

Forest Conservation: Little Red Riding Hood's Perspective

Hello, I am Little Red Riding Hood, aka Raynei Roy, well, at least I am dressing up as this character for Halloween this year. Super excited for all the festivities, I am prepared to hear the Big Bad Wolf's phrase, "All the better to see you with my dear" repeated over and over to me. This certainly got me thinking about how I need to open my eyes and "see" what is right in front of me in general. So, if you are now wondering how in the world this fits with a paper on forest conservation, well, let me explain how I have opened my eyes to see my piece of the world a little better...

As the story goes, Little Red Riding Hood walks through the woods to get to grandma's house. This sums up my childhood. Growing up in Oak Heights, yes, named for the beautiful forest of oak trees in my backyard, I vividly remember my adventures to grandmas. Having to walk along the outskirts of our forest and around a two-acre lake, I never thought about all the fascinating and functional things I experienced along the way that has kept the Oak Heights ecosystem thriving. Through the reading of *Protecting the Forest Together: Forestry and Health Education*, I now can see the importance of the Riparian Forest Buffer, the beautiful oak trees growing strong and tall, and the necessity of all the forest management work my grandfather faithfully has done, and does, to protect the Oak Heights ecosystem that I affectionately call home.

First, as I think about my walk to grandmas, I vividly see the vegetation growing along our lake; however, I now realize it seems to be specifically collected in a region at the heart of the forest. Honestly, I thought this was an area that was not maintained at the level of the rest of our property because it was difficult to see from the house, but I now know this is not the case and it has a purpose. According to the reading, a Riparian Forest Buffer is located next to a waterway, includes a combination of vegetation, and is absent of landscaping practices such as mowing, raking, and herbicides. It helps control both the speed and amount of water flow, helps with filtration by catching dirt and removing nutrients, provides water storage, provides a safe food source for the forest wildlife close by, and keeps water temperatures cooler which is needed to support the aquatic ecosystem. So, like the wolf in Little Red Riding Hood, with open eyes, I certainly see what I previously thought to be weeds and overgrowth very differently.

Speaking of open eyes, seeing the forest on my walk to grandmas, I do love the beautiful trees, especially in the Fall as the colors begin to change. These have been a fixture in my life, and I do understand their role, specifically as the "lungs of the planet" as referred to on the website *Forestry.com* and taught in every biology class I have ever taken, and, yes, I thought I understood this was the basis of their role. However, upon a recent visit to my grandparents, I was involved in a conversation about our Oak Heights forest when a logger stopped by to inquire about who owns the property as well as proposed a way to make a lot of money. Being almost 16 at the time, I saw the dollar signs and hoped it would mean a car for me, but I was wrong as my grandparents were not interested. When I asked why, my grandfather said, "We will need those trees if the dam were to ever break." I wasn't sure what this meant until he explained. As he told me and according to information offered by *Earth Reminder*, I learned

that deforestation happens when trees are cut down from an area which leads to decreased water holding capability of the soil, excessive water on the ground, and the potential for significant flooding which would have HUGE implications for our neighbors. Therefore, once again, my eyes were opened and I could see the impact that this would have, and the importance of forest conservation, even at Oak Heights, was certainly understood.

Lastly, in addition to understanding the importance of the beautiful and strong oak trees of Oak Heights, I now see why my 85-year-old grandfather is so faithful in his forest management practices. Despite Kentucky having nearly 13 million acres of some of the nation's most diverse woodlands as conveyed in the reading compared to the approximate 100 acres owned by my grandparents, my eyes have been opened that our family's small part in preserving our own small forest by keeping it healthy really does matter. Therefore, although I have not heard too much talk about invasive insects, I know both invasive plants and disease have been concerns over the years. Thankfully, my grandfather is very observant and regularly checks the health of the trees. Additionally, thanks to help from experts like the Kentucky Division of Forestry, he has had help when needed to ensure that our Oak Heights forest is around and thriving for years to come.

So, now do you see how my Halloween costume this year really is connected to forest conservation? Like the big eyes of the Big Bad Wolf, we all have to see that it is all of our responsibility. Looking back, I am thankful for what I now have learned about my walk to grandmas to include the importance of the Riparian Forest Buffer, the beautiful oak trees growing strong and tall on our property, and the necessity of all the forest management work my grandfather faithfully has done and does to protect the Oak Heights ecosystem that I affectionately call home. So happy to now be an informed Little Red Riding Hood.