

Exploring Kentucky's Trees

Jim Claypool Art and Writing Contest

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Have you ever looked at a tree standing tall and mighty over an open field and wondered what that tree has been through? What stories could it tell? What events has it seen in the course of its life? From a tiny seed blowing in the wind or acorn falling to the ground and taking root, to the spread of the trunk and branches now in this stage of its life, trees are truly extraordinary and beautiful. Trees hold the very key to our everyday life as we know it!

Arguably the most important contribution is the process of photosynthesis. During this process, the tree will "breathe in" carbon dioxide and water and will convert it into oxygen. This is the oxygen that is a necessity for our very existence! Without trees, other plants would be insufficient to create enough oxygen to provide for our needs. A single mature sycamore tree produces approximately 100 kilograms of oxygen per year. Each person needs roughly 740 kilograms of oxygen per year which equals the amount produced by seven or eight trees. Smaller plants such as grass or weeds would require exponentially more of the individual plants to produce an equal amount of oxygen as does one tree.

Other important contributions from trees include the multitude of products that are either directly or indirectly made from trees. Wood, paper, some foods, drinks and cleaning products are among the long list of goods that are produced using the tree or by-products of the tree. The list of items that are produced using some aspect of a tree is extremely lengthy. Without the tree, would we still have access to all these products? Throughout history, most construction has occurred using wood as the basic building material. Without trees, earlier civilizations would have been unable to construct dwellings and other structures. Waiting on the advent of building materials other than wood products would have been a major setback to the progress of civilization.

Hot Chocolate, Coffee, hair dye, tooth paste, chewing gum and latex gloves all contain products that come directly from trees. Specifically, chocolate comes from the Cacao tree, a native tree found in the Amazon. Coffee is produced from the Coffee tree primarily found in tropical areas of the world. Many of us enjoy these drinks that are derived from trees.

Trees also play a major role in our ecosystem by providing food and shelter for a multitude of birds, animals and insects. The root system of the tree helps prevent soil erosion while the leaves and bark of the tree provide shelter and food for other animals. The tree is essential to the survival of these creatures.

Authors, songwriters and artists are inspired to create works that celebrate and personify the tree. Authors use trees as titles of books and articles while composers use trees as major themes or titles of their works. Author Harper Lee used the tree as a representation of friendship in the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Many artists have depicted trees in their artwork. The frequently used artwork showing the Tree of Life from the book of Genesis is one such example. Trees are universally depicted in many works that leave a lasting impression. Where would we be without the "images" of trees in art, print or music?

Trees often symbolize rebirth and "weathering the storm" through their normal seasonal changes. Dropping their leaves in fall can represent seasons of grief or loss in people's lives. "Standing tall against the storm" can provide inspiration and hope for better days to come. Spring brings the prospect of new life; renewed energy and promise of brighter days. The "lazy days of summer" offer rest and relaxation. Just as a tree experiences change during each season, people experience similar changes throughout their life.

Despite the life-giving properties of trees, many people take the tree for granted. Across the world, entire forests are being clear-cut to make room for human habitation, farming operations and industrial development. The impact of this practice is being felt world-wide through global warming, increased pollution and other negative effects due to the loss of trees. The practice of clear-cutting forests around the globe is abusing the gift of trees!

As Karen Shragg said best in her poem:

*"Think like a tree
Soak up the sun
Affirm life's magic
Be graceful in the wind
Stand tall after a storm
Feel refreshed after a rain
Grow strong without notice
Be prepared for each season
Provide shelter to strangers
Hang tough through a cold spell
Emerge renewed at the first signs of spring
Stay deeply rooted while reaching for the sky..."*

These words should inspire each of us to have a greater respect for the impact of trees on us both physically, emotionally and spiritually. During these unprecedented times that we have all been experiencing, we should all look for that lone tree standing

tall in an open field. Standing tall despite the storms of life and looking to a brighter future.

Works Cited

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