

Lessons on the Land

Hunter Morton and his colleagues at South Carolina's John de la Howe High School build a future for conservation.

BY OLIVER HARTNER



About midmorning, Hunter Morton, a high school teacher, rides out and checks on one of his senior students before his faculty advisor session. He pulls his truck off the road as a big blue New Holland tractor idles to the edge of an upturned field. Its lanky teen operator drops the disks and powers it down before descending from the cab with the confidence of youth, unencumbered by the complications of extra bodyweight or arthritic knees.

“Good morning, Mr. Morton,” he says.

“Good morning,” Morton replies. “How are things here?”

While the student explains his task—discing a dove field to be planted in millet—Morton asks him questions and clarifies the steps regarding the field's next phase for sowing the seed. They part ways and Morton explains how this same senior student, who'd been up before the sun, will learn the same material taught at any other high school before his day ends. “Their time blocks are very structured, and I believe it teaches them to excel inside and outside the classroom. Getting up early and getting it done is just a day in the life of a student at John de la Howe.”

Dr. John de la Howe, a French physician, immigrated to South Carolina in 1764, and upon his death in 1797, left his McCormick County holdings to the state for establishing a school serving underprivileged children. The 1,500-acre campus has seen several changes in the centuries since its establishment, but throughout its existence, the state has honored de la Howe's wishes by using the estate for educating South Carolina's youth.

This most recent iteration of the institute launched in July of 2020 as one of three Governor's Schools operated by the state. While one of these schools focuses on math and science and the other on humanities, the John de la Howe Governor's School places its emphasis on conservation and agriculture, making it the only public high school in the nation offering such instruction. Morton serves as one of four faculty members teaching conservation and agriculture, focusing his lesson plans on stewardship of environmental and natural resources.

“In the classroom setting, let's say chemistry or biology class, they learn the principles and terminology of a concept. Then I get to show them how this applies in the field the very same day with a practicum like a controlled burn.” Most faculty here hold at least a postgraduate degree (many of them earned a doctorate), and like all South Carolina Governor's Schools, students must apply and be accepted to the program. “We have bright kids that are eager to learn, and the small student-to-teacher ratio makes our jobs much more enjoyable,” Morton says. Contributing to the idyllic learning environment is the broad spectrum of racial and gender diversity represented at the school. “Despite our small size, most ethnic groups from our state are represented either in our student body or our faculty, and I'm very proud of that fact.”

Morton also coaches extracurricular activities, such as the field trial team and shooting team, in addition to taking students hunting around campus. “We offer traditional athletics like football and basketball through a cooperative with the county, but our school teams focus on activities that involve sporting life or agricultural pursuits.”

Many educators at the high school level hold second jobs or work on passion projects, and the same goes for Morton with his gun-dog training and field trialing. But he cuts no corners while working at his vocation; and his work amounts to a *vocation*—a true calling—as opposed to being a job that earns him a living and offers little else. “I feel fortunate to share my passion for the sporting life and the outdoors, while preparing my students for the next phase of life,” He says. “It'll be exciting to see what they'll do once they graduate.” As the future for our natural resources, our sporting life, and perhaps our society looks ever more bleak, Morton and his colleagues light a candle instead of cursing the darkness. 🕯️

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