

December 2000

Private Conservation Case Study

Cypress Bay Plantation, Cummings, South Carolina

Robert J. Smith

Cypress Bay Plantation is a 1000-acre tree farm located in the piney woods and bottomlands of the southeastern corner of South Carolina's coastal plain, between Charleston, South Carolina, and Savannah, Georgia. This private forestland, owned by Skeet Burris and his family, is an exciting and impressive example of multiple-use management of forestland for long-term softwood production. Cypress Bay also models a commitment to provide forest aesthetics, protect watersheds, promote recreational use, and create wildlife habitat, food and shelter plots, wetlands, and ponds. It is a classic example of the private provision—at private cost—of public environmental amenities. It is also a very instructive demonstration of how a substantial amount of the nation's forests are owned and managed, and how these privately held lands are able to provide an ever-growing amount of the nation's forest products.

Burris, his wife Gail, and youngest son Charlie, reside in coastal Beaufort, South Carolina, where he has a successful orthodontic practice. Skeet and Gail grew up in east Tennessee and spent summers in the state's rural forests and farmlands, enjoying the outdoors through activities including hunting, fishing, and camping. Both are University of Tennessee graduates: Skeet with degrees in botany and dentistry, Gail with a degree in economics. With careers established in the Carolina lowcountry, and already active in a wide range of civic affairs while spending weekends boating, hunting, and fishing, Burris decided some 20 years ago that he wanted his family to become forest landowners as well.

Existing plantations are seldom available or affordable. Some families are wealthy enough to hold their plantations generation after generation, in spite of a tax system seemingly designed to splinter landholdings and ecosystems into a patchwork of tiny fragmented plots. And when death taxes do force large, well-managed plantations onto the market, their prices are often stratospheric and their fate is often shopping malls or housing developments.

Burris finally found an affordable cornerstone for his now-spectacular plantation, some 40 miles inland to the northwest in rural Hampton County near Cummings. In

1986, the family purchased an abandoned, cut-over, exhausted 100-acre farm, with dilapidated barns and shacks which had been constructed in the 1890s. Where once stately, open, pine-savannah forests had grown, there were now dense thickets of short, stunted, crowded, bent, and twisted pine, gum, and maple.

“All kinds of trash was lying around,” recalls Skeet. “It was just wiped out. The barns on the land had been left to decay, as were the few trees that remained. The whole place was a total disaster—but it was affordable.”

The first step was for the family to sit down and develop a vision statement for the land they had christened Cypress Bay Plantation. It read: “Our vision is to develop an ordinary piece of land and, with a plan and a commitment to lots of hard work, create a tree farm that will serve as a model for other tree farmers.”

Their vision included five principles: (1) restoration of the land, buildings, and forest; (2) conservation practices for trees, their primary crop; (3) preservation of the native live oaks, wildflowers, and non-game animal species; (4) education through demonstrating the finest modern tree-farming practices to their neighbors; and (5) perpetuation of the forests for multiple uses, including recreation, to “ensure a sustainable forest which will be self-sustaining for generation after generation.” Skeet, Gail, and their four sons signed and framed the completed document, which still hangs in a prominent place on the wall of their rustic plantation home.

In the first year, the Burrises began the back-breaking work of restoring and upgrading the existing tumbled-down buildings into serviceable barns and a magnificent cabin, highlighted by beautiful refinished heart-pine flooring. They also cleared wildlife food plots out of the overgrown thickets and began planting their first trees.

Neighbors were pleased to see the abandoned land being managed and cared for and the forests replanted. Having established credibility in the community, the family was able to slowly purchase additional parcels of land contiguous to or very near their property. With some 21 individual acquisitions, Cypress Bay now totals 958 acres in fee. Burris also leases another 2250 acres of surrounding lands in order to carry out a broad wildlife-management plan for the native white-tailed deer, wild turkey, and Northern bobwhite.

Because the plantation is a multiple-use tree farm, the first task after preparing the ground—using a combination of bushhogging, thinning, burning, herbicide treatment, and disking—was to start replanting the forests. Relying almost entirely on their own labor, as well as that of friends who want to hunt and fish at Cypress Bay, they have planted over 112,000 trees. Most of these are longleaf and loblolly pines, which are the dominant trees of the Southeastern forest ecosystem and valuable for timber.

As the plantation is also being used for hunting, hundreds of oak trees of five species have been planted for the mast crops, including 449 sawtooth oaks, a non-native species

that is attractive, fast-growing, and a very early producer of acorns. Additionally, scores of ornamental and fruiting trees have been planted for aesthetic purposes and for game and non-game species.

