



Saplings

Living for the Trees

BY KATHY WESTRA

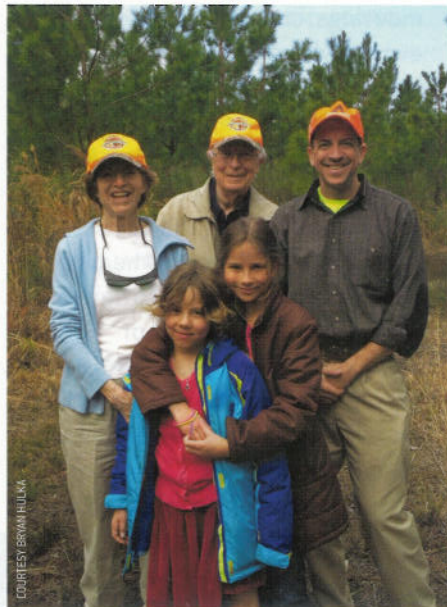
He has a law degree and an undergraduate degree in Asian Studies, but these days, forester Bryan Hulka's personal and professional life is all about trees. The young Tree Farmer gave up law and the allure of the East to get a master's degree in forestry from North Carolina State University. That program led to a job at forest products company Weyerhaeuser, where Hulka manages forest certification programs for 4.2 million acres of company-owned forestland.

He also manages his family's 265-acre North Carolina Tree Farm, Slade Creek LLC, with help from his parents, Barbara and Jerry Hulka, and his brother (and hunting buddy), Greg, a pediatrician. The Tree Farm, located in rural Hyde County, "may not be the end of the Earth, but you can see it from there," Hulka laughs.

"Hyde County doesn't even have a stoplight."

The Hulkas' Tree Farm is defined by the waters of Slade Creek, a tributary of the Pungo River that, in turn, is a major tributary of the Pamlico River and Sound. The "creek" that gave the Tree Farm its name is hardly the small, babbling stream that the name implies; Hulka's property overlooks an expansive quarter of a mile of water. The property includes a house dating from the 1800s, an old moonshine "still" and a bald eagle's nest that Hulka and his family have monitored for more than 20 years.

Hulka's voice reflects his love of the land when he talks about his family's woodland. Listen for just a few minutes, and you'll hear stories of hunting and fishing with his brother Greg on the land their parents bought. "We have seen all sorts of natural phenomena when duck hunting there, including porpoises swimming up the brackish water of the creek, river otters playing in our decoys, eagles circling and tundra swans coming in to check things out," he relates.



Bryan Hulka (right), with the help of his extended family, manages a 265-acre Tree Farm in North Carolina, as well as managing forest certification programs for Weyerhaeuser.

Maintaining water quality on the coastal wetlands of Slade Creek Tree Farm is one of Hulka's chief concerns as manager of his family's property. "What makes this property attractive also makes it difficult to manage," he says. "Our land has lots of streams, so we think a lot about requirements for riparian buffers, wetland-to-upland conversion issues, erosion prevention and timber tracts that are fragmented by water bodies. We also have to manage for the eagle, which is a federally protected species, and the pygmy rattlesnake, a North Carolina threatened species found on the property."

Most of the Tree Farm is planted in loblolly pine, with some water oaks, sweet gum and a few other hardwoods. While Hulka manages the property primarily for timber, he and his extended family also treasure the hiking, fishing, hunting and other recreational opportunities available at Slade Creek.

Although he and his family live two hours away from Slade Creek Tree Farm, Hulka, his parents, his brother Greg and their children (Bryan has one son and Greg, four daughters) make time to visit their land and enjoy one another's company in the century-old farmhouse they have renovated on the banks of Slade Creek.

Because he is both a Tree Farmer and a forest products industry employee, Hulka has been tapped to serve the American Forest Foundation (AFF) in a variety of roles. Most recently, he has managed Weyerhaeuser's independently managed group for the American Tree Farm System® (ATFS) in seven states. He also was selected to serve on the AFF's Independent Standards Review Panel, which is in the final stages of a once-every-five-years review of ATFS' certification standards.

"I've enjoyed being on the standards review panel," Hulka says. "It's good to hear input from other parts of the country and learn about other Tree Farmers' concerns."