A recently thinned stand of pines provides a backdrop for family members to gather around Duncan McKay. Active management has improved wildlife habitat and timber revenue for each generation of the McKay family.

CONSERVATION CHRONICLES

The Real McKay

This Scotland County family is the genuine article when it comes to conservation management

By John Isenhour, technical assistance biologist, NCWRC & photographed by Melissa McGaw, NCWRC

The origin of the phrase "Real McCoy" is difficult to verify. A quick online search reveals references to a distiller, a boxer, an industrial inventor and a Scottish leader. No matter where it started, today we know it means "the original" or "genuine article."

When it comes to managing their property to balance production and wildlife habitat, the descendants of the late John L. McKay (pronounced "Mick-Coy") are indeed "The Real McKays." This family, deeply rooted in the Scotland County community of Wagram, has cooperated across generations to implement a true multiple resource management program.

The transition of land from one generation to the next is often a challenge for families. Each passing generation is not necessarily tied to the land like the previous. Even if there is an interest in holding the family property together, high land values, differing management objectives and simple day-to-day responsibilities often tarnish the glimmer of the land ownership tradition.

The McKay family has navigated this labyrinth since its ancestors arrived in Scotland County in the late 1700s. Currently, Duncan McKay fills the role of family elder. Under Duncan's watchful eyes, his son Jeff, and nephews John McKay and Vince Nelson, guide the management of the property. These three cousins share information with their siblings and circulate thoughts, ideas and suggestions to arrive at a consensus on how to balance row crop production, timber management and habitat enhancement.

The McKays, like many conservation-minded families, have two requirements for their property. First, it must be profitable. Property ownership can become burdensome when facing taxes, insurance and maintenance costs. For most owners, the only way to reduce this burden is by generating income through farming, forest production and possibly hunting leases. The second requirement of the land is that it must offer an intrinsic value. For many landowners, less concrete elements influence their management decisions. Nostalgia, solitude, recreation, legacy and esthetics are a few emotion-based factors that are difficult to calculate in the ledger book.

"Much of our tie to the land comes from summer days spent exploring the Lumber River," Vince and John reminisce. "We would canoe, fish and camp on the banks that are now part of Lumber River State Park."

Making More Memories

Fall and winter visits to the farm often revolved around hunting adventures involving family and friends from the surrounding community. Today, each of the McKay cousins

Top: Vince Nelson(right) and Commission biologist John Isenhour discuss species diversity and the benefits of prescribed burning in the pine ecosystem. Inset: Emily McKay shows off the rewards of habitat management. This is one of four deer harvested by family members over the 2016 Thanksgiving holiday weekend. Bottom: Targeted management is needed to balance monetary and intrinsic values. Identifying significant blocks and corridors in which to focus habitat efforts result in the most benefits on the smallest acreage.

finds their own reasons to visit the farm. Jeff enjoys hunting the property and floating the Lumber River. John regularly visits to work his bees that produce "Knapdale" honey. Vince, along with his dog Trouble, looks for any excuse to load up for a visit to the farm.

With so much emotion tied to land ownership, it is often easy to forget that conservation is expensive because of foregone income, opportunity costs or implementation expenses. It is up to each landowner to determine how to balance monetary value and intrinsic value to meet unique ownership objectives. While some of these costs can be offset with financial assistance from programs under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Farm Bill, "cost share" generally does not cover all of the financial investment. The McKays have received guidance from their forester and North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission staff to carefully get the most bang for their conservation buck. These conservation methods include:

- A prescribed burning program has been in place on the property for the last 15 years. Burning has enhanced wildlife habitat and protected forest resources by reducing wildfire fuel loads.
- Timber harvests have been strategically managed to heavily thin field edges, create forest openings and daylight forest roads. Thinning at variable densities has resulted in a system of scattered early successional habitat areas connected by travel corridors.
- Stands of residual mature longleaf pine have been heavily thinned to promote native ground cover and natural longleaf regeneration. These stands will provide a glance into the ecosystem which once covered much of eastern North Carolina.
- Selective herbicides have been applied to reduce mid-story tree species and promote groundcover. Herbicide treatments have varied in application method, formulation and intensity to limit impact on non-target species.
- The McKay family recently enrolled their property in the Sandhills Safe Harbor program (see related story in this issue). This program provides assurances to landowners that they will not incur new restrictions if their management actions result in red-cockaded woodpeckers taking up residence on their property.

In today's fast paced world, managing property at a higher conservation level is often lost in the shuffle. If you equate balancing a piece of property's intrinsic value and monetary value to walking a tight rope, family dynamics can be thought of as a crosswind which may gust to 30 mph. The John L. McKay family is striving to manage their ancestral home to provide for future generations. Their cooperative efforts ensure that the financial and emotional needs of those yet to come will be met. More importantly, it provides a place to anchor this family and a place where siblings and cousins are greeted with smiles, handshakes and hugs no matter how far they ventured from home. Wise use of their natural resources over the generations clearly makes this family a conservation Real McKay.