

Could You Offer PRIMITIVE CAMPING in Your Forestland?

LOW-AMENITY, LOW-MAINTENANCE CAMPSITES CAN BE A VIABLE PASSIVE INCOME STREAM FOR SOME LANDOWNERS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WITH LAKES, STREAMS, AND BEAUTIFUL SCENERY.

BY PATRICK HIESL AND ALEX TURNER



Photo: Getty Images

Forestland typically does not provide annual timber income and, even when it does, markets for wood have remained stagnant for decades.

Fortunately, landowners have an increasing number of revenue streams such as carbon offset credits, conservation easements, and pine straw raking to go with traditional options such as hunt clubs and recreation leases.

Some forest landowners rent cabins on their property to private individuals. With the emergence of websites like Airbnb and Vrbo, cabin rentals are easy to manage and advertise.

Primitive camping is another income stream. It began during the pandemic in the era of social distancing, and the trend has continued. Camping in the forest is nothing new; many people camp in national or state forests. Often this involves a dedicated campsite and basic facilities.

With primitive camping, however, the forest owner does not have to prepare an elaborate campsite or offer facilities. What attracts users of this camping method is the privacy of camping in spots surrounded by forests without other campers nearby. In this article, we will discuss the experience of one of the authors (Alex Turner) with renting out primitive campsites in his forestland.

GETTING STARTED

We discuss campsites in this article on about 1,600 acres of forest land near Honea Path in South Carolina. A little over half of the property is pine plantation, with the remainder in hardwood forest and pasture.

Family members have managed the property for years with the multiple goals of timber income, agriculture, and wildlife. From a business and investment perspective, the family strategy has been to manage for various uses to diversify and increase income streams. The first time Turner rented out camping space on his forestland was after reading about a new company named Hipcamp in 2016. The California-based company was in the business of renting camping spaces on private land in a manner like Airbnb or Vrbo. Most of the listings on the website were based in California.

Turner decided to list a site on his forestland, and two groups booked the site that year. Things changed in August of 2017 when someone could experience a total solar eclipse in that part of the country. South Carolina, particularly the Honea Path region, was among the best places to view the solar eclipse. Due to the eclipse, most area hotel rooms were booked,



Campsites adjacent to streams that provide a view like this will attract many campers.

as were campgrounds. Many people traveled from states as far as New York and Florida to experience the solar eclipse. Given the increasing interest of people in camping in South Carolina, Turner advertised campsite availability on one of his pastures. More than one hundred people camped for a few days on his land. This started his interest in expanding the primitive campsites on his forestland as an additional income stream.

In 2020, Turner started getting more serious about primitive camping sites as the Covid-19 pandemic forced people to be socially distant, and life as we knew it stopped.

Many public forests

were closed then, and outdoor recreation and camping were only possible on private land. This situation led to an increased interest in people camping on private lands with few or no other campers on site. Turner advertised additional primitive campsites near streams and a lake. Throughout the first year of the pandemic, several of the campsites were booked for most weekends from May to October.

Today, after experimenting with different campsites across his forestland, Turner hosts four primitive and secluded sites to allow for plenty of privacy for the campers. But it is not only privacy that matters. Campsites close to a lake or stream or those with beautiful scenery are more likely to attract campers than those in the middle of a pine plantation.

Over the past couple of years, Turner has invested time creating attractive descriptions of his campsites on full-service websites such as hipcamp.com. He is considering listing some sites on a similar website, tentrr.com. These websites are like Airbnb and other vacation rental services in that the camper books and pays for the campsite through the website.

All communication occurs through this service, allowing for a streamlined process for the camper and the campsite owner. Ultimately, a small percentage of the rental fee is paid to the service provider. Part of the service fee may be a \$1,000,000 liability policy for each booking, such as with hipcamp.com. However, most general or farm liability policies will add primitive camping coverage at a reasonable rate.

Having primitive campsites on your forestland can be lucrative and generate enough income for trail maintenance and other expenses. Turner's campsites rent out for \$40 to \$55



A primitive campsite that is secluded and provides access to a lake will book frequently. Alex Turner, shown here, removed 80 acres of forestland from his hunting lease for year-round camping. The income from the campsite more than makes up for the lost revenue from the hunting lease.

per night without a minimum stay. He charges an extra \$5 per person per night for site cleanup for large groups. While most campers follow leave-no-trace guidelines, some larger groups leave trash that requires cleanup. Such debris might be just a bunch of bottle caps that are not attractive to the next set of campers. A clean site is essential as campers will leave positive and negative reviews of the campsite and their experience on the rental website. Only three of 300 groups in the past few years left trash that required cleanup.

LESSONS LEARNED

Campers prefer private and secluded campsites since such areas have no noise from cars or industrial facilities. Parking vehicles several hundred feet from the camp is not a deal breaker if the campsite provides a pretty view or is next to a stream or lake.

