photos: Native ground flowers which provide nectar for pollinators, and food for insects. Photo credit: Hale, K (2026). Spring Ephemerals - Duke Gardens

Photo Right: EcoForesters' assistant crew leader, Mia Schipp, helping the Southern Blue Ridge Prescribed Burn Association with a prescribed burn on Bailey Mountain.



Virginia Spring Beauty
(Claytonia virginica)

Jack-In-The-Pulpit
(Arisaema triphyllum)



Yellow Trout Lily
(Erythronium Umbilicatum)

In the aftermath of a disturbance, the forest experiences a semi-predictable change in structure referred to as secondary succession. In the spaces left behind by fallen trees or burned undergrowth, new species will bloom and even thrive. After 2024's Hurricane Helene, Western North Carolina experienced an explosion of forest regeneration. Here lies opportunity to control which species dominate these young forests; specifically, we can select for climate change-adapted, fire-resistant species like oaks and yellow pines, creating forests most beneficial to both wildlife and humans.

The changing of the seasons serves as another reminder of how disturbance plays a costly but necessary role in an ecosystem's life cycle. Spring ephemerals bloom in the space between winter's end and the leafing-out of the forest canopy. The increased light availability after trees fall triggers a spring ephemeral boom post-disturbance. These tiny florals play their part in an ecosystem's food web, as they are a valuable source of nectar for pollinators (Hale, 2026). They also provide a meal to ants, who carry ephemeral seeds to their nests to eat the fleshy seed casings, in turn providing the seeds a new location to germinate. Outside of what they provide to the ecosystem, these native flowers bring beauty to the forest floor and smiles to the faces of those lucky enough to find them.

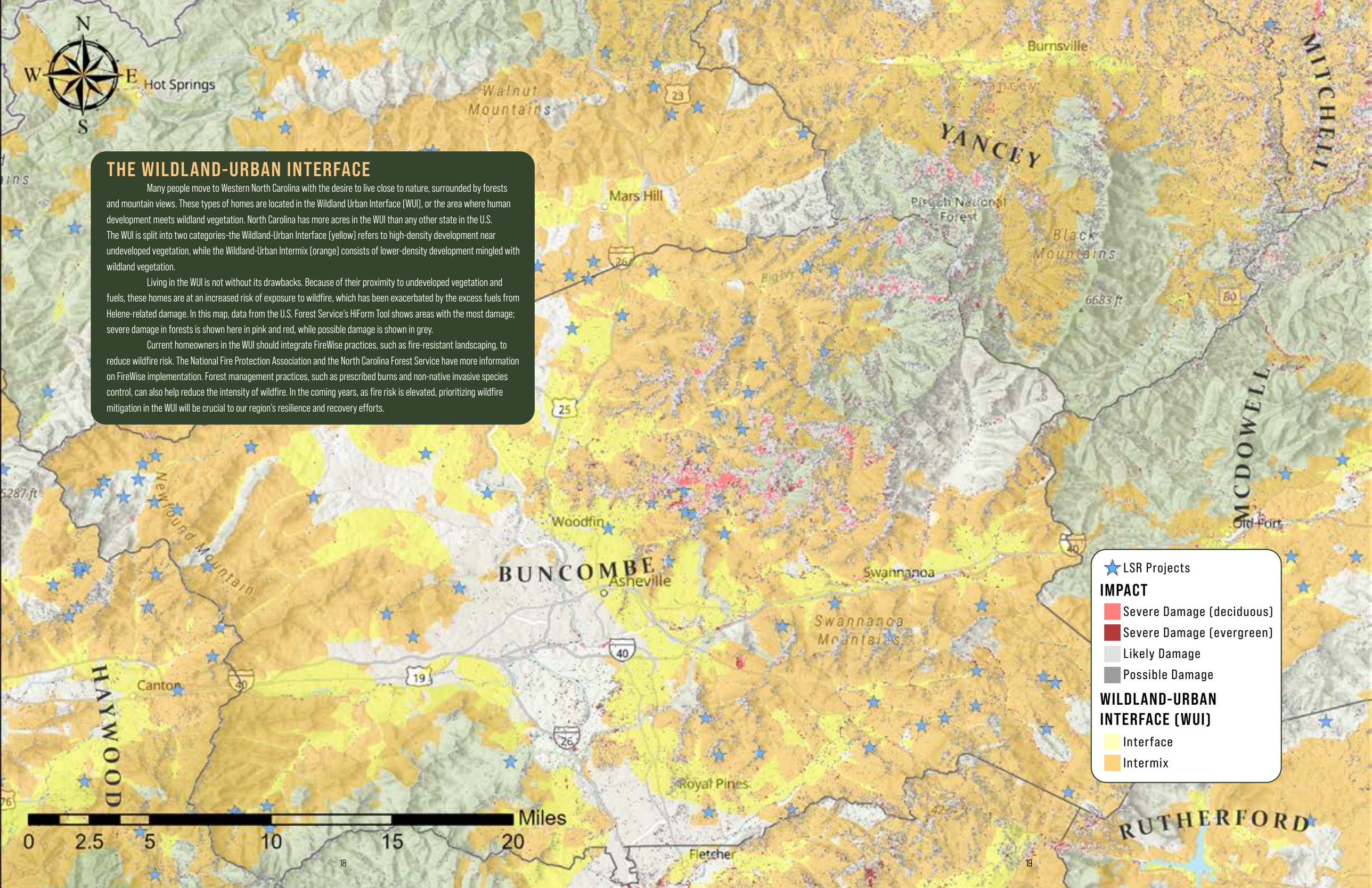
"Disturbances are beneficial, even necessary, to forest health. Wildfires often control forest undergrowth, encouraging biodiversity. Floods bring new water and nutrients to the soil and to animals living in that habitat. High winds often result in tree loss and increase habitat availability. Living trees in the presence of fallen trees may take advantage of the sunlight provided by the new canopy openings and the soil nutrients that become available over time as the fallen trees decompose."

