Taking the Lowcountry Back – the Story of Oak Grove and Chinese Tallow: Using Story in Mini-Documentary to Educate Stakeholders about Invasive Plants

Robin (Buz) Kloot, Research Associate Professor
Sudie Daves Thomas
Earth Sciences and Resources Institute, University of South Carolina
Columbia, SC 29201
803-978-7522 | rwkloot@esri.sc.edu

In this project, we wanted to address one of the more pervasive problems we saw with respect to invasive species, namely public and landowner ignorance. In South Carolina’s Lowcountry, as with many other low lying areas of the Southeastern United states, Chinese Tallow (*Triadica sebifera*) is an example of a pernicious yet beautiful invasive. While on the one hand, federal, state and local agencies are spending millions to eradicate the species, this very plant is on sale at multiple outlets in the state including one of the major hardware retail outlets. In this mini-documentary *Taking the Lowcountry Back – the Story of Oak Grove Plantation and Chinese Tallow*, we chose to use story rather than a conventional educational style approach. Once funded for this project, we quickly identified Oak Grove Plantation, in Beaufort County as a “poster child” site because it was badly infested with tallow, the landowner understood the importance of this infestation on his property, and there was a high likelihood that he would receive some cost share funding for an eradication project with the Natural Resources Conservation Service. Any good story will have a number of attributes, a protagonist, a goal, a villain, jeopardy and finally a resolution. In Oak Grove, we found the classic story with the landowner (Chris Campbell) as the protagonist, Chinese tallow the villain, the goal being to restore the estate to the maritime forest it once was and the jeopardy being the inexorable growth of Tallow. Resolution begins to take shape in the form of Billy McCord, biologist who demonstrates the simple hack and squirt method to Chris; they treat about 20 trees and resolve to return in the spring. The next scene (six months later) it is quite apparent that the hack and squirt method has worked on the trees. Resolution plays out in Chris’ looking forward to the upcoming eradication project and talking about a big picture idea of leaving the estate a better place for the next generation. The beauty of this format is that facts about the Chinese tallow, its history, lifecycle and eradication, can be “hung” on the narrative arc; this can be done deliberately by the producer, but is often inadvertent. Based on our previous mini-documentary productions on soils the audience will appeal to landowners, conservationists and to a broader audience, especially educators and their students. The video can be found at:

https://vimeo.com/59610808

FLEPPC/SE-EPPC JOINT ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM | PANAMA CITY BEACH, FL | MAY 21-23, 2013