Asa Smith

Geog 1125

TR 11:00

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**Service Learning Project (Williams Farm)**

 For the service learning portion of this class, I chose to volunteer at Williams Farm. Williams Farm is an organic farm that is part of the Athens Land Trust and is protected by the city of Athens with a conservation easement. The farm is tucked away in the middle of a popular residential area off North Avenue and is viewed as an “oasis” in the middle of an extremely developed area. It is a nonprofit and was established with a three-part goal of growing and selling organic non-gmo produce at local farmer’s markets, providing a space for Athens residents to learn about sustainable farming practices, and offering employment to low-income community members. The farm generates income in two different ways. They participate in the west broad farmer’s market each week and they work with the farm share program. The Farm Share program is a 12-week co-op in which community members receive organic produce each week that was grown by farmers in their local area. After getting the opportunity to taste some of the produce grown here firsthand, I fully plan on taking advantage of the Farm Share program and informing my peers about this great opportunity.

While volunteering, I predominantly worked with the farm manager Seth Nivens. Seth was extremely passionate about his work with Athens land trust and shared a lot of great advice with me about choosing a career path that you are passionate about. I also worked with a few other UGA students that were volunteering for various organizations but were all excited to be involved. Seth had just finished planting about thirty elderberry bushes the previous day so the main thing that we spent the morning doing was mulching and watering the new bushes. Seth was very knowledgeable about all the different plant species they were growing and informed me of the many different medicinal benefits that elderberries have.

Furthermore, the different crops on the farm are separated with drainage and irrigation ditches. Seth had all the volunteers help with weeding and clearing out these ditches to provide a more hospitable environment for the plants to grow. At the farm, they try to keep out at least 75% of the weeds in order to keep their crops healthy. This means that volunteers must constantly maintain the weeding of these ditches which is a lot more work than it may sound. While performing these various tasks, Seth and I talked a lot about the different problems that the farm has faced dealing with different animals. When they first starting planting in this location, the local deer herd would decimate their crops before they could grow which lead to volunteers constructing a fence around the entire property. As a result, the farm does not have many issues with deer but has started to have a lot of problems with ground hogs. Seth informed me that there is no clear solution to their groundhog problems because of their ability to burrow underneath the fences. However, he also said that there are foxes that live in the area that enjoy spending time on the farm that help scare away the groundhogs. It is hard to find a balance in agriculture between producing high crop yields while also minimizing your impact on native animal species. Therefore, the employees of Williams farm do their best to be hospitable neighbors to the local flora and fauna.

 I firmly believe that Williams farm is a prime example of how humans can mitigate their impact on the environment while also growing delicious produce. While volunteering at the farm, I was able to relate my experience back to our classroom lectures on land use and land coverage. Because humans by far have the largest impact on the earth and control land use, we are the ones that can make conscious decisions to make changes that help us adapt and mitigate the effects of climate change. Williams farm is right in the middle of one of the fastest growing residential development areas in Athens. The land could easily have been sold to a real estate development company to be turned into prime student housing. In addition, many of the surrounding private landowners have chosen to sell their properties to be turned into similar type housing. However, with help from the Athens land trust, the owners of Williams farm made a conscious decision to use the land in a sustainable manner that benefits much of their community and will continue to benefit them for years to come.

 With help from local volunteers and University of Georgia students, Williams Farm has grown from being a deserted piece of land to a fully functioning organic farm less than 2 miles from the heart of downtown Athens. The farm has slowly added to its infrastructure, building a greenhouse, hoop house, and barn equipped with a walk in cooler and fully functioning irrigation system. This site is a model representation of how with a little hard work, urban organic farming can exist in a sustainable manner.