

Green Forests Work - UNEP in the Field

On a foggy Saturday morning in early November, 85 volunteers showed up in Pike County, Kentucky, to help plant trees. The reforestation site was a former mountaintop removal coal mine near Fishtrap Lake that had previously been reclaimed to grasslands. Planting trees instead of grass can help restore these abandoned sites to their original forested condition, and thereby provide habitat for wildlife, improve air and water quality and create economic opportunities for the citizens of Appalachia.



The property is managed by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. A court settlement between The Sierra Club and the Clintwood Elkhorn Coal Company over water quality violations at the site will pay for the reforestation project, which will be conducted in phases over a period of 3 years (about 70 acres per year) and commenced with site preparation (mowing, herbicide) in August, 2011. In order to further prepare the site for planting, two bulldozers ripped up the soil a few weeks ahead of the event to alleviate soil compaction and provide a planting bed in which to place the trees, in much the same way that a farmer plows the land before planting crops.



In a three acre area, over 4,000 black walnut (*Juglans nigra*) trees were planted. In addition to the standard reforestation tract, an experimental research plot was also established. The research site was to determine the differences between growing seeds versus bare root seedlings, and to further determine whether unprotected or sheltered trees would grow better. The shelters will allegedly protect the seeds and seedlings from being scavenged by rodents at the sites. This experiment will help Green Forests Work determine the utility of direct seeding for reforesting future sites.





Two American chestnut trees (*Castanea dentata*) were also ceremoniously planted at Fishtrap Lake in memory of Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathai, who passed away on September 25, 2011. Wangari Maathai was born in Kenya, and was the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree. She had dedicated her life to sustainable development, democracy, and peace. Wangari was an outspoken women's rights advocate, and began a reforestation project in Africa called the Green Belt Movement to help alleviate poverty and promote environmental conservation.



American chestnuts were once the dominant tree species in Appalachia, and were so characteristically large that they were nicknamed the “redwoods of the east.” However, during the early 1900's, an exotic disease called the chestnut blight (*Cryphonectria parasitica*) began to spread throughout the forests, and by the 1950's, approximately four billion chestnuts had died. Considered to be the greatest ecological disaster of the 20th century, hope still remains for the American chestnut's return to the forest. Old mine lands like those near Fishtrap Lake provide many opportunities for planting this legendary tree because the Appalachian coal field lies in the heart of the historic American chestnut range and there is no surrounding vegetation with which the trees will have to compete for nutrients or sunlight.



Among the numerous patrons and volunteers who appeared to help out on Saturday representing different groups and organizations, Mary Garcia came representing her people, a Native American group called the Tohono O'Odham, People of the Desert. As a young woman, Mary was entrusted by the Elders of the Tohono O'Odham Nation with songs, dances, rituals, and ceremonies of the himdag, their Way of Living. The People know to live with respect for the truth that all is connected. Mary blessed the land on which the trees were planted and sang a traditional song for the occasion. She talked to the other volunteers about the importance of environmental conservation and of always remembering that our actions will affect seven generations of people in the future.



Volunteers also had the chance to witness a black bear release by the Kentucky Department of Fish & Wildlife Resources. The 135 pound male had gotten into one too many trash cans in Ashland, Kentucky, and was reported as a nuisance bear. Brought in on an official Fish & Wildlife truck, the bear was safely released back into the wild, and at a safe distance from volunteers.



Toward the end of the day, a few students from Berea College played traditional bluegrass music to invigorate and inspire the volunteers laboring away with their dibbles and black walnut saplings. The talented musicians had a delightfully carefree attitude and a natural disposition for playing traditional bluegrass songs together, which seemed to lighten the load for those who had contributed their time and effort to reforesting a small piece of Appalachia.



We would like to thank the following organizations who helped out with this reforestation project:

- Appalachian Coal Country Team
- Appalachian Regional Commission
- Appalachian Regional Reforestation Initiative
- Arbor Day Foundation
- Berea College
- Bereans for Appalachia
- Campus Christian Center
- Clintwood Elkhorn Coal Company
- Gay-Straight Alliance
- Green Forests Work
- Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources
- Kentucky Division of Forestry
- Kentucky Division of Mining Reclamation Enforcement
- Kentuckians for the Commonwealth
- Native American Nations
- Office of Surface Mining, US Department of Interior
- Samara of Berea
- Shaped By Water

- Sierra Club
- The American Chestnut Foundation
- The Jobs Project
- Tubex
- Union Concrete
- United Nations Environmental Programme
- US Army Corps of Engineers
- University of Kentucky
- Virginia Division of Forestry

To view more photos from this tree planting event, visit our [Facebook](#) page!