Campers will use sites with these features at a higher rate as campsites without. While Turner's campsites on the lake are frequently booked during the late spring and summertime, his campsite in a pine stand only sees occasional renting and is being converted to a common area with a firewood shed and outdoor shower area to serve the other sites.

Meeting the campers or talking to them on the phone to get them to their campsite can become time-consuming. Providing campers with a georeferenced PDF map will take away many questions and free up some of your time. We created a set of simple maps for Turner's campsites using the open-source software QGIS. However, a map built with Google Earth is just as

good. Many campers use their smartphones to navigate the site, and having a georeferenced PDF that somebody can use with GPS software will result in a better user experience than more basic or hand-drawn maps.

Campers do not come to your campsite to talk to you. Most campers interested in primitive camping want privacy and do not want to see or speak to the owner at length. The takeaway is to leave campers alone during their stay. Some campers like to engage with the owner, and you might have to read between the lines to figure out how much engagement they want. If you do engage with the campers, be aware to avoid discussions around politics. If you have people work for you (e.g., on a farm), ensure they stay away from the campers and refrain from engaging in lengthy conversations. Again, the campers come to your site for privacy and to be alone; otherwise, they would be at a public campground.

Having a good description of the campsites on the respective websites is essential. Many campers are attracted by the details that you provide about your camp. Customers will not book sites with little information as frequently as those with detailed descriptions. After a few visits, your campsite will also have reviews from previous campers that will help to promote your camp further.

All the campsites on Turner's land have a small fire pit. He leaves a small amount of firewood at each campsite for the campers to use. In his experience, the more firewood left on site, the more burned. So, if you leave firewood for the camp-

All primitive campsites on Alex Turner's land have a dedicated fire pit. This one is a natural formation of boulders that can serve as a seating area and provide a solid base for a campfire.



ers, be mindful of how much you leave, as they will likely burn everything you provide them.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The land that Turner owns includes not only forestland but active farmland. As such, he has water available at select areas across his farm and plans to establish a central point to provide campers with potable water. He can offer this extra service, but it's not something necessary to have primitive campsites on your forestland.

He is planning on building a central firewood storage area accessible to campers. The idea is to use an honor system to sell additional firewood. Given the experience with how much firewood campers can burn, his idea is to create this firewood storage area in a way accessible on foot only so that cars cannot pull right next to the firewood. This will limit the amount of firewood people will take and may minimize the loss of firewood without payment. Another option is to have campers pay for firewood via Venmo or PayPal.

Campers come from many different places and are likely not locals. The furthest people have traveled to one of Turner's campsites was Orlando, Florida. In many cases, the campsite cost is higher than most people in rural areas are accustomed to paying for camping. As such, the target groups for primitive camping are those from more affluent neighborhoods and cities. That is one reason Turner does not advertise his campsites on social media or locally other than by word of mouth to people he feels will be good stewards of the land. Keep in mind that

posting photos of inviting trails and beautiful scenery could be viewed by trespassers with four-wheelers or other off-road vehicles as an open invitation to trespass!

Turner only rents his campsites in the spring and summer outside the regular hunting season. Since he has most of his forestland leased to a hunt club, he tries to keep campers away during deer hunting season in the fall. Although, for two of his prime campsites situated at the shore of a small lake, he took out 80 acres from the hunting lease to allow for all-year camping at these sites. The loss in hunting lease revenue was made up by the rent charged to the campers during the year, with a small profit.

WHAT ABOUT A LOO?

What do people do when nature calls? The definition of a primitive campsite does not include any facilities. Having people go all over the forest to do their business may work for the first few campers before the woods become unsightly and smelly.

Thus, each camper or group of campers must bring a portable toilet and take the contents of that toilet with them when they leave. Campers can find many solutions online that provide a toilet seat mounted to a five-gallon bucket. The names for these products can be entertaining, with some of the more common ones being "Luggable Loo" and "Bumper Dumper."

Turner once contemplated building an outhouse at some of his campsites. However, after some consideration, he abandoned this idea. The portable toilet system works well, and the outhouse would require regular cleaning and maintenance. This would incur extra time and costs to a system that currently

Campsites with access to a stream or lake are likely to generate a higher income than campsites in the middle of a forest.
(Photo: Tom Pottiger, Unsplash)



has minimal overhead and is designed to be a mostly passive income stream.

In summary, many income streams exist for forest owners. Primitive campsites are one option to create passive income from forestland with minimal input from the forest owner after the initial setup. However, remember that not all forestland is suited for primitive camping.

Campers are looking for quiet and unique views of the scenery or access to water bodies. Campers can book sites in the mountains and near lakes every weekend, while sites in a pine plantation with no scenery or water might only rent once a

month or less.

Nonetheless, if you are considering capitalizing on your property's recreational value, primitive campsites might be an effective way to start with minimal overhead costs. Be aware that most campers do not want to talk or socialize with you, and renting a primitive campsite is a pure business transaction for them.

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