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Clear cutting Tennessee to the ground: ForestWatch says wildlife habitats suffering

By CHARLES W. JOHNSON / News Editor for the Southern Standard

Few would deny Tennessee is a beautiful state, full of natural wonders, open and accessible wilderness areas, graceful waterfalls, lovely and serene lakes, and seemingly vast hardwood forests.

Indeed, as one travels around the state, particularly in the mountainous eastern section, the land appears to be swathed in green during the growing season. The forests seem endless, blanketing the hills and mountains literally as far as the eye can see. With all this spectacular greenery, it's hard to believe these forests could be in danger of disappearing.

There's so much of it, so many thousands of acres of pristine forest land, that it would seem impossible to cut it all down. After all, what force could possibly be powerful enough to challenge Mother Nature herself?

While there are those who look at these forests and see their natural beauty, something to explore and enjoy, others look and see jobs, profit, and tremendous economic potential, nothing more than another crop to be harvested.

One side says our forests are in danger and must be protected from what they claim is an insidious process called clear-cutting, which is where entire tracts of trees are removed down to ground level. The other side says, supported by the state forestry service no less, that clear-cutting is a good way to harvest wood if it is done properly, and trees are then planted to replace the ones which are cut down and ground into pulp.

Both sides cite statistics and expert testimony to back their cases. Both sides are passionate about their beliefs.

But why should the battle between these two factions concern Warren County citizens? Surely the forests in and around Warren County aren't in danger. Surely those who love the nearby wilderness area known as Savage Gulf shouldn't be worried.

Not so, says Cielo Sand of ForestWatch, who was also co-founder of the Dogwood Alliance, and has been fighting to control clear-cutting in the state and in the South for almost a decade now.

"The Plateau forests where McMinnville citizens reside, hunt and recreate are ravaged by huge clear-cuts which destroy streams, wildlife habitat and downright beauty for generations to come," Sand said.

The clear-cut hardwood forests have been replanted in sterile pine plantations as a short rotation crop for the paper and engineered lumber industry, according to Sand.

"Think again if you believe it is small, private property owners who are changing the landscape across Tennessee and the South," she said. "A recent U.S. Forest Service study reports that it's the big guys doing most of the cutting. Six percent of the forest owners own 70 percent of the land, and 1 percent of that 6 percent do over half the cutting."

Are our area hardwood forests in danger? Many are beginning to think so, particularly when they drive through the area leading into Savage Gulf and observe the huge sections of clear-cut ground.

There's an old Joni Mitchell song that goes:

They took all the trees
And put them in a tree museum
And they charged all the people
A dollar and a half just to see 'em
Don't it always seem to go
That you don't know what you've got
Till it's gone
They paved paradise and put up a parking lot

For some, this may seem far-fetched, but for others, it is seen as prophetic. And considering we live in a world where people have watched Amazon forests suffer burning so extensive the fires were actually visible from space, many more are beginning to wonder just how far the assault on nature will go right here at home.

The fact is the Natural Resources Defense Council has placed the Cumberland Plateau on a list of the 12 most endangered wildernesses in the Western Hemisphere.

Opponents to clear-cutting, like ForestWatch and Save our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM), believe there should be some control and accountability for those businesses who use the technique, and are introducing legislation to attempt to establish those controls. But these efforts face some stiff opposition from some surprising sources.

The next article in the series will look at new bill sponsored by SOCM currently moving through the state legislature.

Clear cutting in the South

Some eye-opening facts on harvest rates in Tennessee and the South:

- The South now cuts more timber than the rest of the country combined, and more than any other country in the world.
- Over 2 million acres of native forests were cut in Tennessee between 1989 and 1999. Six hundred thousand acres were clear-cut.
- To feed the South's 98 paper mills alone takes 175 million tons of trees per year.
- Tennessee cuts nearly 5 million tons of pulpwood each year and more than half of this comes from native hardwood forests.