



home • syllabus • schedule • preparation • workshop • follow-up • readings • **case studies** • glossary • support

SCB Sections

- Africa
- ANA
- Asia
- Europe
- Marine
- **NA**
- Oceania

Tools: elearning

Resources

- BLOG
- library
- Instructor

CASE STUDY 3. Longleaf Pine Restoration | pdf |

Fire dripped off the torch along the burn line set by the fire crew. This was not arson, rather a strategically controlled burn to manage the underbrush that would otherwise choke out the growing longleaf pine seedlings. The Nature Conservancy is partnering with private industry and the Big Thicket National Preserve to restore remnants of the Longleaf pine forests that used to cover about 70 million acres and now are reduced to about 3% of their previous extent.

In the words of one press release, "The project is an expansion of an innovative pilot project begun in 2003 on 51 acres of the Turkey Creek Unit, in which The Nature Conservancy agreed to manage the conversion of slash pine areas to longleaf pine and its associated ecosystem by contracting with a commercial timber company, as approved by the National Park Service, to remove the slash pine in an environmentally sensitive manner. The company's harvesting practices were certified according to requirements set forth by the Organization for International Standards (ISO) 14001 Environmental Management System and the Sustainable Forestry Initiative.

"In the pilot project, the purchase and harvest of the timber provided The Nature Conservancy the ability to donate longleaf pine restoration work of equal value to the Big Thicket National Preserve, allowing project to be self-funded. The Nature Conservancy, which owns and manages the Roy E. Larsen Sandyland Sanctuary in Silsbee, has been active in longleaf pine restoration and management in East Texas for more than 20 years."<more>

Stakeholder Perspectives

Family Heritage

Few current residents or visitors to the Big Thicket region realize that the open forests, seen in historical photos at the Big Thicket interpretive center, used to be maintained by periodic fires. Longleaf pine was adapted to survive these fires. Families in Silsbee and Woodville made fortunes harvesting the huge trees that are no longer found in the region.

When the timber industry replanted, it was with the faster growing slash pine more suitable for shorter harvest cycles and the markets for pulpwood and plywood. Now the supply of timber resources is traded on the global market, and lumber mills in the Big Thicket region have shut down.

Environmental Advocates

The Nature Conservancy uses a science-based approach to identify threatened plant communities within each ecoregion. Priorities for conservation are established on a worldwide basis to ensure that it is not only land, but a representative sample of biotic communities living on the land, which will be protected for future generations.

"With the historic loss of longleaf pine systems across Texas, partnerships such as this one with the National Park Service - and others with public agencies, private industry and citizens - are the key to achieving successful restoration and management of this rare habitat," said Wendy Ledbetter, The Nature Conservancy's southeast Texas project director." <more>

Agency Regulators

"We welcome the opportunity to partner with The Nature Conservancy to expand an agreement that



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has already yielded valuable on-the-ground results," said Todd Brindle, superintendent of Big Thicket National Preserve. "As National Park Service budgets become ever tighter, agreements like this play a valuable role in protecting and restoring our resources." <more>

Development Advocates

Land values of previously productive timber lands within driving distance of major metropolitan regions, have risen dramatically in the past few decades. Financial advisors to the timber industry noted that sales of the lands would be more profitable than the forest products that could be harvested from them. As timber corporations divested land holdings, the real estate became available for subdivision into hobby farms and gated communities. Homeowners are understandably concerned about controlled burns designed to manage longleaf pine forests. Degraded air quality due to smoke is only a minor inconvenience compared to the fear that forest fires might get out of control and destroy property.

Sources

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