THE WILDLAND-URBAN INTERFACE

Many people move to Western North Carolina with the desire to live close to nature, surrounded by forests and mountain views. These types of homes are located in the Wildland Urban Interface (WUI), or the area where human development meets wildland vegetation. North Carolina has more acres in the WUI than any other state in the U.S. The WUI is split into two categories-the Wildland-Urban Interface (yellow) refers to high-density development near undeveloped vegetation, while the Wildland-Urban Intermix (orange) consists of lower-density development mingled with wildland vegetation.

Living in the WUI is not without its drawbacks. Because of their proximity to undeveloped vegetation and fuels, these homes are at an increased risk of exposure to wildfire, which has been exacerbated by the excess fuels from Helene-related damage. In this map, data from the U.S. Forest Service's HiForm Tool shows areas with the most damage; severe damage in forests is shown here in pink and red, while possible damage is shown in grey.

Current homeowners in the WUI should integrate FireWise practices, such as fire-resistant landscaping, to reduce wildfire risk. The National Fire Protection Association and the North Carolina Forest Service have more information on FireWise implementation. Forest management practices, such as prescribed burns and non-native invasive species control, can also help reduce the intensity of wildfire. In the coming years, as fire risk is elevated, prioritizing wildfire mitigation in the WUI will be crucial to our region's resilience and recovery efforts.



MODERN FORESTRY REVISITED: THE FUTURE OF OUR FORESTS

By: Willow McNeil
EcoForesters' Development Assistant

FEATURING KEYNOTE SPEAKER ETHAN TAPPER

"There is no doubt that we have caused every problem that these forests face. There is no doubt that we are their greatest threat. And I believe there's no doubt that we're also their best hope for a better future, that we may actually be the keystone species in these ecosystems."

