

50th Anniversary • College of Environment and Design

PLACE
+
MEANING
+
EXPERIENCE

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15 Georgia's Saltmarsh Landscape

Darrel Morrison

When I arrived in Georgia from the Upper Midwest in 1983, I soon fell in love with the broad expanses of saltmarshes along the one hundred miles of Georgia coastline. One-third of all the remaining saltmarshes on the Atlantic coast in the United States are in Georgia—a total of 378,000 acres. I think I was first introduced to the beauty of Georgia's saltmarshes when I saw them from coastal Highway 17, where the roadway sometimes flies above the marshes on sleek concrete bridges. During one sunset, I gazed down from one of those bridges onto the saltmarshes below. Sinuous silver creeks snaked through the blackness, reflecting the afterglow in the sky.

When I taught field courses on native plant communities of the Southeast, I saw saltmarshes from many perspectives. As my students and I rode the Cumberland Queen from St. Mary's to Cumberland Island on May mornings, I saw them as vivid-green bands between a leaden sky above and dark water below. On Sapelo Island, the saltmarshes spread out as a broad expanse of burnished gold under a December sunset sky. Alongside my students, I painted watercolor interpretations of the saltmarshes on Cumberland Island and along the Crooked River. I took off my shoes and walked barefoot, my heels and toes sinking into the “pluff” mud of a Sapelo saltmarsh at low tide. The fiddler crabs scurried for cover, and the white snails climbed the stalks and leaves of salt cordgrass, seeking shelter from the next high tide.



The saltmarsh is a paradox. Botanically, it seems, at first, to be a simple ecosystem: almost all of the vegetation you see is of one species, salt cordgrass (*Spartina alterniflora*). It's the one species that has adapted to both the salt concentration (an average of thirty parts per thousand) and to the dramatic changes in water level that rhythmically occur in the tidal environment. The salt cordgrass is the main “producer” in this ecosystem, using sunlight and nutrients from the soil to produce organic matter that supports directly or indirectly a vast network of different forms of life. In spite of its initial appearance as a simple ecosystem, it is in fact an intricately complex system of adaptations and interdependencies with a slow pulsebeat: high tide . . . low tide . . . high tide . . . low tide . . .

Interior channels or creeks cut through the seemingly flat expanse of salt cordgrass. Alongside these, raised levees build up through deposition of detritus carried by water moving through the creeks. There are other areas of open water: small ponds or depressions too deep for salt cordgrass to grow. The height of much of the grass in the saltmarsh is in the range of three to five feet, alternately exposed during low tide and then immersed during high tide. Along the creeks, with higher levels of nutrients, the cordgrass may grow to eight feet or more, and often is a darker green color than that of the surrounding expanse of marsh, adding a sinuously beautiful pattern to the composition.

Now, thirty-five years after first falling in love with the saltmarshes of Georgia, I have returned to the Midwest, but my life has been forever enriched by my years in Georgia. The words of nineteenth-century Georgia poet Sidney Lanier in his poem “The Marshes of Glynn” come to mind:

*The world lies east: how ample, the marsh and the sea and the sky!
A league and a league of marsh-grass, waist-high, broad in the blade,
Green, and all of a height, and unflecked with a light or a shade,
Stretch leisurely off, in a pleasant plain,
To the terminal blue of the main.*

Although my life now lies west, my thoughts often flow east to those vivid memories of broad expanses of saltmarshes and endless rhythmic tides. ●

29 Understanding Place through Art and Ecology

Nancy Aten

My fellow students and I learned the language of place through Professor Darrel Morrison's course, *Field Study: Native Plant Communities of the Southeast*. During the Maymester, sixteen of us traveled in two vans, on routes designed to introduce us gracefully to the regions of Georgia. We stayed in state park cabins, cooked communal meals, hiked together, and spent each day in one or two special places. Along the way, we learned the vocabulary of the southeastern landscape and how to respond with sensitivity. Darrel posed increasingly complex questions that, we would discover, involved weaving together ecological understanding with concerns of artistry and design.

In the Coastal Plain, we scientifically sampled vegetation and described places in a qualitative framework. We were asked how we might design a landscape that supported and enriched the character of the place. On one day, my heart opened to the longleaf pine savanna at Big Woods. In my journal, I wrote: "The strong vertical lines of the pines. Open, with sunny areas . . . The bracken fern dominant in a sea of light green makes the punctuations stand out . . . The saw palmetto in conversation with bracken."

In the mountains, I sat writing and sketching in a very different place. The language of age in the magical Sosebee Cove forest gave me steps to take in woodland ecological restoration work to this day. "Diversity. Shade. Cool. Nine species in my square-foot drawing . . . Huge variability in tree ages. A strongly healthy feeling. Lots of fallen branch/leaf litter, very rich dark humus soil. Occasional rock outcrops add mosses and lichens. So alive and exciting. Grand and inspiring."

Heggie's Rock, a granite outcrop in the Piedmont, is straightforward at first but with study reveals an intricate story. "Still. Quiet. Dry, like a desert today. The celadon-green pale lichen and charcoal gray rock are the backdrop. You can feel everything waiting, patiently, for drops of rain. You can see where the water will collect, where little rivulets will run; the mosses and lichens and sedums show the patterns and define the history. The dry ephemeral pools are surprisingly flat-bottomed, centuries of wear and

deposits and survival. You have to look closely for the secrets they hold . . . This is a place of imagination and artistry and detail, and a lesson in patience and fidelity.”

Knowing place is a process, and the tangible exercises we practiced in Plant Communities of the Southeast led to a fluency in reading the landscape, and caring about it, that underlies every project I undertake. ●

