

Afterward

For many of our students, the day that we spend with Bren Whittaker is the single most important day of our year together, a year in which we visit a tropical rainforest and a temperate old-growth hardwoods forest, in which we see howler monkeys and Plymouth gentians, and in which we meet a great number of talented people who have dedicated their lives to the conservation of biodiversity.

For the last couple of years we have started our day with Bren standing along a dead-end dirt road in northern Vermont. After piling out of our vehicles and pulling on waterproof boots, our students gather to meet Bren. As he has done each year that we have visited him, the first thing he does is ask for each student's name, home, and field of study - and he remembers most of the information he receives. Throughout the day, he will turn to a student and ask how the situation that we are discussing compares with his experience in Alaska or her life in South Carolina. Invariably Bren listens with respect. He does not use the students to make specific points; instead, he hopes to learn as much as he teaches.

After the introduction, Bren speaks briefly and with quiet pride about the conservation importance of the land where we are standing, of how, as Secretary of the Environment for Vermont, he enabled the state to purchase Moose Bog and the surrounding forest. We move off to the bog itself, walking along ground that becomes progressively wetter until we are out of the forest and standing on the floating mat of the bog. We find the footprint of a moose, or perhaps some fresh droppings, giving credence to the site's name. If we were to end our time with Bren at the bog it would be quite special, but after we leave the bog we drive to his home, the 63 acres of land where he and his wife Dorothy have lived since 1959.

The love that Bren holds for his land is deep and complex. This is a man who understands that the land and its biodiversity sustain our species, and that his land nourishes his family in many ways. As a professional forester, pastor in a poor rural community, husband of a farmer in the rocky soil of northern New England, and conservationist, Bren holds many values toward his land and understands the many forms of worth and sustenance that the land offers. Moreover, he does not just view his land in terms of the present.

He shows our Students the line where the last glacier stopped for a while, some 12,000 years ago, creating an outwash plain like the ones we see on Martha's Vineyard. The edge of the plain is clearly marked where his neighbor's corn field ends, for beyond, the crop would not grow. Later, deep in his forest, we stand around the decayed stump of a great white pine that was cut perhaps a century ago. The tree was so large that a large mound still remains, the remnants of a forest giant that may have begun life before Samuel Champlain visited the New World. We visit the site where a shack once stood, home to a family during the Depression. Although no trace of the building itself remains, the herbs and shrubs at the site indicate the former presence of a house to Bren's practiced eye. Bren shows us another portion of his forest where the trees are all about the same age. The place, he tells us, took the full force of the Great New England Hurricane of 1938, which flattened many forests in New England, including several patches of old growth. The legacy of the storm can be read from the even-aged trees standing at this spot.

Bren's appreciation of his land is not only historical; he also thinks of the future. He also shows us the seven acres of red pine plantation that he planted in 1961, soon after he acquired the property. The pines are reaching marketable size, and he expects that in a few years one of his sons will begin harvesting and selling the trees for use as utility poles. Elsewhere on his land, we find white plastic tubes surrounding slender saplings of white ash and sugar maple. Bren shows us saplings that are not protected, and how they have been repeatedly chewed down by deer. The tubes are one of his attempts to give some saplings a chance to grow tall enough to survive the deer. Bren the forester speaks to us of the market value of these hardwoods; Bren the conservationist has a twinkle in his eye, and we hear in his voice that the real reason he protects these tiny trees is to help re-establish the diverse forest that stood on his land, before the number of deer grew so high.

Until 1995, he always showed our class two neighboring stands: one that he had cleared completely, according to a certain school of forestry practice, and another that he left forested, occasionally cutting specific trees for market or to help other trees grow to a marketable size. Between two of our annual visits, however, the cleared site, which was an impenetrable thicket and produced no potentially marketable trees over the 11 years he had left it, had come under the control of another steward of the land - a family of beavers. The beavers had flooded the thicket, ending Bren's

experiment.

Throughout our time together, Bren acknowledges that his land is not merely an historical entity, nor just a storehouse for the future, but that it has great worth in the present. Bren and his wife Dorothy tell us of the small farm that they run, of the tremendous efforts they expend to coax vegetables from rocky soil during a short and unpredictable growing season. They grow much of their own produce here, as well as feeding neighbors and vacationers in the region. The wood that they burn to heat their home during the long winters comes from their land, as does some of the meat and fish for their table.

The most important stop we make on our tour of his land, however, is in a small patch of forest that Bren calls his sanctuary. Here, in the lee of a ridge, stand several tall firs, spruce, and white birch that survived the 1938 hurricane. Here stands a tiny piece of forest that may approach being old growth. This tiny stand is special to Bren, and to each of our students who visit it. Here, the strands of the past, present, and future come together. Here we catch a glimpse of what much of his land might have looked like several hundred years ago. Here we see a legacy that Bren is preserving for his children and grandchildren, and here we draw strength from the mighty trees around us. As a young forester, Bren recognized that this particular spot had much more to offer than mere board feet of lumber, and he left it untouched.

Bren has devoted his life to helping others through his skills as a forester, religious leader, farmer, and conservationist. He brings many perspectives and insights to his own land, and to the landscapes where he, his parishioners, and the people of his state live. He recognizes his responsibilities to use the land and its biodiversity wisely, to provide for those living today—to provide them not only with food and lumber but also with sanctuaries where they can refresh their spirits. But he also recognizes that his stewardship of his land requires a certain sensitivity to the past and regard for the future.

By watching Bren walk his land, and hearing him share the many ways in which he loves and uses its biodiversity, each of us gains new insight into our own values and the worth of biodiversity. We hope that this book, too, will help others gain insight into their values, that they may recognize the many forms of worth to be found in biodiversity, and that they may better protect it.