

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program

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Abstract—African-American rural landholdings have declined precipitously over the past century, and heirs' property is believed to be a significant factor in this decline. Over the same time period, under-participation in sustainable forest management has resulted in limited economic returns from land. The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program was launched in 2012 to address these two issues through an integrated, community-based program of legal and forestry outreach and assistance. Family land has important heritage value to African-American landowners, and many want future generations to retain it. We find that addressing the issues of heirs' property and promoting forestry engagement work synergistically in this program. In particular, the potential economic returns of sustainable forest management can motivate families to come together to resolve heirs' property and work toward future land ownership strategies that are both economically productive and supportive of family legacies.

INTRODUCTION

African-American rural landholdings have declined precipitously over the past century due to a number of factors including outmigration; voluntary sales; foreclosures; lack of access to capital and credit; illegal takings; purposeful trickery and withholding of legal information; actual or threatened violence; and various forms of racism and discrimination by individuals, organizations, and government agencies (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Gilbert et al. 2002, Zabawa 1991, Zabawa et al. 1990). The rate of African-American land loss has far exceeded losses for other racial and ethnic groups since the turn of the 20th century (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Gilbert et al. 2002, Gordon et al. 2013). One of the primary contributors to African-American land loss is believed to be the prevalence of “heirs' property” among rural, Black populations (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Dyer et al. 2009, Zabawa 1991). Heirs' property or “tenancy-in-common” is inherited land passed on intestate, without clear title, typically to family members.

Over this same time period, limited engagement in forest management has resulted in reduced returns from land and decreased land value for African Americans. Concerns about African-American participation in forest

management have been voiced for at least 3 decades. Hilliard-Clark and Chesney's (1985) study of two North Carolina counties found no Black forest owners who had received technical assistance from State or local forestry agencies. Results also showed that heirs' property limited forestry activities for many, and there was a widespread lack of knowledge about and perception of bias in program administration. Many of these same issues persist today. Recent research in Mississippi (Gordon et al. 2013) found that African-American forest owners reported high levels of distrust of government agency staff, issues of heirs' property and land loss, and limited engagement with forestry professionals. Yet, studies also indicate that African Americans have strong attachments to the land and interest in managing forest lands (Gordon et al. 2013, Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985, Schelhas et al. 2012). Forestry is a productive land use appropriate for many landowners who are employed off the land or retired; however, lack of familiarity and heirs' property often hinder substantial African-American engagement in forestry. The persistence and linkages of these two issues provide a compelling reason to increase outreach to African-American forest owners and to provide assistance with heirs' property and sustainable forest management.

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The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR) was launched in 2012 by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities, in partnership with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and Forest Service. The SFLR is a 6-year program to test the potential of sustainable forestry practices to help stabilize African-American land ownership, increase forest health, and build economic assets in the southern Black Belt region. The program began with 30-month pilot projects initiated with community-based partner organizations¹ working in multi-county Black Belt² regions in northeastern North Carolina, coastal counties of South Carolina, and west-central Alabama. The SFLR entered a second phase in 2015 and 2016, when the original projects in three States were extended for 3 more years and new projects were added in Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Virginia. The SFLR seeks to stabilize ownership and increase the economic value of land by resolving ownership issues and increasing the use of sustainable forest management. It has provided financial and program support to community-based projects, with each project designed to build and coordinate a system of support for African-American landowners involving nonprofits, academic institutions, for-profit service companies, and government agencies. The primary activities of the projects have been providing information and legal assistance for resolving heirs' property issues and estate planning, raising awareness and educating landowners about forestry, and building linkages among landowners and forestry assistance providers. The program also included a research component to establish baseline conditions for the pilot regions in order to understand current issues and measure progress, guide program activities, and add to the scholarly and applied literature on African-American forest owners.

BACKGROUND ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN LAND OWNERSHIP AND FOREST MANAGEMENT

Forest management and heirs' property are intertwined for African-American landowners in complex ways. The prevalence of heirs' property among rural, Black populations is linked to both low productivity of land and land loss (Gordon et al. 2013, Hitchner et al. 2017). Heirs' property is inherited land that is held in common by individual shareholders who each own a fractional interest in the entire property, which remains in a deceased owner's name (Dyer and Bailey 2008). Shared ownership in the form of heirs' property often makes it difficult to productively use land and often results in a diminution of wealth for affected families (Dyer and Bailey 2008).