Ethan Tapper, forester and bestselling author of "How to Love a Forest", beautifully encapsulated the theme of Modern Forestry Revisited 2026 with this quote. His work as a forester and digital storyteller were first introduced to EcoForesters through Meredith Balgley, who, along with her husband Erik Bendix, was named 2025's EcoForester of the Year. Executive Director Lang Hornthal states, "I wasn't even finished [with his book] before I knew we had to get Ethan to come to Asheville and share his passion and his vision with us." And on March 26th, Tapper served as the keynote speaker for Modern Forestry Revisited: The Future of our Forests, sharing his story with nearly 200 attendees.

In the aftermath of a disturbance such as Helene, active stewardship is needed to help shape our future forests. Tapper describes stewardship-one of his favorite words-as both a profound responsibility and an ongoing process. "How do we pass this world along to future generations, and give them a world that is not just not any worse than the world of today, but a world that is so much better?" At the time of writing How to Love a Forest, Tapper was in the process of stewarding his own forest, the 175-acre Bear Island in Vermont. Restoration often feels like a big task to tackle, especially when faced with complications like non-native invasive species, climate change, and storm damage. Bear Island's challenges, he says, felt overwhelming at first, especially when first viewing the property. The previous landowner had high-graded the land, a practice Tapper describes as "a very selfish and short-sighted one." "What they'd done is essentially manage the forest as efficiently as possible to be less healthy, the inverse of what any responsible forest landowner or logger or forester would ever do." Along with an absence of healthy trees, as he continued to walk the property, he saw evidence of deer overpopulation and a 30-acre patch of invasive Japanese barberry.

Tapper, at first, left the property saying he'd "find some forest elsewhere that's easier to love." Yet, in the coming months, he continued to check on it, with a creeping thought that he could try and help this forest heal. After visiting again in the summer, he found something surprising. There were plants that he loved-like lowbush blueberry, sweet fern, and pink corydalis-and healthy trees peeked out from behind masses of unhealthy ones. "I had to ask myself in that moment," he said, "if it would be a greater kindness to this forest, this ecosystem, to do nothing, or to do absolutely everything in my power to try and make it healthy again." He, of course, chose to do something. After purchasing the property, he began creating pockets of regeneration, encouraging healthy trees, and hunting deer to reduce overpopulation. Through intentional stewardship, Bear Island started to come back to life.

There is often a misconception that our forests will recover if we allow nature to take its course. Yet past mismanagement, non-native invasive species, and the impacts of climate change mean that forests will continue to degrade without intervention. In his talk, Tapper defined forestry as a discipline of action. "We don't have to be bystanders in these ecosystems-we can go into them and we can see what's going on, and we can do something about it, right?" In his path to becoming a forester, he experienced what he referred to as a "deepening," where the more he learned, the more he could see. "I started to realize that these forests that I'd seen as being these perfect, pristine, utopian systems, these ecosystems that only needed to be left alone, were actually, yes, beautiful, and yes, precious, but also deeply wounded-and in many ways, deeply imperiled." He mentioned that, for example, all bird species have experienced a 30% decline over the last 50 years. "How do we not be witnesses to that?" he asks. "How do we be the people that stop and reverse that?"

"There is often a misconception that our forests will recover if we allow nature to take its course. Yet past mismanagement, non-native invasive species, and the impacts of climate change mean that forests will continue to degrade without intervention."

"With our help, these forests may rediscover a capacity for life beyond imagining, an abundance that this world has not known for generations."

His talk concluded with a reading from the end of "How to Love a Forest", describing the choices we have to make for the benefit of these ecosystems. "In this moment," he writes, "we can allow this biosphere, our home, to sink further into dysfunction and disarray, or we can make the radical and bittersweet decisions necessary to choose a different path...With our help, these forests may rediscover a capacity for life beyond imagining, an abundance that this world has not known for generations."

Continued on next page...

Photo Left: Ethan Tapper, Author of "How To Love A Forest".
Photo Top: EcoForesters' Development Assistant, Willow McNeil, tabling at our Modern Forestry Revisisted event.
Photo Bottom: Attendees of the Modern Forestry Revisited event learning about non-native invasive species.

