



By George M. Hopper

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What could be more natural than a forest with birds, wind, trees and rain? As the river runs from the forest, the water is fresh with a filtered drink of clean air; the aquatic life is habituated with coolness of leaf shade from the streamside; and the sound of ripples soothes all animals nearby.

Mississippi is blessed with forests where fish, birds and wild animals can spend their lives. It is these places of wood and river that provide our special memories of time spent in the natural world. Our society places great value on the quality of life received from the natural Mississippi surrounding us and of the time we spend, or dream of spending, in those places.

But what happens to the natural when a catastrophe occurs?

The loss of such places to fire, storm or other causes leads us to find ways to replenish landscapes with an eye toward a natural world.

Following Katrina, MSU and others around the state sprang into action planning ways to rebuild the forest and rivers of the area. Federal and state leaders provided funds and opportunities to replant the forest, to restore wildlife habitats and to recover rivers to prestorm conditions. The Katrina Recovery Act provided \$950 million in funds for farmers, forest owners and cities to establish new areas.

The Forest and Wildlife Research Center at MSU crafted a research initiative with six major goals:

- Assist the recovery and restoration of Mississippi's forest, wildlife, fisheries, water and aquatic resources
- Assist in the rebuilding and expansion of Mississippi's forest products and outdoor-based recreation and tourism industries
- Evaluate and assist in recovery of the economic and rural social infrastructure
- Develop rapid damage detection protocols for natural disasters
- Develop decision support systems for industrial and community juxtaposition for efficient and economically viable use of our restored resources
- Evaluate and assist in developing policies regarding recovery of the natural resources and the resiliency for future natural disasters.

Research and education will be vital to rebuild the economic infrastructure in the areas impacted by Hurricane Katrina. A research and education program should be a fundamental component to any rebuilding effort and will provide the guidance for effective recovery.

Programs developed through research and education will demonstrate to local communities their options for building a new Mississippi forest—one designed to accomplish specific objectives for economic development and restoring the environment.

Meanwhile, cities across the state have observed that natural settings, such as treescapes and greenways inside towns along city streets, increase merchants' profits while enhancing appeal to new residents. In the January 2006 issue of the *Journal of Forestry*, Kathleen Wolf reported that people agree trees and natural settings within and near living spaces make cities better places. A landscape with trees is preferred by most people—perhaps as a way to help remember how they found great joy in times spent in the natural world.

I know we will restore our lost forests. We will grow new special places, and we will determine the best practices to keep Mississippi natural, both inside our cities and nearby—which in Mississippi is never far away.