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Geoff Buckley has been a member of the faculty at Ohio University since 1998. He holds a bachelor's degree in Human Ecology and American History from Connecticut College (1987), a Master's degree in Geography from the University of Oregon (1992), and a Ph.D. in Geography from the University of Maryland (1997).

Geoff's research interests include resource conservation and sustainability; management of public lands, especially state forests and urban green spaces; environmental justice; and the evolution of mining landscapes. Recently, he examined the role that coal companies played in manufacturing images of Appalachia through the medium of photographs. This is the topic of his book, *Extracting Appalachia: Images of the Consolidation Coal Company, 1910 – 1945* (Ohio University Press, 2004). His forthcoming book, *The Conservation Impulse: A Century of Saving Trees in Baltimore and Maryland*, is due out in early 2009 (Center for American Places).

In his spare time, Geoff enjoys traveling and hiking local trails with his wife Alexandra, their three children Ingrid (9), Peter (7), and Owen (2), and their dog Holly.



Into the Woods

By Geoff Buckley

“Everyone needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in, and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike.”

- John Muir

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“Do you miss Athens?” I inquired. My friend, who had left Ohio University several years earlier for a job on the east coast, thought for a moment. “To be perfectly honest, I didn’t think I would,” he confessed, “but I do.” I then asked him what it was that he missed the most. “It’s all the little things you take for granted,” he replied – the historic campus green on a beautiful spring day; the easy commute to work; the familiar faces at the coffee shop; knowing your next-door neighbor; the generally slower pace of life. Having moved to a large metropolitan area, he also appreciated the short distances Athenians travel to get almost anywhere and, of course, the lack of congestion.

Our brief conversation made me stop and think. What do I value most about living in the Athens area? What keeps me – and my family – firmly rooted in southeastern Ohio? It didn’t take long for me to work up a list. To begin with, I thoroughly enjoy my morning walk to the office. Rain or shine, it beats the 45-60 minute car commute I put up with while a graduate student in the Washington, DC area. Bucking the national trend, my wife and I sold one of our cars when we moved here because we simply didn’t need it. I arrive to work with fresh coffee in hand, energized and ready to begin the day. Then there is our amazing farmers market. To purchase fresh fruits and vegetables directly from the farmers who actually grow them is an experience relatively few of us – plugged in as we are to the global economy – get to enjoy these days. Eating “close to home” saves energy, supports local growers, and, when it comes right down to it, tastes a whole lot better. I also cherish the friendships that my family and I have established over the past 10 years. Athens is a place where people make time for one another – not always possible in other parts of the country where travel times, traffic, and frenetic schedules conspire to limit our daily interactions with friends and family.

Having said all this, however, it is our rich inheritance of public lands that keep me tethered to this unique corner of the world. Those of us who take pleasure in hiking, biking, kayaking, or some other outdoor pursuit know full well we are very fortunate in Athens to be surrounded by numerous state forests and parks, a large national forest, and a host of other “green spaces.” If it is an open expanse of water I want – or the prospect of spying a blue heron – then a hike at Dow Lake or Lake Hope is in order. If it is quiet and solitude I seek (save for the unmistakable call of a pileated woodpecker) any of a number of slightly more difficult paths in Stroud’s Run State Park will do the trick. A mile or so from the trailhead and I am unlikely to encounter another soul until I return to my vehicle. If the purpose of the hike is to wear out a 10-month old retriever or some highly energetic children, then a hike up radio hill or a scramble through Boulder Cove is likely to produce the desired result. When I long for something more “scenic,” a 40-minute drive puts me in the heart of the Hocking Hills. There are few state parks in the country that I know of that contain such remarkable geologic formations. Whether it is upper rim of Conkles Hollow on a lazy summer afternoon, the spectacular icicles that cling to the cliffs near Ash Cave in the wintertime, or the sound of rushing water at Cedar Falls, I never tire of the Hocking Hills. When weekend crowds grow too large, a short walk down one of the many dirt footpaths that connect these spectacular features to one another restores the peace in no time at all. My favorite is the 2-mile journey from Cedar Falls to Old Man’s Cave. Then there is the bike path, that 19-mile ribbon of asphalt that connects Athens with Nelsonville. Even at the dizzying speed of 15 miles per hour, one can still be treated to the flash of a red-winged blackbird or the sight of a black snake sunning itself in the fading autumn sun. It may not change dramatically on a daily basis,

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like the unpredictable river in Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*, but there is always something new to see if we would only slow down for a moment.

