

Trees: What They Mean to Me, Us, and the World

What do trees mean to you? Do they mean shelter, laughter, and the freedom to breathe freely? They should. In Kentucky, from 2001 to 2023, 689,424 acres of natural tree cover were lost (Global). Trees are the lifeblood of our planet. We depend on them daily for shelter, recreational space, and to help maintain the environment. We must not let these majestic, ancient trees fall to invasive species, loggers, and other methods of deforestation. Planting new trees is one solution to deforestation. However, there is a better solution. We must preserve our few remaining old-growth forests.

Old-growth forests host creatures that are unique to the old-growth ecosystem. Destruction of old-growth forests has resulted in the extinction of majestic animals such as the Ivory-billed woodpecker, Red wolf, and the Carolina parakeet (United States). Preserving our old-growth forests will lower the risk of species loss. Species extinction is not an archaic concept. On October 14, 2023, US Wildlife officials declared two species in Kentucky extinct (Congressional). When one animal is removed from the food chain, this will result in irreparable damage, including the collapse of the food chain, overpopulation, underpopulation, or even the extinction of other species. Many species will continue to go extinct if we don't do something to protect our old-growth forests.

In addition to old-growth forests providing homes to select species, old-growth Forests also provide many great spaces for recreational activities. Colossal trees towering over you are beautiful places to play, hang out, and enjoy life. My family loves to hike at Bernheim Forest, and only imagining this forest with just some newly planted trees sends shivers down my spine. On another note, old-growth forests bring tourism, meaning money. Did you know that in 2023, Kentucky hunting license sales totaled around twenty-two point eight million dollars

(Congressional)? Losing that money would mean much less money going towards the welfare of Kentucky citizens. In addition, old-growth forests' high biodiversity means they host many species that hunters highly prize. Those animals prefer old-growth forests because of the nutrients and the variety of habitats found in the old forests. Not only do old-growth forests host a wide range of animals, but they also bring happiness, money, and prosperity.

Besides the fact that old-growth forests host endangered species and provide beautiful spaces for activities, they also help to maintain the environment. Mature trees lock in significantly more carbon than younger ones. Older trees sequester around 48 pounds of carbon annually, while younger trees only sequester about 22 pounds yearly (Goergen). Since older trees capture more carbon, cutting them down and replacing them with younger ones would increase carbon levels. Carbon dioxide is a greenhouse gas that causes global warming, which heats our planet and causes more damaging weather. Kentucky has had steadily stronger floods, longer droughts, and decreased crop yields due to global warming. Old-growth forests help the environment. Action is needed to protect our forest. Legislation to protect forests is one solution, but another alternative that has become more popular in recent years is the purchasing of carbon offsets by companies to meet their sustainability goals. Many companies, such as the one my Dad works for, use these offsets to meet their organization's sustainability goals (Dupont). When they purchase these offsets, they prevent the destruction of old-growth forests and preserve them for future generations.

Old-growth forests are very beneficial to Kentucky. Not only do old-growth forests increase biodiversity but also tourism and environmental health. Old-growth forests have been proven to have more benefits than new-growth forests. Old-growth forests are precious, and Kentucky cannot afford to lose them. We cannot just stand by and let our old-growth forest

havens get destroyed. We need to have happiness and prosperity. We need to do something. On behalf of the environment, we must fight for our right to have old-growth forests!

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