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Celebrating old growth, fighting new challenges in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest

Tiny insect marauds trees as visitor numbers climb

Written by **Karen Chávez** 8:19 PM, Jul. 16, 2011

JOYCE KILMER MEMORIAL FOREST — Marshall McClung was born and raised on the edge of Nantahala National Forest outside Robbinsville, in a log cabin with no electricity or running water.

“If I stepped off my front porch, I was in the woods,” said McClung, 66, a retired 30-year veteran of the U.S. Forest Service. “I was always in the woods, but the first time I ever went out to the Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest, I was a teenager, and I was overwhelmed at the trees.”

But when McClung looks to the U.S. Forest Service's 75th anniversary of the dedication of the old-growth forest on July 30, it's with a touch of the bittersweet.

Rick and Jillian Self, of Charleston, S.C., walk by a massive poplar tree in Joyce Kilmer Memorial Forest on Friday. /

Many of the mighty trees of Joyce Kilmer — firmly rooted in soil since the time when Cherokee freely made their home in the forest and the Mayflower had yet to set sail from England — have been under siege over the past decade.

The hemlock wooly adelgid — the tiny bug that decimated large sections of hemlocks in the Smokies — has taken its toll in Joyce Kilmer, though towering poplars remain and continue to give the forest its sense of majesty.

Use of the 3,800-acre forest also has increased at a time when funding for upkeep has declined.

“I'm sure a lot of people who haven't been out there in a while and come to the celebration will have some disappointment,” McClung said. “They look as though a strong wind storm had gone through the area snapping the trees off and leaving jagged snags of varying heights.

“It would be comparable to Clingmans Dome where the trees have come down naturally,” he said.

The trees in this remote pocket of Graham County grow so big they stand about 100 feet tall and up to 20 feet in diameter.

They have survived centuries of fire, drought and violent storms, farming pressures and timber crews, only to see the annihilation of the hemlock population, much as the American chestnut tree was wiped out by blight in the 1930s.

“A lot of folks in this region had to bear witness to the death of the chestnut at the same time Joyce Kilmer Forest was being established,” said Brent Martin, Southern Appalachian Regional Director for the Wilderness Society, based in Sylva.

“But even without these hemlocks, Joyce Kilmer still has historic significance and we have these great tulip trees still standing and hopefully will for many more years,” Martin said.

A 'magic place'

Joyce Kilmer attracts some 40,000 people a year from every U.S. state and dozens of foreign countries, many of them drawn by a “last of its kind” factor, said Cherie Brantley, director of Graham County Travel and Tourism.

Most come to hike the 2-mile figure-8 loop trail through the memorial forest, although there are 60 miles of trails in the wilderness area.

“It's one of the few remaining virgin forests in the country,” Brantley said. “We know it's a huge draw. There's a constant trail of people coming through to get information on Joyce Kilmer.”

There are no economic impact studies, she said, but in a county where two-thirds of the land is publicly held, tourism is the No. 1 industry, which makes the forest's impact on the economy unmistakable.

“This is one of the few places you can see trees that large,” said Robert Rankin, innkeeper of Snowbird Mountain Lodge in Robbinsville and president of the nonprofit Partners of Joyce Kilmer-Slickrock Wilderness

“In the late 1930s, you'll see in the old photos the clear-cutting. The timber companies had come through and taken every stick of wood they could, with no rehabilitation.”

Shirley Oswalt feels the ancient land running through her blood. A member of the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, Oswalt grew up in the Snowbird community just outside Joyce Kilmer.

“These mountains have always been important to us. It's part of who we are,” said Oswalt, who teaches the Cherokee language and culture to young tribe members.

Oswalt worked with a fellow tribe member from Oklahoma to translate the poem “Trees” into Cherokee. Some of her students will read the translated version during the 75th anniversary celebration.

In memory of a poet-soldier

The forest was created to memorialize poet and soldier Alfred Joyce Kilmer, best known for the poem “Trees.”

He was killed July 30, 1918, while serving in France during World War I. Historians say it is likely that Kilmer, a New Jersey native, never spent time among the giant trees.

After Kilmer's death, the Veterans of Foreign Wars requested the Department of Agriculture find land with trees magnificent enough to serve as a living memorial to the tree-loving soldier.

“They found land in Graham County for $28 an acre,” McClung said. “That was at a time when most forest service land was going for $2-$4 an acre.”

But this was prime logging land, and in fact, the land was owned by Gennett Lumber Co. But the timber company was cash-strapped, McClung said, and needed money badly to build a saw mill.

Joyce Kilmer is now one of six wilderness areas in Western North Carolina, comprising 78,000 acres, a small percentage of WNC's more than 1 million acres of national forest land, Martin said.

Wilderness areas are permanently protected from certain uses, including logging, road building, resource extraction and mechanized use, Martin said. They have little signage, and chainsaws are prohibited.

Future of the forest

Though Joyce Kilmer escaped the threat of logging, it hasn't been able to fend off the aphid-like hemlock wooly adelgid, which started showing up in the Southern Appalachians about 2002.

Today, the population of hemlocks is about 95 percent gone, said U.S. Forest Service silviculturist Dave Casey.

The Forest Service first began treating the hemlocks in 2004 with a chemical called imidacloprid, and with predator beetles. “It was too little too late,” Casey said. “There is no evidence of resistance.”

The hemlock is considered a keystone species. It grows along creek banks, with its long, sweeping, tightly knit branches providing year-round shade for native trout that require cool water and habitat for some endangered species.

“One of the big impacts of the loss of the hemlocks will be on the trout population,” said Lauren Stull, acting district ranger for the Cheoah/Tusquitee districts of Nantahala National Forest.

The effects should be showing up soon. Many standing dead hemlocks were presenting a hazard to the visitors to the memorial loop, Stull said, and 150 were removed with dynamite in November.

The goal was to create a more natural-looking effect, Stull said, as if the trees were taken down by a strong storm. “In terms of protecting public safety, I feel we did the right thing,” she said.

In the coming years, new tree species will change the forest ecosystem, Casey said, sprouting in the forest newly open to sunlight.

“There will be no shortage of rhododendron. It's closing in pretty quickly,” Casey said. “A lot of red maple will be coming in and I'm sure more poplar. There's not a lot of things out there that can do what the hemlock can do.”

Stull said the forest will continue to face pressures from other invasive species, but the most immediate challenge will be handling increased visitation with a decreasing budget.

“I know the forest will continue to change,” she said, “but it really pleases me to know it will be there for future generations.”