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FORESTRY EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT: VIEWS FROM ALUMNI OF A SOUTHERN FORESTRY SCHOOL

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ABSTRACT: Forestry alumni of the School of Forest Resources at Mississippi State University were surveyed to elicit their views on curriculum improvements and employment success in their fields of study. The Forestry major consists of two options: Forest Management and Wildlife Management. About two thirds (68%) of responding Forest Management alumni worked in private forest industry. Interestingly, more Wildlife Management Option graduates were employed in a forestry-related (50%) enterprise than a wildlife-related enterprise (about 38%). Almost one third (31%) of the forestry jobs held by wildlife graduates were in timber procurement.

Results of the survey suggest the need for curriculum improvements that enhance communications and personnel management skills, agreeing with several critics of both natural resources education and the forestry profession. At the same time, a more practical, field-orientation approach to forestry programs has been suggested, particularly as it pertains to subjects like timber procurement - an area in which many Forest Management and Wildlife Management graduates are employed. In an already often crowded curriculum, the challenge will be to maintain a balance between a broad-based education of citizens who are aware of and appreciate the world around them and a more focused training of foresters who are well grounded in the practices and theories associated with forest science. This has become an increasingly difficult task in many programs in which requirements for accreditation and/or certification encounter university policies to decrease the number of credits required for graduation.

That a significant number of Wildlife Option graduates are employed in forestry-related jobs, many of which are in timber procurement, reinforces the value of forestry training for some undergraduate wildlife students, particularly those not planning to continue their education beyond the baccalaureate level. This notion is reinforced by the objectives of the Wildlife Management Option that are clearly articulated in the Bulletin of the Mississippi State University: (1) "provides education necessary for today's multiple use management of our forest land;" (2) "prepares the student for a number of wildlife management positions and fulfills requirements for certification as a Wildlife Biologist by the Wildlife society," and (3) "most important, it prepares the student for graduate work in the wildlife ecology area. The M.S. degree in wildlife ecology is almost necessary for employment in this field."

That almost 86% of recent Wildlife Option graduates were employed in either forestry or wildlife careers and almost 95% of recent Forest Management Option graduates were employed in their field is encouraging. Statistics like these may be important recruiting tools for this program, and perhaps others like it in the South.

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