

Hemlock Message Part 4: Stewardship – Key to Hemlock Survival

By Donna Shearer, Chairman, Save Georgia's Hemlocks

“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul.” John Muir

Gratitude is much on our minds during the Thanksgiving season as we reflect on our blessings – perhaps families, friends, homes, health, or jobs, – and our hearts go out to people who have suffered losses. It's also a time to think about broader kinds of blessings, not just those that we have but those that surround us – the beautiful part of the country where we live, the bountiful natural resources in our area, our freedom to enjoy them, – and yes, our responsibility and privilege to protect these treasures.



This sense of stewardship for the world around us rises from a different spring in each individual. For some, it's a spiritual matter rooted in a belief that we have a care-taking role for our planet and all its creatures. It may come from a more intellectual recognition of the interdependencies and finite capacities of the natural systems that sustain us. Some have a firm grasp on the economic and/or political consequences of managing our resources wisely (or not). And still others are drawn by the awesome beauty of special places and their terrible fragility.

If it is true that freedom and the capacity for moral decision-making are central to what it means to be human, then the awareness and appreciation that are the first steps of stewardship must lead to changes in individual behavior and communal commitment to effective action. To take the journey from conceptual to more concrete realms, consider the plight of the hemlock as it is threatened with near extinction by the hemlock woolly adelgid and our power to avert this disaster.



Let's start with our awareness of the hemlock. The dense, evergreen canopy associated with mature hemlock forests creates a unique environment that is a critical habitat for many animal and plant species. At this point, it is not clear whether migratory birds that rely heavily on the hemlock will adapt, go elsewhere, or become threatened themselves. Increased stream temperature of even a few degrees is likely to have enormous consequences on the distribution and abundance of brook trout. An accelerated rate of sediment deposition in streams can adversely affect brook trout by reducing the production of food organisms, decreasing dissolved oxygen content of sub-gravel waters, and smothering eggs and embryos before they can hatch. Many of our rare and endangered plants rely on the shade of evergreens such as hemlocks for their very survival. As migrating elsewhere is not an option for them and rapid adaptation is unlikely, their future is very uncertain.

To move on to a proper state of appreciation, consider some of the other consequences that are likely if the hemlocks disappear, as could occur within the next decade. In addition to the loss of certain shade-loving native plant and animal species that depend on hemlocks for food and habitat, we can expect a decline in the scenic splendor of our mountains, closure of trails and recreation areas due to the danger of falling trees, increase in soil erosion, degradation of water and air quality, decline in revenue from outdoor enthusiasts and tourism and the

associated jobs, increased exposure to drought, decline in the beauty and value of private property, risk of personal injury and property damage, expense to remove dangerous dead trees, and the list of dire consequences goes on.

And all this doesn't begin to touch the profound sense of loss we may feel when our special natural places are no longer as we remember them, when we cannot to share their majesty and beauty with our children, when we are unable to give decent answer to the inevitable question, "Couldn't you have done anything to save the trees?"

Now is a time of crisis, a unique combination of danger and opportunity when individual choices and communal actions can still make a difference. Individuals can choose to do the simple cultural tasks (such as watering and mulching) that help maintain the health of the trees on their own property, be watchful for signs of adelgid infestation on their hemlocks, and when it arrives, take swift action to treat the problem themselves or have it done by a qualified professional.



Communities and homeowner associations can have an even greater impact by banding together in addressing the problem. By taking action to combat the woolly adelgid on both their shared and private spaces, they can achieve a wider area of suppression, decrease or delay the occurrence of re-infestation from nearby untreated areas, and help to protect the beauty and value of their property. This kind of effort begins with talking to friends and neighbors to make them aware of the issue, publicizing it through e-mail lists and newsletters, and posting information on association web sites.

A good next step is to have a presentation about the hemlocks at a homeowner meeting or informal gathering in someone's home. Then, as many homeowner associations have already done, the group can develop and implement a Hemlock help plan for treating their hemlocks on shared and private property, including guidance on choosing the trees to be treated (all or only some), determining the right kind of treatment and method, and figuring the cost.

In the larger public spaces such as our national forests, state parks, and recreation areas, *all* individuals and groups can help by making contributions to the research labs that are rearing predator beetles for release on public lands, volunteering to participate in forest health project through the U.S. Forest Service or state forestry departments, and supporting the efforts of nonprofit organizations working to save the hemlocks. For more information on what you can do to help save the trees, please visit www.savegeorgiashemlocks.org or call the Hemlock Help Line 706-429-8010.



A parting thought – stewardship is not just a function of ownership but one of membership in the total community of our planet. If this is a value you hold dear, share it with those you love. Pass it on to the next generation. The hemlock's very survival depends on it. Isn't it time to take your family for a lovely walk (and talk) in the woods this weekend?