

2024 Conservation Writing Contest

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Sustaining Nature's Lungs

"Forests are the world's air-conditioning system – the lungs of the planet – and we are on the verge of switching it off" ~ Prince Charles. Just like the lungs in a human body are necessary for life, trees are one of nature's most vital pieces that are imperative for environmental success. Trees have never ending benefits to offer, but many things are stripping away these positive factors and causing detrimental harm to our environment. Kentucky is home to a bountiful world of forestry that must be protected. It is easy to care for the forest around us and if we do just that, we can be sure to sustain nature's lungs and allow for a prosperous future in our state.

To begin, our world is home to a large number of forests. According to "Forests.org," America alone is home to 304 million hectares of forest land, which is about 750 million acres. Of this 750 million, 12.4 million is located right here in the Bluegrass State. These forests and the trees within hold strong importance to communities just like mine all across Kentucky. For instance, trees are a key source of health for humans. What is known by many is the fact that they produce healthy foods such as fruits and nuts for us to eat and they produce the oxygen we use to breathe. However, not many know about the further benefits that humans receive from trees. "Trees: Nature's Helper's for Healthy Lives" explains how trees also filter harmful pollutants out of the air to prevent health problems. They are able to absorb and hold things like carbon dioxide, ammonia, nitrogen, and so much more through their photosynthetic processes and keep the air cleaner. Trees can also help people continue physical activity and become happier. One example of this in my own community is the abundance of trees located at the Columbus Belmont State Park. Trees cover the majority of this park and are lined all throughout the trails within, leaving an enjoyable place for people to exercise at. The shade offered by these

trees allows for comfort and the beauty of them is peaceful to visitors of this park. Trees have the ability to help humans physically and mentally in all sorts of ways.

Furthermore, these forests also aid our environment and even our economy. Forests are biodiverse spaces that create a home for many plants, animals, and insects as well as support all the ecosystems that are present. Trees also have a way of purifying the air so that we humans can breathe fresh air. "Trees: Nature's Helper's for Healthy Lives" says that as the carbon dioxide levels in our air rise, trees regulate this and store the pollutant to lessen the effects of climate change. This, in turn, presents a more vibrant future for our homeland and all that rests on it. Not only do forests provide support for humans and the environment, but they also are a large part of Kentucky's economy. It is said by "Managing Land for Forest Health" that \$13 billion dollars of our state's economy comes from industries related to our forests. This contribution helps regulate the overall economy within the Bluegrass State. Forestry shows its importance to us in various ways, and it is clear that we cannot live without forests.

Though these forests are vital to our world, many things are harming them and are causing great losses to these areas. However, there is so much you can do to help preserve the plethora of trees that are crucial to our state. For example, "Not All Things in the Forest Should be Wild" explains that one of the main detrimental factors to forests is wildfires. These fires are fueled by trees and run ravage through forests, destroying everything in their path. Though not all wildfires are man made, and many are a result of weather, it is important to practice safety with fire as a preventative measure. Another adverse factor that is prominent in nature is the excessive presence of invasive species in forests. There are many invasive plant and pest species that harm the goodness that forests bring. A species of plant that wreaks havoc on trees in my own community is the malevolent Kudzu vine. Like many invasive species, it competes with the

growth of trees and usually wins. All invasive species are hard to control, but you have the ability to fight these forces to protect our forests. You can partner with conservation districts and even divisions within our state government to oppose the factors that are depleting forests. These divisions offer programs for education about the importance of forests and how to maintain them and conservation districts help you take the initial steps to preserve nature around. All it takes is one small step to make the jump to a brighter future for Kentucky forestry.

Overall, protecting our trees is crucial so that we can obtain a brighter future. Without our help, all that these forests provide will be lost, and life as we know it will be changed forever. Let's take care of the forest populations while we still can, and not let nature's air conditioning be switched off. Instead of taking a step back into the heat of what could come, take a step into the ever cooling, fresh breath of the trees around. Work with your friends, family, and community to do what is most needed by our state and help sustain nature's lungs.

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