Bringing the existing forests under control meant eradicating the weedy gums and maples which aggressively invade cut-overs, abandoned land, and lands where natural fires have been suppressed. Throughout this process, Burris made a special effort to preserve all the native live oaks—the giant Spanish-moss-festooned trees of the antebellum South. This involved cutting out and bushhogging the competing trees, and removing brush thickets, vines, and creepers to “release” the oaks and allow them to grow into towering, stately trees. Smaller live oaks and saplings are usually moved out of the forests and into open areas, wildlife plots, and along roadsides.

Cypress Bay lacks a water source, so 50 acres of ponds have been constructed to increase wildlife diversity and heighten the aesthetic value of the property. These include fish ponds, greentree reservoirs, and duck ponds which are seasonally planted and flooded. 4400 majestic bald cypress have been planted around and through the greentree reservoirs and along some of the smaller ponds, serving as shelter for wildlife and adding a striking beauty to the plantation.

The various ponds provide habitat for nesting ducks in the spring and summer as well as feeding and roosting habitat for the much larger numbers of waterfowl which arrive in the fall to spend the winter. Large wading birds utilize the ponds depending on the water levels. These include the great blue heron and the stately all-white great egret and snowy egret. And the fish-catching belted kingfisher is evident as its loud rattling call is heard from various ponds. Burris is especially proud of his accomplishments in turning old fields into prime wildlife habitat, as evidenced by the tall, striking wood storks that come to feed in his bald cypress greentree reservoir throughout summer. The wood stork is increasingly rare, and is listed as endangered on the US Endangered Species List.

Burris’s man-made wetlands offer interesting evidence of the rapid resiliency and adaptability of wildlife to newly created habitats. An unwelcome recent visitor which appears to have settled in is a beaver. But perhaps the “balance of nature” will resolve that problem before much harm is done, because last fall a six- to seven-foot-long American alligator somehow found its way into the large greentree reservoir.

A variety of food plots, firebreaks, and wildlife corridors have been created in between the pine and oak woods, as well as in the natural mixed pine-hardwood stands. A wide array of productive grasses, forbs, and shrubs also have been planted, as well as grains, corn, and sunflowers to feed both game and non-game species.

From the beginning, Burris has coordinated his efforts with a number of private wildlife associations. As part of the South Carolina Waterfowl Association’s Wood Duck project, he has erected 34 wood duck nest boxes, which produce around 200 ducklings a year. In cooperation with the Association’s Mallard Project, Burris has

released over 1400 ducks, hoping to take hunting pressures off the wild migratory waterfowl which winter in the area. Charlie Burris and a local Hampton County Boy Scout troop have placed 20 bluebird boxes, which have produced over 100 young Eastern bluebirds. Other birds have benefited from the nest-box program, with successful nestings of hooded mergansers, Eastern screech owls, and great crested flycatchers in the large boxes, and house and Carolina wrens and prothonotary warblers (the bird that was the undoing of Alger Hiss) in the small boxes. Burris also erected a condominium for purple martins atop a tall pole by a large fish pond near the cabin, as martins purportedly have a voracious appetite for mosquitoes. (Unfortunately, these notoriously fickle birds have not yet chosen to utilize his expensive martin house nor grace the premises with their gorgeous colors and their mellifluous song and call notes. It is also only fair to add that martins take relatively few mosquitoes, because the birds are diurnal and the mosquitoes are mainly nocturnal. Nevertheless, they will take some mosquitoes at dawn and dusk and the beauty of their colors and calls are well worth the expense and trouble of trying to attract them.)

A drive or hike through the Burris family's plantation is a wonderful visual and recreational experience. The forests, wildlife plantings, buffers zones, firebreaks, roads and trails, ponds and wetlands all have irregular boundaries and broad curves; avoiding straight lines wherever possible gives the land a wild and natural feel. Many of the roads on the plantation have been planted with grasses to reduce erosion and heighten the natural appearance. Only a few are graveled and none are paved or blacktopped. In the pine forests, modern thinning techniques have been employed to eliminate the artificiality of plantation rows. The overall mosaic of different ages, sizes, and types of forests, interspersed with a variety of fields, wildlife habitats and food plots, wetlands and ponds, creates a highly appealing and extremely diverse landscape. It is certainly more varied and interesting, with a wider array of habitat for non-game and game species, than most similarly sized unmanaged "wildlands."

Working closely with a number of private wildlife conservation groups such as Quail Unlimited, the Quality Deer Management Association, the National Wild Turkey Federation, the South Carolina Waterfowl Association, and Ducks Unlimited, Burris is already generating a top-rate revenue for his deer-hunting leases, upland-bird leases and duck-blind leases. His wildlife-management practices have been so outstanding and are producing such high-quality hunting that people are queuing up across the Southeast for the opportunity to obtain a lease.

