

Community- Based Forestry in the Alabama Black- Belt Region

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Abstract

The Black-Belt region of Alabama is endowed with immense forest resources. However, high poverty, unemployment, and low education levels have persisted among African-Americans who represent the majority of the population and own a significant portion of the private forest land. This paper provides the context wherein community-based forestry approach was applied, some of the challenges, how the Federation of Southern Cooperatives accepted and approached the challenge, the impact of their efforts and some of the lessons-learned.

Key Words: *Black-Belt, Minority Forest landowners, Poverty, Cooperatives*

I. Introduction

Advancing community-based forestry in the Black-Belt has some unique challenges because of the history of the region and its people as well as Americans preoccupation with individualism and anti-communism, the absence of significant public lands, and poor service delivery by public agencies charged with land management. Despite the challenges, there are opportunities for organizations like the Federation of Southern Cooperatives to use the community-based forestry approach to leverage resources and deliver technical assistance and education while encouraging collective actions. The Challenge these organizations face is gathering the resources (people and money) to sustain this effort in the long-term. This paper provides the context wherein the community-based forestry approach was applied, some of the challenges, how one organization accepted and approached the challenge, the impact of their efforts and some of the lessons-learned.

II. Background

The Black-Belt of Alabama is part of a larger area distinguished by its population and its soil. This region is called Black-Belt because of the predominant African American population and the dark soil. This region is also characterized by a history of slavery and share-cropping, denial of rights, disruption of social, economic and political structures, and the erosion of community and collective action.

The Black-belt region is known as a region with rich land and poor people despite the presence of a significant forest industry (Schulman 1991). Alabama Black-Belt's poverty rate of 34.9% is almost twice the state's average of 18.8% and is well above the national average of 13.3%. The population in the Alabama Black-Belt have relatively shorter life-spans, lower education attainment and lower average per capita income

when compared with other Alabama counties (Fraser et al., 2005). This may be as Joshi *et al.* (2000) suggest, the economic benefits of the forest industry are not overcoming the shortfalls in human capital development that threaten the long-term economic and social well-being of these communities. Gilbert *et al.* (2001) went even further after reviewing studies of black farmers and rural landowners. They contend that land is a part of a social, political, and economic complexity and how land is distributed may be a key element in economic underdevelopment of African-Americans.

Alabama has 23 million acres of forest of which only 6% is publicly owned. This is the second largest area of commercial forest in any state of the union and Non-Industrial Private Forest (NIPF) landowners own 78% while the forest industry (mainly paper companies) and other corporations own the other 16%. The typical Alabama NIPF landowner has 80 acres on average and these smaller holdings represent almost 50% of the total forested acreage in the state. African-Americans are 26% of Alabama population and they own 4% of the NIPF acreage (Rosson and Doolittle, 1987). Most of these African-American owned forestlands are located in the Alabama Black-Belt region.

III. African American and Forestland Ownership

1. Evolving disconnect between African-American and Land

African-Americans connection with forestland was evident throughout European exploration, settlement, and development of North America. As slaves, they used the forests as a place for worship as well as refuge, were involved in clearing woodlands for agriculture, and worked as loggers and producers of naval stores (Leatherberry, 1992). After the Civil war they became forest landowners and managers. However, the rise of Jim Crow, mechanization of agriculture and the industrialization America's mid-west brought the first changes to the African-American relationships with forests. Intimacy with the forest turned to fear because organizations opposed Black freedom such as the Klu Klux Klan (a white supremacist group), used the forest to mask their movement and as a venue for lynching. The mechanization of agriculture reduced the need for field labor and many African-Americans migrated from the South to manufacturing jobs in booming Northern and Western industrial cities. Educational opportunities, high paying jobs, and the availability of services and security in urban centers kept the South to North flow of young African-American migrants. In the meanwhile, African-Americans became more disconnected from their forests as they relied less and less on the land for their sustenance. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), the federal agency responsible for supporting and family farmers contributed to further disengaging African-Americans from the land. Most recently, the USDA admitted to its role in discriminating against Black farmers causing many of them financial distress and foreclosure of their property. They settled a class action suit by compensating claimants for their losses..

