

Forever Green: The School, Future Owners Cannot Build on Property

By William L. Holmes in the Winston Salem Journal, 1998

From the corner of his eye, John Wear spied a speeding shadow cast on the pond, a rippled dark spot pushing closer to his perch on the shore.

A chalky, blue heron soared around the sprouting foliage of a nearby tree a second later, about eight feet in front of Wear's nose. The Catawba College professor didn't flinch.

He stared stoically for a few seconds as the prehistoric-looking bird glided gracefully from side to side, looped around the pond and settled bony-knee-deep in a narrow canal. Only the rumbling engine of Wear's Gator-- a six-wheeled golf cart he uses to splash through soggy divots in the trails slicing near the water-- cut the silence.

A half-mile away, cars slowed and sputtered at a four-way intersection with a gas station on every corner.

Wear wants to stop developers from ever creeping onto the fringes of his peaceful pond, from moving their gas stations and restaurants and used-car lots closer to his red maples, green ashes and black willows.

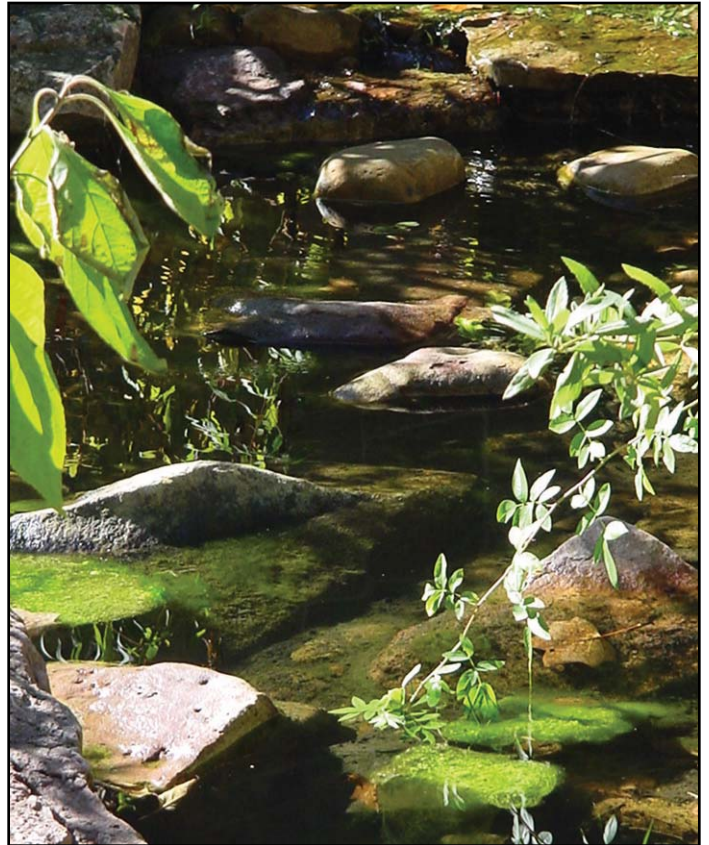
He and the college have struck a deal that should do it.

The trustees of Catawba College recently turned over the development rights for the 150-acre ecological preserve that Wear manages to the Land Trust of Central North Carolina.

The trust plans to keep the right in perpetuity, assuring that neither the college nor future owners can ever build on the fragile property.

"There's going to be more and more pressure to develop, whether you like it or not, 40 or 50 years down the road," Wear said. "Somebody may make a poor decision. It would really be a shame."

Catawba is the first college in the state to cede its development rights to a land trust. Wear and Jeff Michael, the executive director of the trust, say that



it is one of the first in the country to do it.

The payoff is that students in the budding environmental sciences program at Catawba will continue to have a living laboratory for study, Wear said. They use the preserve regularly for seining for largemouth bass or crappie in the shallow, 2 1/2-acre pond or cataloging the 75 or so species of birds flitting through the bunches of button bush and swamp rose that ring the pond's edge.

The land doesn't support rare animals or plants, Wear said. Rather, it stands as a monument to the lay of the land in the central Piedmont before widespread farming called for draining and tilling of swampy bottoms.

"We really don't have that many (lots) left that, that type of Piedmont wetlands system," Michael said. "We have really robbed ourselves of that in the Piedmont. The more of them that we can preserve ...the richer the wildlife in our area will be."

Animals depend on wetlands for a healthy habitat. Wetlands also serve as a natural filter for runoff water before it works into creeks and other bodies of water.

Ben Isenberg, a junior at Catawba studying environmental science, said he has scoured nearly every crook and creek in the preserve. The preserve helped draw him from Connecticut to Catawba, he said.

“If we’re going to compete with some of the bigger schools for students, we need to have something like that,” Isenberg said. “I love the hands-on part. We’re so fortunate to have something like that.”

Fred Corriher, the president of Catawba, doesn’t doubt that the college hit upon a vein of luck while mining for contributions. Over the past eight years or so, a few local residents have donated money or land to the college for the preserve. The college added it to its own holdings.

Wear, a Salisbury native who earned his doctorate in biology at Wake Forest University, returned about five years ago from South Carolina to make the piecemeal preserve the centerpiece of the then-new environmental science program.

The program trains students in conservation, ecology, and related fields.

“It’s really sort of cutting edge for a college of our size,” Corriher said.

The trustees had little debate about turning over the property to the land trust, Corriher said. They have few doubts that forsaking a future soccer field or dorm site for credibility and a good will was the best choice, he said.

“In order to be a good model for our students, we need to be good stewards of the land we’re entrusted with,” he said. “I think everybody understands the value of this program.”

Wear intends to expand the environmental science program and the preserve during the next few years. He and his students have added to the trail system through the preserve, even running wooden planks over the muddy swamps. He is in the early stages of developing an impoundment designed to attract more waterfowl to the site. Four donors are discussing donations of up to 70 acres, more land for the muskrats, mole salamanders and deer to poke around. ■