

29 Understanding Place through Art and Ecology

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My fellow students and I learned the language of place through Professor Darrel Morrison's course, *Field Study: Native Plant Communities of the Southeast*. During the Maymester, sixteen of us traveled in two vans, on routes designed to introduce us gracefully to the regions of Georgia. We stayed in state park cabins, cooked communal meals, hiked together, and spent each day in one or two special places. Along the way, we learned the vocabulary of the southeastern landscape and how to respond with sensitivity. Darrel posed increasingly complex questions that, we would discover, involved weaving together ecological understanding with concerns of artistry and design.

In the Coastal Plain, we scientifically sampled vegetation and described places in a qualitative framework. We were asked how we might design a landscape that supported and enriched the character of the place. On one day, my heart opened to the longleaf pine savanna at Big Woods. In my journal, I wrote: "The strong vertical lines of the pines. Open, with sunny areas . . . The bracken fern dominant in a sea of light green makes the punctuations stand out . . . The saw palmetto in conversation with bracken."

In the mountains, I sat writing and sketching in a very different place. The language of age in the magical Sosebee Cove forest gave me steps to take in woodland ecological restoration work to this day. "Diversity. Shade. Cool. Nine species in my square-foot drawing . . . Huge variability in tree ages. A strongly healthy feeling. Lots of fallen branch/leaf litter, very rich dark humus soil. Occasional rock outcrops add mosses and lichens. So alive and exciting. Grand and inspiring."

Heggie's Rock, a granite outcrop in the Piedmont, is straightforward at first but with study reveals an intricate story. "Still. Quiet. Dry, like a desert today. The celadon-green pale lichen and charcoal gray rock are the backdrop. You can feel everything waiting, patiently, for drops of rain. You can see where the water will collect, where little rivulets will run; the mosses and lichens and sedums show the patterns and define the history. The dry ephemeral pools are surprisingly flat-bottomed, centuries of wear and

deposits and survival. You have to look closely for the secrets they hold . . . This is a place of imagination and artistry and detail, and a lesson in patience and fidelity."

Knowing place is a process, and the tangible exercises we practiced in Plant Communities of the Southeast led to a fluency in reading the landscape, and caring about it, that underlies every project I undertake. ●