Over the past 150 years African-American experience with forests has gradually changed from intimacy to dissociation. Mitchell (2001) presents a number of theories for why this occurred. These ideas can be summarized as inequitable distribution of resources, social structural barriers, inadequate access to technical

assistance and the collective memories of Jim Crow. The USDA has coined a description of African-American landowners: *limited resources, traditionally underserved, minority landowners*.

2. The Challenges that this disconnect presents

In parts of the Deep South, limited resources traditionally underserved landowners still control pockets of private forestland. These are the residuals of African-American family and/or community holdings which were accumulated in the post-civil war/reconstruction (1867 to 1910) era when African-American owned over 15 million acres of land. This ownership and control of land has always strongly affected many aspects of rural life, especially in these poorer regions of the country. Gilbert, Wood and Sharp (2002) found that rural land ownership in minority communities is particularly important since it is often one of the few and largest forms of wealth. Land is also culturally significant to minority groups like American-Indians, Hispanics, and African-American. Despite this significance, recent studies indicated that African American landownership has declined at an alarming rate over the course of the second half of the twentieth century. According to statistics from the USDA, African-Americans owned about 15 million acres of land in 1910 but this has since declined to less than 2.3 million acres.

Brown (1973) listed seven reasons (tax and partition sales, mortgage foreclosures, failure to write wills, land ownership limitations on welfare recipients, eminent domain, and voluntary sales) for the rapid decline of black land. Beyond this, there are well documented evidence of how African-Americans were cheated out or driven off of their land through intimidation, discrimination, violence and even murder. These only compounded the problems other owners of private lands across the nation faced: pressure to develop the land, forest health problems, and catastrophic wildfires.

Several studies have demonstrated that African-American forestland owners have diverse ownership objectives and they generally manage their land-based resources less intensively than other non-industrial private forestland owners. Many African-American forest landowners pay little attention to their forest except when timber is harvested (Gan, Kolison and Tackie, 2003). Schelhas (2002) argues that the African American history of landownership, hunting, recreation, and access to extension services and programs is dramatically different from that of white landowners and that these differences impact natural resource management in important ways today. On the ground this is reflected in the fact that relatively few African-American landowners have formal forest management plans and they usually manage their land with little professional advice and minimal planning for the future. In reality, their culture of forest ownership is family centered rather than economically driven, their decisions about their forest land are often made in complex household and family contexts, and their values differ from the values of professional foresters.

African-American forest landowners generally own smaller acreage and small forested tracts that are not well served by contemporary logging operations. These capital-intensive logging operations are designed to harvest large tracts and are inefficient when harvesting tracts under 50 acres (Greene et al. 1997). This means that smaller tracts are not served by these logging operations. In effect, the majority of all

smaller forested lands have few, if any options, for harvesting and marketing their timber.

Current evidence also indicates a low participation in government conservation and forest management practices among farmers in general and limited resource minority landowners in particular. A number of studies (Bell et al. 1994; Molnar et al., 2000) have all reported a chronically low participation in government-sponsored programs among small and limited resource farmers. The fundamental problem is trust. Given the history of relationship between African-Americans and public agencies e.g. USDA, many are reluctant to participate in agency sponsored events (Mitchell, 2001)

Schelhas et al. (2003) reported that many of the issues facing forestry in the South involve common pool resources. For example, the Southern Pine Beetle, a significant threat to forest health does not recognize human property boundaries and can spill over from one land ownership area to another. In order to achieve the common good, forest health, Southern Pine Beetle management and control activities must find ways to work with landowners with diverse objectives and characteristics. In a similar way, other common good resources such as wildlife and biodiversity are of broad enough concern and benefit to society that they can only be addressed by involving large land areas with diverse private and public ownerships. While southern forest owners value their private property rights, they also care about the health of their forest, watershed benefits, wildlife, biodiversity, and other environmental issues which require collective efforts (Bliss et al 1997; Wicker 2002). Schelhas et al. (2003) went further by suggesting that there is a need to develop institutions for managing common pool resources across the mosaic of ownerships who control the southern forest.