In Chapter 5 of How to Love a Forest, titled "Change: A Windstorm," Tapper describes his experience working in the aftermath of a New England storm. "I speak to people with frantic voices, people who need me to understand that something deeply wrong has happened to their forest, that there must be something I can do to fix it." For those in Western North Carolina seeking answers after Helene–and the foresters working in a post-Helene environment–this quote is particularly powerful. During his talk, Tapper stated that trees have been dying as long as trees have been alive, and that the death of a tree is normal. Dead trees create habitat for wildlife, and benefit soil and water. Despite these benefits, though, he acknowledged that this was not a normal storm, and that increasingly intense storms and factors like invasive plants can impact natural regenerative properties. "We recognize that even if forests are resilient and even if they can come back from this, in this moment, they might need a little bit of help to do that."

So, what decisions can we make here in Western North Carolina that will help rediscover this "life beyond imagining", especially in the wake of a disturbance like Helene? Following Tapper's reading, Senior Forestry Director Andy Tait joined the conversation to add regional context. Tait explained that there were many conditions pre-Helene that affected the health of our forests, once again bringing up high grading, which he described as "basically the opposite of evolution." Combined with fire suppression, climate change, and non-native invasive plans, inaction is irresponsible. Both foresters likened the action needed to restore our forests to helping someone who has experienced an injury–"in the same way that [they] might need help to be their best self, and might need help to recover, that's what we want to do," Tapper stated.

Yet management–especially for private forest owners–can be costly, and there are few markets available that value the ecosystem services that forests provide. While some carbon sequestration markets are available for family forest owners, we still need more opportunities to pay landowners to manage for other benefits, like clean water and wildlife. Tapper emphasized the value of beauty and legacy in forests, and stated that we intrinsically recognize the importance of being able to walk through a forest landscape, valuing it beyond an economic number. There is one market, though, that offers a renewable resource as well as an opportunity to help forests heal: timber. Because we've seen examples of bad logging, Tapper stated, we often feel averse to it. But a better world for our forests and a world in which we use wood as a resource is possible. Wood offers an alternative to carbon-intensive resources like steel, concrete, and plastics, and responsible harvesting can introduce a much needed diversity of age to our forests.

"These trees are not the forest.
Your forest is still here.
It has not been lost;
only changed."

During the question and answer section, a member of the audience asked what a good logging harvest job looks like. Smaller loggers that cut down trees with a chainsaw, harvesting in a way that mimics natural disturbances, help add complexity to even-aged forests. Tapper emphasized the importance of this idea of "complexity", mimicking the multigenerational structure of an old growth forest while still retaining some old legacy trees. Tait chimed in, saying "If you told me I was going to be cutting trees 20 years ago, I'd have said 'You're crazy. I love trees.'" Now, he recognizes the importance of creating these intentional disturbances, but made sure to emphasize the need to leave a diversity of tree species.

Not only is a diversity of habitat types necessary, said Tapper, but also a diversity of approaches to stewardship. At Bear Island, for example, he's actively working to get more coarse woody material on the ground, unlike our region's current abundance of debris. Intentional placement of big tree tops and whole trees can help protect young saplings from disturbances like deer browse. Here in WNC, some of these approaches can be taken to benefit regeneration post-Helene, but it's important to move fuels away from any structures to mitigate fire risk. Tait mentioned that debris management will be a long-term process, and will depend on a number of factors, such as tree species and height. "It depends", he said, is the golden answer for forestry questions. There will never be one perfect solution that can be applied on a landscape scale, but by implementing a diversity of practices and encouraging diverse habitat types, we will be less vulnerable in the face of changing conditions.