As beautiful as these places are, some of my most memorable jaunts have been through forest lands that still bear the mark of the region's mining past. In his seminal volume, *Americans and Their Forests*, Oxford University geographer Michael Williams writes, "The hands and the minds of people have made the geography of any place as surely as have climate and relief and soils and vegetation." He must have had Appalachian Ohio or some similar place in mind when he first put these words to paper, for the physical environment of southeastern Ohio has been shaped and reshaped by humans for thousands of years. Although evidence of Native American occupation is still visible – even to the untrained eye – it is the more recent industrial past that leaves me spellbound. Ninety years ago, some 50,000 miners were busy removing 48 million tons of "black diamonds" from the coal-bearing strata of southern and eastern Ohio. While the mineral's importance to the local economy has diminished significantly since the industry's halcyon days, its social and environmental legacies endure. Company houses and forgotten cemeteries; abandoned mines and derelict equipment; gob piles and acid mine drainage. They remind us of coal's erstwhile ascendancy. Even the surface – covered in secondary growth today – exhibits the scars of this bygone era. J.B. Jackson was right: Landscape truly is "history made visible."

If it is "old growth" forest you seek, you won't find much here, although impressive specimens can still be found scattered among the younger growth. Except in small patches here and there – Cathedral State Park in West Virginia is a good example – most of Appalachia's ancient forest was swept away by mining and logging companies in the late-19th and early 20th centuries. Historian Ronald Lewis estimates that as late as 1880, West Virginia still possessed two-thirds of its original "old growth" forest. By 1920 it was almost all gone. Southeastern Ohio's forests suffered a similar fate. As cutting technology advanced from the simple whip saw, which allowed two able-bodied men to cut 100 feet of plank in a day, to the steam-powered band saw, which could churn out 60,000 to 80,000 board feet on a daily basis, the pace of deforestation accelerated. As America's demand for wood, charcoal, and coal increased vast stretches of forest across the Appalachian region succumbed to the onslaught.

Ours is a very different kind of forest. It is secondary forest, cutover once, twice, maybe three times in the past century. It is a recovering landscape – one that Aldo Leopold would have delighted in watching return to full glory season by season and year by year. Walking through sections of the Wayne National Forest today it is hard to believe this area was once practically devoid of trees. Although some species, such as the American chestnut, have not returned, and others have been introduced, such as white pine, it is an extraordinary thing to be on hand to witness the renewal. In his poem, *In a Country Once Forested*, Wendell Berry describes the reforestation process succinctly and elegantly: "The young woodland remembers the old, a dreamer dreaming of an old holy book, an old set of instructions." Visiting these public lands today, we are confronted everywhere by the ghosts of our industrial past. We are reminded of practices that placed a premium on board feet and tonnage, but paid little mind to the overall health of the forest ecosystem or the purity of local waters. And yet we cannot help but be impressed by nature's power to recover from even the most egregious of assaults. An 80-year old

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oak or beech may not qualify as “old growth” to some, but it is an impressive sight to behold nevertheless.

What is it that draws us into the woods? One can only speculate. Perhaps it is the urge to break free – if only for an hour or two – from all the devices that keep us connected to one another: laptop computers, pagers, cell phones. “We seem so frightened today of being alone that we never let it happen,” Anne Morrow Lindbergh once observed. “We choke the space with continuous music, chatter, and companionship to which we do not even listen. It is simply there to fill the vacuum. When the noise stops there is no inner music to take its place.” Here in Athens, and perhaps other small communities around the country, we are fortunate to have places we can visit where the inner music can still be heard.