Zabawa et al. (1990) reported that making an economic return from a small forest parcel may be critical to an owner's ability to retain the land while maintaining their economic well-being. Gan et al., (2003) argued that given the constraints African-American forest landowners face they must engage in the stewardship of their forests, but this effort requires trying different approaches. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives community-based forestry is one such attempt to use a non-traditional approach to helping African-American forestland owners..

IV. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives and its Strategy

1. Mission and History of the Federation

Community-based forestry has unique problems in Alabama because of individualism, exclusive rights in property ownership, and the anti-communist (anti-community) wave which created barriers to collective action in unincorporated areas. The Civil Rights movement was a major force for change in the USA especially in rural, predominantly African-American areas such as the Black-Belt. The right to vote, to attend desegregated schools, to hold public office etc. came as a result of federal initiatives and local collective actions to correct these historic wrongs. These rights had to be hard fought for. Some of the leading opponents to change were the scions of the plantation class who fought the federal government for their own rights just as they ferociously fought to suppress African Americans' right to vote. Local and state policemen, lawyers, judges, politicians, and civil servants effectively subverted most

attempts to integrate African-Americans into the mainstream and were only overcome by the force and weight of federal laws. The same cast of characters has also stridently opposed societal control of property use. They are equally ferocious in defense of their right to do whatever they want on their property and feel that everyone should be left alone to manage their property as they see fit. Therefore, Alabama has by far the lowest property taxes in the USA and every attempt to change the tax structure has been strenuously resisted. Similarly, Alabama is one of the few states which does not uphold "home rule": that is governance by a local elected body. In all unincorporated areas in the state (i.e. all rural areas) laws are made in the state legislature not at the county level. The plight of the African-American is made more acute because public agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) have a history of persecuting anti-communists. During and after the Civil Rights era the FBI, Internal Revenue Service (IRS) and other agencies were used to disrupt African-American organizations under the pretext that they were investigating un-American (communist) activities or tax-evasion. It was this arena that African-American organizations were started in the mid-twentieth century (1950s and 1960s).

The Federation Southern Cooperatives is one of the few surviving African-American organization with a commitment to collective action (cooperatives) and land-based development. The Federation of Southern Cooperatives was founded in 1967 to ensure that African-American and other historically underserved communities of the Black-Belt have the support and resources to own and make full use of their land, natural resources, and other business opportunities. From the beginning the Federation experienced some very tough times, fighting to overcome entrenched opposition and fighting to stand up for the rights of those who have been underserved for so long. During most of its existence the Federation has also faced active opposition by white political leaders who were concerned that the Federation represented a challenge to the status quo. A federal grant jury investigation was allowed to drag on for years during the 1970's, causing some funders to withdraw support and thereby slowing the growth of the organization. After a long and challenging battle the Federation was eventually able to clear its name and regain the support of private foundations as well as working relationships with federal and state agencies.

The Federation was established to work with African-American family farmers and landowners to enhance the quality of their lives and improve their communities. The Federation's mission is to: (1) Develop cooperatives and credit unions as a means for people to enhance the quality of their lives and improve their communities (2) Save, protect and expand the landholdings of Black family farmers in the South and (3) Develop, advocate and support public policies to benefit the Federation's membership of Black family farmers and low income rural communities. The Federation's main strength is its ability to work directly with people from the local communities to achieve their goals. Their approach is participatory and is based on the trust they have built with communities throughout the south.

The Federation has always viewed forest land as a very important asset for African American communities. However the benefits of forestland ownership have not and are not being fully realized by with minority and limited-resource landowners. According to Schelhas (2001), underserved landowners are in danger of being left behind in the changing economics of forest management and ownership in the

Southeast. They lack the knowledge and have not easily accessed available information and technical assistance to manage their forests and market the products and services that derive from it. Moreover, inappropriate forest management practices have deteriorated the natural resource base of some communities, resulting in loss of timber income and reduced recreational and environmental benefits. These conditions have exacerbated unemployment, poverty and problems of environmental degradation in many areas in the Southeast. The Federation's Black Belt Legacy Forestry Program (BBLFP) which is one of the 13 Ford Foundation funded community-based forestry demonstration projects in the U.S has focused on addressing these issues by exploring forestry-related opportunities that exist within the African-American community and other underserved communities in the Alabama Black Belt.