The discussion concluded shortly thereafter, but Modern Forestry Revisited continued into the next morning with a guided member hike. Led by Tapper and Bo Dossett, the Madison County Ranger with the N.C. Forest Service, the hike took us through the Mill Ridge Trail, which runs parallel to the Appalachian Trail near Hot Springs. From invasive plants to the impacts of the 2016 Silver Mine fire, Tapper and Dossett took attendees through real-world examples of the topics covered in the previous night. Both foresters spoke about how to piece together the history of a forest through a series of clues, like using the whorls of a pine tree to tell its age. Around halfway through the hike, Tapper pointed out a tall, dead standing tree, with a large cavity–perfect for wildlife value. A perfect example of diversity in ages, this dead tree stood near hundreds of saplings, evidence of regeneration from the fire that occurred a decade prior.

Through both events, one powerful message persisted: we have the power, and the duty, to shape and assist our future forests. With active stewardship, we can remove non-native species, encourage oak regeneration, and establish a diversity of tree ages and species, making our forests better than they were before the storm. Disturbance, though destructive, can also be an opportunity. As Tapper writes, "These trees are not the forest. Your forest is still here. It has not been lost; only changed."

EcoForesters thanks our sponsor, the Biltmore, for making this event possible.

Photo left: The crowd for Ethan Tapper's talk at Mordern Forestry Revisited.
Photos top and bottom: Photos from our guided EcoForesters member hike.
Event photo credit: Angelina Herbert

REFLECTIONS ON HOW TO LOVE A FOREST

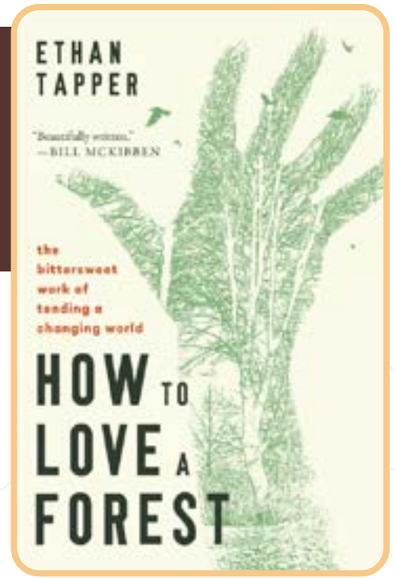
By: Ellie Peterson
EcoForesters' Engagement Coordinator

One of the most common misconceptions among people who love forests is that the best thing we can do for them is to leave them alone. But the truth is, our forests need help. Southern Appalachian forests face serious challenges – from urbanization, to invasive species, to increasingly severe disturbance events.

The realization at the heart of Ethan Tapper's bestselling book How to Love a Forest is this: "We cannot choose if we will impact ecosystems, if we will impact people across the globe, if we will impact the lives of future generations. We can only choose what the impact will be" (p. 9). A forester, Tapper explores this realization and the resulting responsibility with compassion, honesty, and determination; for although human actions are the driving force behind the many of the greatest threats our planet faces, we are also its greatest hope.

"How to Love a Forest" is an important contribution to the conversation around environmental stewardship. Since November, we've been sharing reflections of our favorite sections on our instagram, @ecoforesters, as an invitation to talk about why active stewardship matters, what it looks like in practice, and how some of Tapper's ideas play out here in the forests of western North Carolina.

Tapper describes this time in Earth's history as the Anthropocene, a period in which "human influence touches every living thing, every forest on Earth" (p. 78). Our species has spent recent history using our power to extract more from our ecosystems than they can give. But it hasn't always been this way – and it doesn't have to be. Tapper has a proposal: What if we chose to act as a keystone species again?



"How to Love a Forest" is an important contribution to the conversation around environmental stewardship."

A keystone species is one on which many others depend. In North America, beavers are a classic example. They're ecosystem engineers, animals that change their environment to suit their needs. Their dams can turn whole valleys into rich wetlands – creating habitats, storing carbon and water, and supporting an abundance of life.

Humans, too, are ecosystem engineers. How to Love a Forest invites readers to imagine a different kind of relationship with our ecosystem. One in which we are active participants – working to restore balance, and to give as much as – or even more than – we take. Ethan Tapper describes freedom as a branch on a tree: "Each person holds a tiny piece of an unthinkable power. The freedom to destroy ecosystems or to protect them, to destroy or protect each other. Our roots are intertwined" (p. 123). We've been through a lot together in Western North Carolina over the last few years. Our forests have been tested, and so have our communities. But our forests are resilient, and so are we. Everyday, we at EcoForesters get to work with partners, communities, and individual forest stewards who are using their freedom to protect our ecosystem – our collective future.