It's quite remarkable that Skeet, Gail, and their sons have turned this sorry, abandoned, over-worked farmland into such a productive forest and wildlife "spectacular" in a mere dozen years. It is certainly a testimonial to the incentives that spring from land ownership and family, incentives to create a vision for the future and, through hard work and enlightened stewardship, to pass the land on to the next generation in better condition than when acquired.

Recognition for Burris's exemplary stewardship was quick to come. He is a hard worker and learns quickly. In 1989, three years after purchasing the land, he had it under a written Forest Management Plan. Two years later he became a certified tree farmer in the American Tree Farm System (ATFS) and was qualified to place the American Tree Farm member's signs on his property.

Founded in 1941, the American Tree Farm System currently has some 66,000 private landowner members, managing over 83 million acres in all parts of the nation. A landowner must first be certified by a professional forester that his or her land is being managed up to the highest silvicultural standards, and that soil, air, water, wildlife habitat and species, and aesthetic values are all managed at a high standard. Members must be recertified every five years to keep them up to ever-improving standards.

A uniquely important aspect of the ATFS is that it has annual contests among its members to single out and reward superior stewardship. The various state chapters have annual contests for State Tree Farmer of the Year; the organization's four national regions select a Regional Tree Farmer of the Year; and those four winners compete for the National Tree Farmer of the Year award. The four regional winners and their families attend the annual ATFS convention, where they give presentations at various workshops. The highlight of the closing banquet is the introduction of the regional winners, the showing of a short video about their lands, and the announcement of the National Tree Farmer of the Year.

In 1995, just nine years after purchasing an abandoned farm described as a "total disaster," Skeet and Gail Burris were selected by the ATFS as the South Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year. The following year they won the Southern Regional Tree Farmer of the Year title.

Skeet's exemplary stewardship and management of his tree farm and wildlife habitat, as well as his continuous improvements and innovative projects, are winning him wide recognition and near-capacity visitorship on his periodic open-house days. His stellar achievements were recognized this year when the family was selected for the second time as Southern Regional Tree Farmer of the Year, and in September Skeet and Gail were honored as the National Tree Farmer of the Year at the ATFS convention in Missoula, Montana. This is a truly remarkable series of achievements in such a short period of time, and it underscores what private landowners can accomplish in the area of private conservation.

What accounts for the Burris family's—and the property's—success? They chalk it up to the fact that they own the land. It is their future, their children's future, and their children's children's future. They developed their own vision statement for the land and they followed Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." "I could visualize what I knew the land could become," says Skeet Burris, "and that kept me focused."

To see Cypress Bay now is to witness the truly marvelous results that derive from private ownership, as self-interest and private stewardship are directed into enlightened conservation.

This case study was written by Center for Private Conservation senior scholar Robert J. Smith. For the purpose of this case study, a site visit to Cypress Bay Plantation was made over Labor Day weekend, September 3, 4, and 5, 1999. An intensive investigation of all parts of the land was undertaken by car, jeep, and foot. Fortunately, chiggers (“red bugs”), mosquitoes, ticks, and deer flies were not completely unbearable. But even that discomfort was easily overlooked because of the warm hospitality of Skeet and Gail Burris. Indeed, after the treat of one of Gail’s predawn breakfasts of fresh blueberry muffins, scrambled eggs, and sautéed venison backstrap medallions, one wonders whether folks come for the huntin’ or the eatin’. On the afternoon of September 4 we took a break from the heat and bugs to visit some of the neighbors and fellow tree farmers to get a feel for what other members of the tree-farmer family are like. We visited the tiny crossroads village of Oliver, Georgia, some 42 miles west of Savannah on the Ogeechee River, to visit Guerry Beam Farm, the elegant country home of Kirby and Lynda Beam. Kirby runs a lumber-supply business in Savannah. Much of their land includes hardwood bottomland forest along the river. They also have extensive acreage in loblolly and longleaf pine. The Beams were selected as the Georgia Tree Farmer of the Year in 1993. The following year they won as National Tree Farmer of the Year. We returned via Allendale, South Carolina, to visit the tree farm of Thomas G. “Brooks” Ballou. Brooks was selected South Carolina Tree Farmer of the Year in 1985 and is in demand as a speaker on modern management techniques for pine plantations.

Created in 1995, the Center for Private Conservation researches, documents, and promotes the public benefits of private conservation and private stewardship. The Center for Private Conservation is supported by the William H. Donner Foundation.