2. The Federation Strategy

BBLFP uses a mix of outreach, training, demonstrations, information dissemination, and one-on-one technical assistance to assist limited resource and African-American landowners in generating income options that both draw upon and preserve forest resources. BBLFP implemented the following 5 key activities:

- Education and Technical Assistance: Forestry education and training activities that focus on forest best management practices, the importance of a forest management plan and estate planning and heir property. The BBLFP technical assistance comes in the form of workshops, seminars, and demonstrations at the Federation's Rural Training and Research Center (RTRC) or in locations within the community. These educational events are also important venues for sharing information and building networks.
- Demonstration: Agroforestry demonstrations at both the RTRC and on private land to augment training activities with a functional "show and tell" dimension. Our diverse demonstration sites serve as training grounds to expose distressed landowners to a range of opportunities which can yield or enhance economic opportunities. These demonstration projects, which are maintained by local landowners with strong support from BBLFP staff, provide hands-on training and education to a broad base of landowners about agroforestry, and forest management practices with minimal financial risk.
- Cooperative Development: Cooperative development and marketing activities are centered on agroforestry opportunities, which can yield shorter-term benefits for economically distressed landowners. For example the BBLFP has assisted landowners that are raising goats in their forest to increase their bargaining power by facilitating the creation of a regional meat goat cooperative.
- Outreach: Direct outreach and technical assistance to landowners and farmers to understand and develop forest management plans and identify and access government programs and funding. The Federation's outreach work is centered on providing information and technical assistance on sustainable forestland management and land utilization alternatives.

- Youth Development: Traditionally, youth from underserved communities have left their communities to attend college or to get better paying jobs in urban communities and only returning when they retire. The main objective of the youth development program is to connect youth to the land, as well as to landowners who are successfully utilizing their land, and have become committed to preserving it.

V. Impacts of the Federation CBF Approach

The Federation has centered its community-based forestry program efforts on achieving a combination of short and long-term economic, social and ecological benefits. In this section we will focus on the impacts of the Federation's community-based forestry approach as related to education and technical assistance, coalition building and cooperative development.

1. Education and Technical Assistance

A critical aspect of landownership addressed by the Federation's CBF education and technical assistance program is heir-property, one of the most common causes of African American land loss. Heir-property is generally a piece of land inherited by all the descendants when original owner dies intestate i.e. without a will or other types of estate plans. In this situation, every descendent own a fractional, partial and undivided interest in the land and does not have a separate deeds to their ownership interest. As a result, the given parcel of land has many owners (a number of whom may reside in other states) and in most cases they have no real connection to the land. In these situations the challenge is to obtain approval from all the owners prior to initiating activities on the land e.g. to harvest trees or to apply to land assistance programs. The Federation has helped people to resolve heir-property problems by proving legal services and advice on estate management and drafting of wills.

The Civil Rights Action Team (1997) reported that minority and limited resource landowners have historically been underserved by extensions and assistance programs in the South. The Federation has consequently brokered education and technical assistance between forest landowners and natural resource professionals because it recognizes that the public and private benefits of the forests can be enhanced with assistance from natural resource professional. Historically African-American landowners who have woodlots as small as 5 to 10 acres have not received meaningful assistance in managing and developing their forest land holdings. The Federation has relentlessly brought state and federal agencies' awareness to the issues with which socially disadvantaged forest landowners have to grapple and has worked diligently to connect forest landowners with state and federal resource providers.

Timber marketing has always been very challenging for African-American forest landowners. Specific challenges for African-American forest landowners have to do with a history of abuse by loggers and timber brokers. Unscrupulous operators have been known to pay African American forest landowners a small fraction of the value of their timber or defrauded these owners of their property. These negative experiences

have made many African-American landowners reluctant to explore the revenue potential of their land. In response, the Federation has organized workshops to educate landowners on how to successfully market their timber and has provided direct technical assistance in developing timber sale contracts. In this process, landowners have come together and learn from each other by sharing their positive and negatives experiences.