"...Our true nature is to be caretakers, stewards of this earth," writes Tapper. "We already have the power to transform the Anthropocene into...an epoch of regeneration, an epoch of abundance – we just need to do so" (p. 92).

Photo Left: EcoForesters' Crew Leader, Sal Covarrubia, planting native trees on

ECOFORESTERS HAS A NEW TOOL IN OUR TOOLBOX: LANDOWNERS

NEW AMBASSADOR PROGRAM TO CONNECT LANDOWNERS

Landowners own their forest for different reasons; it is a legacy, a source of income, and a way to connect with their land. No matter the reason, managing a forest can be an overwhelming task. While EcoForesters staff provides technical expertise, some of the most practical wisdom comes from those who have experienced the ups and downs of forest stewardship. This is why we are excited to announce a new ambassador program that will add another layer of know-how to our outreach team.

Our goal through this program is to share landowner experiences with each other. Over the years, we have engaged with landowners that have run the gauntlet of cost share programs, battled non-native invasive species and encountered success often through trial and error. These events often carry more weight than a recommendation from a textbook; rather, it is a proven strategy that can be easily related to similar conditions. Sharing knowledge through personal stories provides a community of practice that offers emotional support and a sense of belonging.

The Ambassador Program will provide several opportunities for engagement that include tours of forests under active stewardship, articles written on firsthand experiences applying for cost share programs and discussions on the best tools and methods for ongoing non-native invasive species control. This is particularly important as NNIS control can be daunting to begin. Hearing the details of how to rid a special place of invasive plants and the satisfaction of seeing native plants return will incentivize others to act. This model will also encourage neighbors to share information and even tools needed for forest management.

Our first roster of Ambassadors will include past EcoForesters of the Year who have agreed to serve as liaison for EcoForesters in a manner comfortable for them. This program will succeed by utilizing the individual skills and expertise of each landowner. If you fit the description of a model landowner and would like to engage other landowners on forest stewardship, please contact us. We will soon be sharing information on opportunities to become involved in this program and learn from your fellow peers and neighbors.

Photo top: EcoForesters' Forester, Joey Borders, educating EF members on the state of our forests during a member hike.
Photo left: Landower, Russ Oates, putting caging around new tree saplings on his property to protect the tress as they grow.

AFTER HELENE:
USFS BEGINS RECOVERY WORK ON PISGAH NATIONAL FOREST

Across Western North Carolina (WNC), the aftermath of Tropical Storm Helene is impossible to ignore. What we encounter in the woods today is not just scattered blowdowns, but entire landscapes transformed. In many places, the volume of downed trees is staggering—hillsides where trunks are stacked in tangled walls of debris, creating conditions unlike anything the region has experienced in modern times.

As an organization dedicated to promoting resilient, ecologically sound forests, EcoForesters has been closely watching how these conditions evolve. Similar to what occurred on private lands, downed trees have become barriers to National forest access and made controlling fires more difficult. Once these trees have dried, they will shift from being storm damage to potential wildfire risk—especially for the communities that border some of the hardest-hit sections of the forest.

When the U.S. Forest Service invited a group of state, local, and nonprofit partners to discuss wildfire risks leading into the spring fire season, EcoForesters joined to better understand the scale of the threat and how our region can respond.

The 2025 wildfire season was an early indicator of the challenges that lay ahead. Across WNC, fire activity exceeded that of previous years, particularly in storm-affected areas. We saw firsthand how the blowdown changed firefighting conditions. Trails, access roads, and previously reliable firebreaks vanished beneath piles of timber. In many heavily impacted zones, responders were unable to establish containment lines at all—removing one of the most essential tools for slowing or stopping fast-moving fires.

