

For the good of Georgia and society, foster a love of forests



Your Turn
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Guest columnist

People, climate and forests are an astonishingly powerful mix, with enormous potential for improving the planet. But it is critical that those of us who feel this way ensure that the next generation has the right tools and passion to continue this important work.

In the simplest terms, a well-managed forest can, among other things, help mitigate a warming climate by removing and storing carbon, and therefore reduce the frequency of catastrophic forest fires.

And at a time when the pandemic has kept a lot of people isolated, indoors and anxious, it's more important than ever to connect with the natural world. This improves our health and strengthens our connections through something as simple as a walk in the woods.

So if we're serious about shaping leaders of tomorrow by ensuring today's students and their teachers understand the crucial connections between people and forests, we'll have done something with long term benefits for our communities and our planet.

That's why I'm committed to leading Project Learning Tree (PLT), an initiative of the Sustainable Forestry Initiative, developing engaging curricula for children of all ages on the critical importance of our forests and their surrounding environment.

Georgia's forests are important on so many environmental, social and economic levels. Forests are a key solution to the challenge of climate change because they are carbon sinks; taking in carbon (CO2) and converting it to sugar (glucose), which is used as the building blocks for wood cells in a tree.

Healthy, well-managed forests provide crucial biological habitat for numerous species, protect our soil and water quality, and offer tremendous opportunities for recreational and cultural experiences, in addition to supporting our own health and wellness. Georgia produces over 330 million tree seedlings annually which are planted throughout the 22 million acres of available timberland in Georgia.

Forests are also an economic engine, driving growth and delivering prosperity for so many in

Georgia and throughout America. Over 141,200 jobs are directly and indirectly associated with the forest industry in Georgia. In total, forests sustain nearly three million well-paying American jobs.

As the leaders of tomorrow, today's young Americans must come to understand how crucial forests are to all our lives—and how their actions can help protect and conserve them for the long-term.

We've developed PLT's Forest Literacy Framework, available entirely online, to help young people get excited about their forests.

This framework translates the language of forests and sustainable forest management into concepts everyone can understand at all age levels, kindergarten to grade 12.

From learning about what a forest is and why it matters to understanding our responsibilities toward forests and how they can be sustained, the approach teaches a conceptual framework for better thinking about forests. And it's designed for everyone from parents to community leaders to teachers.

My strong belief is a more forest-literate population will result in better outcomes both for our forests and for society at large: A future business leader, educated on the environmental benefits forests provide, will take greater care in ensuring the forest products her company sources come from healthy and well-managed forests; a young child, excited by forest field trips and classroom learning, might decide he'll make sustainable forestry his career and using forests responsibly his mission.

Ultimately, the aim is to get young people in Augusta and across the US on a pathway to connecting more with the outdoors, creating opportunities for a lifetime of learning, whether that means a career in sustainable forestry or just encouraging more walks through a local forest and greater appreciation of a forest's importance to all of us.

For more information about the Georgia PLT program and how you can get involved visit the website at <https://www.georgiaplt.org>.

Helping educate America's young people on the vital importance of our woods means America's forests will be all the more appreciated and sustained for the generations to come.

Jess Kakneviccius leads Project Learning Tree's work in education to advance environmental literacy, stewardship, and pathways to green careers using trees and forests as windows on the world.