

What can a tree do for me? Trees have been an important part of my life since I was very young. From working in the shelterbelts and planting young trees, to fishing and hunting, trees play a very special part in my life. Trees benefit our environment and create a spectrum of recreational opportunities. Many of my fondest memories involve trees, so today, I want to talk about how trees have impacted me, specifically; and the part they have played in my life.

So, what does a tree do for me? Trees have a large impact on our world's environment. Their primary function is producing oxygen and lowering carbon dioxide levels, however; trees benefit the world in many other ways. Trees are often used to shade people's homes and lower cooling expenses. By keeping the direct sunlight off my home, it stays dramatically cooler during the hot summer months. Not only do trees provide beneficial shade, but they also improve soil health. Trees help replenish micronutrients that other plants deplete from the soil. A soil in good health fosters a healthy next generation of plants. Contrary to what people may believe, forest fires can be beneficial to soil health. When trees burn, the resulting ash contains nutrients that can be easily absorbed by the first plants that sprout after the fire. I have witnessed this process firsthand in Custer State Park after the recent fire.

I know that trees have important benefits that impact people, animals, and our environment. I helped plant and maintain the shelterbelts on our family farm for cattle protection and to hold snow. I also planted some young trees on the hillsides of our property to help prevent erosion. Through these acts, I have had a positive influence on my environment.

I also have come to appreciate the recreational value of trees. The Black Hills is one of my favorite places and the trees are the main reason why. Some of my fondest memories center around our family's cabin in Custer State Park. My great-grandfather constructed the cabin from trees harvested on-site. Our cabin is a special place for the whole family to gather. Sitting in front of the cabin, it feels like you're in an untouched section of nature, and able to fully relax. I've always enjoyed listening to the peaceful sound of the wind whistling through the tall ponderosa pines and the squirrels chattering to each other. Down by the creek that runs next to the cabin sits a huge fallen tree. If you climb up on it, that tree is the perfect spot to sit and fish into the pool below. I have spent hours sitting on that log and have many memories catching trout from that small pool of water. Hunting also plays a large part in my life. From mourning doves and pheasants to deer, I oftentimes walk through trees trying to flush the wildlife. The trees provide the habitat and cover for the species to thrive. Trees are used by birds to roost and build their nest. Some birds even use trees to perch in and watch for prey. Trees can also provide a valuable food source in the form of fruits and nuts. Browsers, like deer, eat young branches off of trees. These foods are high in necessary nutrients for wild animals. Trees truly are one of nature's most versatile organisms because animals use them in so many ways.

Just like trees provide food for animals, they do the same for humans. I feel very fortunate to have an apple tree in my backyard. Picking the apples is a fun activity for my family. Not only do we enjoy eating the apples, but the homemade juice is like nothing you can buy from a store. It's a long process, but the end product is worth it.

Like a habitat for an animal, a tree can provide a form of habitat for people. As a child, I loved sitting in the shade of the big tree in front of the farmhouse with a popsicle in my hand, enjoying a summer day. The shade of that tree provided some relief from the hot summer sun.

Another one of my favorite things to do as a child was going to the local lumberyard and digging through the bin of scrap wood. I was looking for anything I could possibly use to construct the project I had imagined. I remember making some crazy projects, like a human figure with rotating joints, so it could actually move. One time, I even made a birdhouse with a deck attached for the birds to sit on. I have to thank trees for the material that made those fun projects possible.

So, what do trees do for me? Trees are special to me because of the memories they invoke, the benefits they provide to our environment, and the recreational opportunities they create. Trees have had an incredibly positive impact on my life.