

MOUNTAINS

A day in life of forestry technician Kate Beckner



Word from the Smokies
Frances Figart
Columnist

Karetza “Kate” Beckner is a forestry technician at Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Her job is largely focused on removing invasive or nonnative species so the park’s natural plant inhabitants can thrive.

In honor of Feb. 11, the annual International Day of Women and Girls in Science, Beckner remembers when she was a child and got an initial insight into her future focus.

“I first got excited about science around third or fourth grade,” she recalled. “My family and I discovered several salamanders under a rock in our yard. I was fascinated by them.”

At that time, Beckner had no idea where she wanted her career path to take her. All she knew was that she wanted a job that allowed her to get outside.

“I participated in Future Farmers of America and 4-H in high school and really enjoyed some of the activities we participated in,” she said. “I began taking some very general classes in college based on the experiences I had in those clubs, and from there I chose a more specific career path. I sought advice from people who knew me and wanted me to succeed in whatever career path I chose — people like my parents and my FFA adviser.”

In most of her college science classes, Beckner noticed there were significantly more male students than female. Early in her career, she was often the only female on her work crew. But over time she has seen more women entering scientific fields.

“Beckner’s field work with invasive plant species tends to involve the established species in the park,” writes Martha Hunter in a story called “Preserving the Landscape Through Invasive Species Management” set to appear in the forthcoming Spring 2022 issue of “Smokies Life” magazine. “From August 2020 to August 2021, the invasive plant management crew spent nearly 2,700 hours in the field treating mimosa, privet, multiflora rose, Japanese honeysuckle, and garlic mustard stems.”

Beckner is responsible for removing invasive plant species from known locations throughout the park as well as locating and identifying new infestations of invasive plants that may crop up.

“During a typical day, I often hike to an old homesite or roadside area to remove invasive plants such as Chinese privet, Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose or English ivy,” she said. “We use a variety of techniques to remove invasives including hand pulling, foliar treatments and systemic treatments.”

A favorite part of her job is researching up-and-coming technology and equipment in order to try out new techniques that may improve the effective-



Karetza “Kate” Beckner is a forestry technician at Great Smoky Mountains National Park.
PROVIDED BY EMMA DUFORT, GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION



Species like this invasive bush honeysuckle quickly overtake land if left unchecked. Forestry technicians use a topical herbicide and machetes to reduce their numbers. PROVIDED BY EMMA DUFORT, GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS ASSOCIATION

ness of forestry work.

“Sometimes we get to experiment,” Beckner said. “People will say ‘Oh it’s impossible to get rid of this plant.’ But sometimes, if you take a little time, you can figure it out. I enjoy that part.”

According to Hunter’s story, one such experiment occurred when Beckner attempted to treat Italian arum stems with various herbicides during the summer months with no success. Eventually, Beckner read that arum leaves are dormant during summer, a departure from the usual patterns of invasives. She directed her team to wait for winter to do the arum treatment — and it worked.

When she isn’t out in the park doing invasive plant removal or researching the latest techniques, Beckner is maintaining and managing the data for her work. “We have to make sure we keep the data updated so we can show what we’ve done and how effective we’ve



Beckner remembers discovering salamanders like this two-lined blue ridge salamander under a rock in her yard when she was young. This got her excited about science. PROVIDED BY ANN FROSCHAUER

been — and where we need to spend more time,” she said.

Additionally, Beckner and other forestry technicians work with interns and seasonal employees on a daily basis. She likes these interactions and being able to share her experiences with others.

“When I was starting out, many of my co-workers and supervisors, both male and female, were very supportive and helpful by sharing their knowledge and insight as I strove to make the best career choices for myself,” she said. “Now I want to share my understanding in a way that I hope will help others make

their own career decisions.”

When asked how she would encourage girls considering a science career, she said, “Find what interests you, and don’t be afraid of trying new experiences. Often, finding out what you don’t want in a career is the most helpful way to find where you really do want your career to take you.”

Frances Figart is the editor of “Smokies Life” magazine and the Creative Services Director for the 29,000-member Great Smoky Mountains Association, an educational nonprofit partner of Great Smoky Mountains National Park. Reach her at frances@gsmassoc.org

STATE BRIEFS

Former deputy convicted of falsifying records

RALEIGH — A North Carolina jury found has found a former sheriff’s deputy guilty of falsifying training and qualification requirements for a former sheriff and his former chief deputy.

Chad Coffey was facing a total of 24 felony charges. He was found guilty of 12 counts of obstructing justice Thursday and acquitted on 12 counts of obtaining property by false pretenses, The News & Observer of Raleigh reported.

A judge sentenced Coffey to five to 15

months in prison. At most, he will serve six months since post-release supervision is required for the last nine months of such sentences. Coffey then faces two years of supervised probation.

Hart Miles, one of Coffey’s attorneys, argued that prosecutors were overreaching, saying Coffey, who was in charge of the Granville County sheriff’s office training program, was following former Granville County Sheriff Brindell Wilkins’ orders. Miles said his client didn’t know he was breaking the law, and any punishment should be administrative, such as losing his teaching or

other certification.

Death penalty dropped in murder trial over virus concerns

CHARLOTTE — A North Carolina district attorney has dropped a capital murder charge against a man in the 2017 death of his parents, citing an increased risk of exposure to COVID-19 to those associated with the trial.

Mecklenburg County Assistant District Attorney Jodi Anderson told a judge that because death penalty trials routinely run on for months, they carry

an increased risk of COVID-19 exposure for jurors, judges, witnesses and other court personnel, The Charlotte Observer reported. Any outbreaks of the disease during the trial could indefinitely delay a verdict.

Curtis Atkinson Jr. is accused of the shooting and stabbing deaths of his parents, Ruby and Curtis Sr. By the time the Atkinsons were found in their east Charlotte home, they had been dead for days.

Atkinson Jr. will now be tried in May on a first-degree murder charge. If he is convicted, he now faces a mandatory life sentence.

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