

Life on the Edge

by Joe Kays

Growing up on California's central coast, the world was a laboratory for Annie Hermansen-Báez, thanks in large part to her father, an elementary school teacher.

"Whenever we went anywhere he was always pointing out things about the natural world to me and my two brothers, whether we wanted to hear about it or not!" Hermansen-Báez says. "We camped all over California and lived out in the country for many years. My brothers and I always had snakes and lizards as pets, along with many dogs, cats, chickens, and geese."

After earning a degree in biology from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1991, Hermansen-Báez joined the Peace Corps and spent 3 years in Paraguay teaching subsistence farmers about agroforestry systems, crop diversification, and soil conservation techniques; helping them construct soil erosion barriers and utilize green manures; and sharing tree nursery and organic vegetable gardening practices.

Based on her Peace Corps experience, Hermansen-Báez decided to go back to school in forestry at the University of Florida (UF). In 1998, the year she completed her master's, Florida wildfires scorched 500,000 acres and caused more than \$600 million in damage, prompting the Chief of the Forest Service and the Director of the Southern Research Station to commission an assessment of the wildland-urban interface in the South.

Hermansen-Báez spent the next 3 years collaborating on that assessment with Ed Macie, the Forest Service's regional urban forester, then in early 2002 helped establish the



Annie Hermansen-Báez in her office on the University of Florida campus. (photo by Joe Kays)

Southern Center for Wildland-Urban Interface Research and Information in Gainesville, FL. Hermansen-Báez has two titles these days—center manager and technology transfer coordinator—but she describes herself as a facilitator between the scientists and the center's clients, who include natural resource professionals, private forest landowners, planning departments, local policymakers, and others.

We caught up with Hermansen-Báez at the center's offices on the shore of UF's Lake Alice, itself a natural oasis in the middle of one of the Nation's largest universities. Looking around her office, we see evidence of many travels to South America, among them photos of her husband and two sons.

You are a strong promoter of multiculturalism, aren't you?

We are a multicultural family, so I think it's very important that my children learn about the world around them. I met my husband while I was in the Peace Corps. He is from the area where I worked in Paraguay. We moved to Gainesville in 1995, got married, and now we have two children. We speak Spanish and

even Guarani, the native language of Paraguay, in our home and we try to go back to Paraguay at least every couple of years.

How do think your background prepared you for the work you're doing today?

Both as a volunteer in the Peace Corps in Paraguay and as a student in a tropical biology course in Costa Rica, I came to realize that you couldn't separate natural resource issues from people issues. I really wanted to work in a career in which I could combine those two issues. That continued when I was working on my master's degree. For my thesis I studied the seed germination of a tree species from the Brazilian savannah. Brazilian farmers sell the seed pods to a pharmaceutical company who then extract a medicinal compound. I also looked at how income from selling the seed pods fits into the whole socioeconomic structure of the area.

How has the center's mission evolved since its inception?

In the fire arena, the concept of the wildland-urban interface has been around for awhile, but only in the last 5 years has it really taken off as a term

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used outside of fire. We're trying to make people think about the interface as much broader than just fire and to include a range of issues related to the effects of urbanization on natural resources. You can't think about fire without thinking about land use planning, for example. They're all connected.

What has been your greatest challenge?

The demographics of people living in and close to our forests have changed dramatically in recent years. The average land tract size is going down and the number of landowners is going up. A lot of these people have a negative image of forestry because they don't know much about forest management. So we in the forestry community have had to spend time working on our image with the general public. We try to help them understand that forests are a renewable resource and that everyone will benefit if we maintain land in forests—be it plantations or natural forest stands.

We've also had to adapt our training methods for foresters. In the past, foresters weren't trained to work with the diverse group of people that you find in the interface now, so we're spending a lot of time on professional development, retraining our forestry professionals to work with different types of forest users and different management objectives. We're also working with the forestry school here at UF to teach future foresters about working in this new environment, incorporating more interface concepts into the curriculum.

Another challenge is communication. Historically, forestry has not marketed itself very well. If you look at the old Forest Service publications,

Interface challenges mean new training methods for foresters. (photo by Larry Korhnak, University of Florida)

they're often lacking color and illustrations and tend to reach a limited audience. We're trying to make our products look more interesting and we're making them available in multiple formats so we can reach a wider audience.

What are some of the center's most promising areas of research?

We're doing a lot of research right now on plant and mulch flammability. Fire professionals want guidance so they can advise people who live in the interface what they can plant around their homes. We've developed a series of fact sheets about fire in the wildland-urban interface to help people make their homes and surrounding landscapes more firewise.

We recently started a study on how urbanization will affect the forest ecosystems and human communities of the Florida Panhandle, an area that is beginning to see rapid land use change. We try to give people information they can use to make sound decisions. People need to know what the consequences might be so that they can make informed decisions.

We're also getting into the whole biomass area. Because of energy concerns, biomass as a potential fuel is popular right now, and there are a lot of woody biomass sources in the interface, everything from urban wood waste to hurricane debris. The UF is really taking a lead in developing alternative fuels, so there is a lot of opportunity for collaboration.

In the best-case scenario, what would the wildland-urban interface look like in a place like Florida?