Recognizing these realities, Forest Service professionals have set goals for reducing hazardous fuel loads quickly and safely. That effort began with a comprehensive assessment of the entire Helene impact zone. Specialists in fire behavior, ecology, emergency response, and forest management worked together to map where the damage was most severe and which areas posed the greatest immediate risk to neighboring communities, watersheds, and vital infrastructure.

Importantly, the Forest Service also sought input from county emergency managers, local and state officials, tribes, and key stakeholders—including EcoForesters. Those conversations helped identify specific locations where fuel reduction work was not just beneficial but essential. At the same time, planners worked to avoid sensitive habitats and ensure ecological impacts were minimized—a key priority for EcoForesters.

Some of the most heavily damaged areas in the Pisgah National Forests are also those closest to communities and private inholdings. North Carolina ranks number one in the nation for total acres in the wildland-urban interface. Our desire to be close to nature has also put communities at greater risk. With warmer, drier spring conditions on the horizon, the risk compounds.

From EcoForesters' perspective, removing hazardous fuels is just the beginning. Once access is restored and fuel loads are reduced, the real work of long-term forest resilience can begin. That includes preparing for large-scale reforestation, controlling non-native invasive species, and helping the Pisgah recover. This work will require partners to have patience and a zeal for working together to find the right solutions.

EcoForesters remains committed to supporting collaborative, science-driven restoration efforts on public and private lands that reduce wildfire risk today and create healthier, more resilient forests for generations to come.

NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION DISASTER RELIEF FUND

In February 2026, EcoForesters was awarded $95,000 from the North Carolina Community Foundation's Disaster Relief Fund, supporting our work restoring Helene-damaged forests in WNC. Thanks to this funding, our work over the next year will prioritize outreach, education, and landowner training efforts in communities hardest hit by Helene, building off of our established Landscape Scale Restoration model. Through our workshops, we will bring together community landowners to learn from local resource providers, providing information on invasive species, wildfire mitigation, and post-disaster management. Our stewardship staff will conduct training sessions on non-native invasive identification and control, giving forest owners the tools they need to steward their land. In collaboration with nonprofit partners and volunteer fire departments, we'll bring resources on wildfire mitigation to vulnerable communities.

This project will also fund boots-on-the-ground stewardship work, encouraging healthy, resilient forests. It will support our non-native invasive species control efforts, preventing existing invasions from worsening in Helene-damaged forest stands. We'll add capacity to our saw work, clearing access to recreation spaces and fire breaks. Funding will also help expand our sweat equity program, reducing financial barriers to essential stewardship practices.

We are grateful to the North Carolina Community Foundation for recognizing the importance of forest restoration in our region's long-term recovery, and are excited for this opportunity to expand our impact.

NORTH CAROLINA COMMUNITY FOUNDATION

COMING SOON:
TIMBER LOSS RELIEF PROGRAM

The Timber Loss Relief Program (TLRP), administered by the North Carolina Forest Service, will provide eligible landowners with funding to offset timber losses from Hurricane Helene. **If you own at least 10 acres of contiguous forest** and experienced moderate to severe timber loss, you may qualify for this program. It is important to note that this program will not cover 100% of damages, and that landowners with light or scattered damage may not qualify. For more information, **please contact your county ranger** with the North Carolina Forest Service.

Find your county office at:
www.ncagr.gov/divisions/nc-forest-service/contacts

**Disclaimer: The Timber Loss Relief Program was not officially released at the time of printing this newsletter; details may have changed.*

EcoForesters.org

OUR MISSION

EcoForesters is a 501(c)(3) non-profit professional forestry organization dedicated to restoring and conserving our Appalachian forests through education and stewardship.

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SCAN TO DONATE

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THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

This is more than a forest restoration effort, it is an investment in the ecological, economic, and cultural future of the Appalachian region. With your support, EcoForesters has been able to continue to help create a legacy of healthy forests, empowered landowners, and resilient communities. Thank you!