

New STPAL conservation director talks mountain bike park, new projects and threats to our north Georgia environment



Keith Ray snorkeling for freshwater mussels. The Pickens native has been involved in the study of aquatic species since his days as a student at Reinhardt University.

By Dan Pool
Editor

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Pickens native and Reinhardt graduate Keith Ray was named as the Director of Conservation for Southeastern Trust for Parks and Land (STPAL) earlier this summer.

STPAL is probably best known here as the group that brought the mountain bike park to Pickens County. But that is only a small portion of what the regional organization does.

Doggedness in field research opens doors for PHS, Reinhardt graduate

Ray is a 2002 graduate of Pickens High, a 2006 Reinhardt University graduate and spent eight years working as a fish biologist at Auburn University, obtaining a Master's degree during that time and was involved in numerous field studies plus database work on different species and research on fish throughout the southeast, South America and Africa.

Ray had side experience with the state DNR before returning here to join the teaching staff at Reinhardt where he worked full time in the biology department beginning in 2016, leaving earlier this year to join the Southeastern Trust for Parks and Land (STPAL) as their Director of Conservation. STPAL manages more than 40 properties comprising almost 10,000 acres across three states.

Ray's wife Brittney, also a native of Pickens County, operates her family's Taylor's Boutique on Camp Road. They have three sons in the Pickens School System, Ben, Anderson, and Slade.

Ray said in a recent interview that he was not initially interested in biology entering Reinhardt University, being more drawn to math. The school had no math major at that time so he landed in the classes taught by biology professor Dr. Steve Powers, who became a mentor to Ray.

Ray's first effort with genetics was not entirely successful. "But I found that in life if there is something I find hard, I want to go back to it until I tackle it."

With the challenge of moving from pure math to biology and with Dr. Powers inspiring him to look at research involving aquatic creatures, Ray pursued a course in research in Evolutionary Genetics, working to identify new species of fish around the world.

In simple terms, Ray explains that during the earth's history, mountains have formed and separated some streams. An evolutionary geneticist looks at how species have adapted and changed, as they were literally on different sides of a mountain. He said his field looks at understanding and identifying patterns and is an important tool to predict where new species will be found.

Ray takes pride in the intensity he brought to field work. "I wanted to be known as the person you called if the search for a species was going to be tough," he said. Early at Reinhardt he got a lesson in the doggedness it takes to do field work properly. He said they were assigned to count ground hog holes in an area covered in kudzu during the summer. Then went back in the winter and it became clear how many holes had been missed while the vine was in full growing season. "It showed that people are not naturally good at finding things," he said. Throughout his time at Reinhardt and later at Auburn he was often asked to participate in field work for all manner of projects based on his skills at getting good samples.

During this time in his research, Ray said he developed particular views on conservation which he hopes to adapt on the properties managed by STPAL.

STPAL handles 40 properties and 10,000 acres



Ray teaching about fish at the Confluence 2022 at Smithgall Woods State Park. It's the annual meeting for the Georgia Adopt-a-Stream program.

Locally, people may be familiar with STPAL as the creators and managers of the Talking Rock Nature Preserve (the mountain bike park as it often called). Less known, the group also holds property on Burnt Mountain (in the Falling Waters area but only accessible inside the Ga. Highlands) and a large tract in Waleska.

STPAL has just opened a new mountain biking and hiking destination on Fightingtown Creek in Fannin County. Ray has been involved in these projects in various ways.

An immediate challenge on the Burnt Mountain tract is access. And while people may picture a conservation director spending days peering into a stream, much of the work involves interaction with other people. Ray said education and trying to forge partnerships are essential components of his duties. "I work with neighbors and try to think where conflict may come from and how to keep people involved," he said.

He also works to balance the desires of people who recreate on their properties and the need to protect the land. "What does the community want and how do we balance that with the protection?" he said.

And each property is different. For example in Waleska, STPAL is responsible

for a private property which is still pristine forest, but being invaded by wild pigs.

At the Talking Rock property, the area has been logged and needs a widespread burn to restore it, but burning off an area popular with hikers and mountain bikers is another type of challenge.

Challenges to the environment

For the environment in general, Ray identified several bigger picture threats.

First is loss of habitat. Ray indicated that alteration and degraded habitats are the main threats to the environment. Ecosystems don't function properly, and most native species begin to disappear when their habitats are destroyed. Development and increasing areas of lawns are two major causes of habitat loss and alteration that he gives.

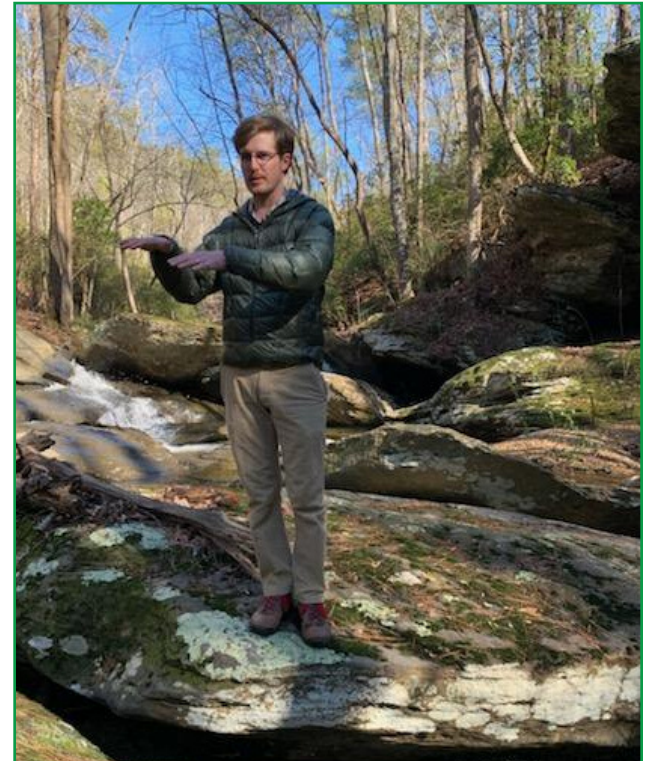
Second is invasive species. He said this actually ties back to the habitat loss as many of the invasive species are particularly adapted to moving into cleared space. He cited kudzu as one famous invasive, but noted the mimosa trees (putting on a colorful road side show at the time of this interview) are another growing threat, crowding out native plants. Fish, such as Grass carp, which

can lay million of eggs, are a growing threat to our waters.

Third, he identified as negative human interactions – even in the most protected areas humans have a tendency to want to alter a property, he said. He cited killing snakes as one of the most common of these. He pointed out that many older people will recall fondly how it used to be a popular pastime to drive around in the evening and look for rattlesnakes on

the road and then run over them. And in the same conversation these people will note that there just aren't snakes on the roads any more.

Part of his mission, Ray said is to educate people and work within a community to develop common goals of preservation. Find out more information on the Southeastern Trust for Parks and Land at stpal.org.



Southeastern Trust for Parks and Land Director of Conservation Keith Ray explaining geology near the STPAL property called Staraland near Waleska.

District governor challenges Rotary club to "imagine" what more they can do



photo/Max Caylor

District Governor Gerry Taylor receives a check from the Rotary Club of Jasper President Marty Callahan during his visit last week.

The donation goes to help the environment and six other program areas. The district governor challenged the local civic group to "imagine" what more they could do to serve the community.

President Callahan noted, "Our club sent 643 bags of candy to all employees of the Pickens School District as a thank you for their work with our students."

Rotary meets weekly at noon at Chattahoochee Tech and visitors are welcome.



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