It's tough to say exactly what it would look like, but our philosophy is that since land use change is going to happen, it can happen best with

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The Southern Center for Wildland-Urban Interface Research and Information

The SRS Southern Center for Wildland-Urban Interface Research and Information (WUI Center) was opened in Gainesville, FL, in January 2002. Activities of the WUI Center represent an immediate Forest Service response to critical findings of the *Southern Wildland-Urban Interface Assessment* and the *Southern Forest Resource Assessment*, which both identified urbanization as the biggest threat to southern forests.

Though initially focused on research and technology transfer needed to address fire in the wildland-urban interface (WUI) in the South, the WUI Center has expanded its focus to include a range of issues related to the urbanization of southern forests, such as how ecosystems and disturbance regimes are altered by human influences; subsequent risks to human and natural communities; and the relationship of land use policies to ecological processes and disturbances in the interface.

The mission of the center is to develop and communicate guidelines, models, and tools needed by natural resource managers, policymakers, planners, and citizens to reduce risks to ecosystems and human communities in urban and urbanizing landscapes. The center's technology transfer program focuses on disseminating new and existing information, serving as a clearinghouse of WUI information, building partnerships and collaborative

efforts and approaches, and facilitating and creating linkages.

The Southern Wildland-Urban Interface Council (SWUIC), a chartered council of the Southern Group of State Foresters, is the advisory council for the WUI Center. SWUIC helps guide the technology transfer activities of the WUI Center and assists in identifying research needs. This guidance helps ensure that the research and technology transfer products of the WUI Center meet the needs of their stakeholders.

The WUI Center's Web site, InterfaceSouth (www.interfacesouth.usda.gov or www.interfacesouth.org), has publications, training and outreach programs, decision support systems, a literature database, a photo gallery, current WUI news and events, and much more. You can also sign up for the Southern Wildland Urban Interface Network listserv from the Web site and receive the *InterfaceSouth Update*, an electronic, monthly bulletin about critical WUI issues, and the *InterfaceSouth Post*, which contains current interface information, such as upcoming conferences or news articles, sent out on a weekly basis. 🌲

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The Southern Center For Urban Forestry Research & Information

In 1997, the SRS Southern Center for Urban Forestry Research & Information (UF Center) was formed to direct urban forestry research and provide technology transfer within the Southern Region to address pressing issues including changing land use patterns, increased urbanization, loss of forest canopy, and changing demographics. The UF Center and the SRS Southern Center for Wildland-Urban Interface Research and Information work closely together and are now both part of the same SRS research work unit.

The focus of the UF Center is to help communities and landowners address a broad spectrum of southern urban natural resource issues—from the city center to the national forests—with a focus on the human dimension. The UF Center is a cooperative effort that integrates Forest Service Research, State and Private Forestry, and the National Forest System. The UF Center also works closely with universities, State forestry agencies (urban and community forestry programs), cooperative extension services, nonprofit organizations, and others.

UF Center research focuses on topics such as urban expansion and demographic shifts and their effects; the role urban forests play in improving the livability, healthiness, and prosperity of urban neighborhoods; the economic value of trees and urban forests in southern cities; the effectiveness of urban forest management and design options for improving urban neighborhoods and commercial areas; and the role

urban forests may play in carbon sequestration.

The UF Center's technology transfer program focuses on:

- identifying research and information needs of customers;
- communicating research results and other information with customers through publications, conferences, workshops, and other resources;
- facilitating the exchange of information among and between researchers, practitioners, and others involved with urban forestry;
- providing technical assistance to State urban and community forestry programs; and
- assisting with the development of storm damage assessment and poststorm urban forest assessments.

The UF Center's Web site, Urban Forestry South (www.urbanforestrysouth.org), was developed collaboratively with the southern regional extension forester and the University of Georgia, School of Forestry & Natural Resources. The Web site has a variety of urban forestry resources, such as a document library, tree ordinances, classroom activities, presentations, and much more. You will also find a section on grant announcements and other funding opportunities, job announcements, and an urban forestry manual. 🌳

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planning that takes into consideration the suitability of sites for the development proposed for them. We also need to think about reducing risks to humans and forest ecosystems from events such as fires, floods, and hurricanes.

There's a certain irony in the fact that your offices are adjacent to a wildland island, isn't there?

It is interesting to have our office right next to an interface between people and wildlife. In the spring we had a sandhill crane couple with two young chicks wandering around our building, knocking on the doors with their beaks. We often find turtles on our front doorstep, which we promptly return to Lake Alice. We've even seen bald eagles and hawks in the vicinity. And we are right on the UF campus in the heart of Gainesville.

It goes to show that you can have a wildland-urban interface just about anywhere! People often think of the wildland-urban interface as being on the edges of cities or towns. But the interface is more of a condition than an exact place—it's where there are a mix of elements coming together in one location, such as the wildlife and human interactions we have here, or housing set in a landscape managed for both fire resistance and aesthetics. I love working in a place where I can walk out the door and step into that wildland-urban interface. I think most of us would prefer to work and live in a place like this—the challenge is making it safe and sustainable for both the humans and wildlife. 🌳

Joe Kays is a freelance science writer and editor of Explore, the research magazine for the University of Florida.