2. Coalition Building

From the time the Federation started working on community-based forestry, they saw the need and potential for bringing together a coalition of players to address African-American forest landowners' issues. Such dialogue does not come naturally to many rural communities, where political and economic differences have historically worked against productive conversations about forest management. In this initiative the Federation has brought NGOs, state and federal agencies and many university partners to work together to assist African-American landowners. In this process additional resources and expertise were brought into the communities.

In addition to building coalition with partners outside the community, the Federation has also worked to bring together landowners within the community. For example in Alabama, among the African-American community, land loss is frequent and absentee landowners are plentiful. Community members and families are very often very worried about what's happening to their forest and to the community. The Federation's CBF initiative has provided a forum to bring forest landowners together and facilitate relationship building to address their concerns. BBLFP has helped forestland owners discover new possibilities, see the actual and potential economic, social, and environmental benefits of the forest and how to work together toward common goals.

3. Cooperative Development

Social research around the world that has devoted considerable attention to social network and structures has indicated that they can both enable or inhibit sustainable forest management and equitable forest benefits (Gibdon, McKean and Ostrom 2000). Nagubadi et al. (1996) in an investigation of program participation behavior of non-industrial forest landowners in Indiana, observed that among many factors, membership in forestry organizations significantly influence landowners' program participation and actions on their land. Through cooperative and other organizational development the Federation has encouraged landowners to form or join social networks to address their common needs. For example, only a small percentage of family forest owners have written management plans or make use of professional foresters. By forming forest landowner groups and by fostering peer-extension the Federation has been able to successfully address this gap that has persisted for a long time just because professional foresters has emphasized timber management and neglected landowners with multiple and diverse objectives. In the same way, the Federation has encouraged African-American landowners' involvement in the Alabama TREASURE Forest Association and Alabama Forestry Commission's minority Advisory Council. Both of these groups have provided landowners with an opportunity to network and learn from their peers as well as promote their common interests and needs.

VI. Lessons-Learned

The Federation has actively served and worked with minority and limited resource landowners in the Alabama Black-Belt and in surrounding communities for over forty years. As landowners become aware of the importance of land ownership, and the prevalence of land loss, many landowners are requesting assistance that most states and federal agencies are unable to provide because of their limited and diminishing outreach and technical assistance budgets. The Federation has seized this opportunity to implement the CBF approaches to encourage and engage African-American forest landowners in the stewardship of their natural resources to improve their livelihood and communities. In this process, the Federation was able to draw and document many lessons-learned that highlight what worked well, the mistakes, as well as particular patterns and trends identified.

Despite all the efforts, the Federation realized that CBF's credibility among private and public land managers and agencies remains very low in Alabama and many agencies continue to focus on addressing individual large landowners' issues instead of focusing on the collective needs of small tract holders.

Another challenge is inherent in the process of collaboration. While the benefits of collaborative efforts are in part the result of organizational differences, creating a workable partnership between NGO's, academics, and state and federal agencies is fraught with challenges. Community based groups like the Federation, are involved in frontline activities such as face-to-face problem solving while academics are more theoretically oriented. In building these partnerships, the Federation has persistently asked the question "what is the community getting out of the process?" and this has kept our partners focused on how the community benefits.

For many of communities, especially those divested by industry and agencies, every small change is significant. However, in spite of the Federation's efforts, a large number of landowners are still not receiving any sort of assistance in managing their land. A key question is: How do we scale-up CBF efforts to achieve region wide impacts? The Federation's limited capacity, due in part to funding volatility and small staff numbers, has often limited its CBF efforts. This situation has very often made it very difficult to attract, recruit and retain skilled and experienced people to work in rural areas.

The Federation has also recognized some challenges it needs to address if it is to continue and succeed as an organization. For example, the Federation has a very stable executive staff that has been involved with the organization from the beginning. It is a very strong, bonded and experienced group of people, who have been together through all the ups and downs over the years and have grown together as an organization. Although this is of great value to the organization, as retirement approaches, the need to hire and train a new group of leaders is essential for the future success of the organization.

This initiative was a great experience but it was too short-term to determine if the results are either long-lasting for those directly involved or if there is an increased

involvement of others who were encouraged by seeing the benefits to those directly involved.

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