

## The Georgia Alabama Land Trust

This summer I had the privilege of interning for six weeks at the Georgia Alabama Land Trust at their Alabama office in Piedmont, Alabama. The Georgia-Alabama Land Trust is a non-profit conservation organization serving Alabama and Georgia. The Land Trust is dedicated to the protection of land for present and future generations. The Land Trust focuses on protecting forests, farm land, rivers and streams as a way to maintain clean air, water, and fertile farmland. They do this by establishing conservation easements on private land. A conservation easement is a legal agreement made between a landowner and a land trust. The easement protects the conservation values of a property by permanently limiting the use of the land. The land continues to be owned and used by the private landowner and never takes away their right to sell it or have it be inherited.

As an intern at the Land Trust, my main responsibilities included conducting field inventories and annual site monitoring reports, monitoring protected lands through field monitoring, draft property conditions reports, land management plans, reserved rights approvals, property transfers and field operations. I took part in organizing and implementing plans for removing trash and debris, sustainable erosion, habitat rehabilitation, and boundary marking and fencing. I also had the opportunity to converse with landowners and conservation easement donors which was a neat experience.

While with the Land Trust I became much more organized and neat with my record and file keeping. Conservation easements have a lot of different parts and each

easement has its own field file that must be maintained and updated for permanent filing. The main project that I undertook during my time with the Land Trust was monitoring the various conservation easements that the Land Trust has along the Choccolocco Creek. These properties are a part of a protection effort being made on the Choccolocco Creek. The goal is to create a terrestrial conservation corridor from the headwater of Choccolocco Creek to its termination in the Coosa River. It was an incredible experience working on this project due to the history of the Choccolocco Creek. In 2003, Monsanto- the world's largest biotech corporation- paid \$700 million to the residents of the Anniston area, which is along the Choccolocco Creek. They had finally confessed to knowingly dumping millions of pounds of PCB's into the local landfill and the Choccolocco Creek for the last 30 years. PCB causes several forms of cancer in animals and humans and was causing severe disconformities in the aquatic life of the creek, which includes several endangered and threatened species. The lawsuit against Monsanto was the first civil suit of its kind, and despite the compensation to the local residents, the health of the creek and local environment was still severely degraded. Therefore, by establishing a riparian corridor along the creek, the Land Trust hopes it can gradually improve the quality of the water.

While the background of a lot of these properties allowed for different learning experiences, I also was able to learn a great deal from meeting different landowners. Talking with and meeting with the landowners firsthand gave me a different perspective on land conservation. It is easy to get caught up in the environmental and natural side of land conservation and forget that it's also about people. Having direct contact with landowners helps remind you of that human aspect of land conservation. One meeting

that stuck out to me was when I visited a property along the Choccolocco Creek and the property owner showed me around the property. The property featured the old meandering channel of the Choccolocoo Creek along with the new channel. The landowner told me about how he remembered when the creek flowed along the old channel. Having just taken physical geology, I am very aware of how long it takes for a river to change courses, which made me realize how long this man had owned and worked this land. He told me that he wasn't really sure whether or not his son will continue to work the land, but he wanted to make sure that no matter what, that this land was conserved. That was the last landowner I met during my internship and it had the biggest impact on me. Here was a man, very different from me, that I made a connection with through our shared passion for conservation.

This last meeting with the landowner allowed me to understand that by looking at the similarities you share with another person, the differences can be overshadowed. This internship has really allowed me to experience a work environment that was very different than anything I have experienced. This allowed me to become much more in touch with where I place my values on a professional level. This internship has motivated me to pursue a career that has meaning and provides me with the opportunity to truly make a difference, and the compensation rewarded for that far exceeds any monetary compensation.