The benefits of any individual shareholder investments in the property are shared by all owners, reducing the incentive for any one individual to invest. Furthermore, heirs' property owners may be restricted by other heirs' property owners from many land use and improvement options, which could include harvesting standing timber or planting trees for future harvests, accessing credit from banks for investments in the property, and participating in various land improvement programs offered by Federal or State governments (Dyer and Bailey 2008, Dyer et al. 2009). While such activities are not impossible for heirs' property owners, they generally require that all heirs agree on a plan and/or legally designate an individual or group as responsible for management. Such agreement may be very difficult when there is a large number of geographically dispersed heirs who have different knowledge levels of the land and diverging interests in its future, as is often the case when heirs' property has been passed down through several generations. Many family-held parcels of land are also lost due to delinquency in paying property taxes, often because of the complexity of agreeing to an equitable payment distribution or organizing a number of heirs, many of whom do not live on the land or have a direct interest in maintaining it, to pay taxes on time (Reid 2003, Rivers 2006). As small family farms have declined, heirs' property land often is covered in unmanaged second-growth forest (Schelhas et al. 2017a).

In the 13 southern States, there are 4.6 million private forest owners holding 87.0 percent of the forest land, of which family forest owners constitute 4.5 million owners holding 57.5 percent of the forest land (Butler et al. 2016). While family forest owners have been extensively studied, there have been few regional studies of African-American forest owners. Our primary understanding of how African-American forest owners and ownerships differ from White forest owners and ownerships comes from Forest Service studies of non-industrial private or family forest owners. Birch et al. (1982) found that, in 1978, African Americans comprised 8.5 percent of family forest landowners and held 4.7 percent of the family forest lands. Recent data from the Forest Service's National Woodland Owner Survey (Butler et al. 2016) showed that African Americans comprised 4.6 percent of family forest landowners and held 1.7 percent of the family forest land. Although these surveys are related, methodological changes over time limit comparability, and the relatively small percentage of African-American forest landowners makes it difficult to examine statistically differences among forest landowner characteristics, values, and behaviors by race. In spite of the relatively small percentages of ownership and forest

¹ Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, SC; The Roanoke Center, NC; and Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN) and Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, AL.

² Wimberley and Morris (1997: 2) define the Black Belt as a "social and demographic crescent of southern geography containing a concentration of black people."

land held by African Americans, this land has important social, economic, cultural, and political consequences for rural minority communities (Gilbert et al. 2002).

More focused, local studies on African-American forest landowners have found African-American forest owners to be similar to the broader population of family forest owners in that they have diverse ownership objectives and occupations, while differing in tending to have smaller tracts of land and to either not engage in forest management or to manage land less intensively than the broader forest owner population (Gan et al. 2003). They have also been found to be generally unaware of or unlikely to use assistance programs, and they have faced more constraints than their White counterparts (Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009). Recommended strategies for extension and outreach personnel to address these concerns have included creating awareness of the benefits of forest management, addressing obstacles (such as distrust and inability to afford cost sharing), increasing participation in financial assistance programs, increasing technical assistance in forest management, and assisting with timber sales (Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003, Guffey et al. 2009, Schelhas et al. 2012).

Several studies have examined participation in conservation assistance programs and forest management practices. Gordon et al. (2013) discuss African-American landowner relationships and distrust with forestry assistance providers, including USDA and county forestry committees. Gan et al. (2005) analyzed participation in conservation programs and found that neither White nor non-White landowners had high participation rates in conservation programs. White landowners were more likely to participate in some programs [e.g., Conservation Reserve Program (CRP)] and enrolled more acres in the CRP and FIP (Forestry Incentives Program). In comparison, non-Whites were more likely to be dissatisfied with program participation and less likely to be able to afford the cost share. Analyzing the same dataset, Onianwa et al. (2004) found that membership in a conservation organization was a significant indicator of participation in agricultural cost-share programs. Onianwa et al. (1999) also found that non-Whites had fewer acres enrolled in the CRP, but there was no significant difference among White and non-White landowners in plans to retain trees after the contract period. Studying timber harvesting and use of assistance, Gan and Kebede (2005) found that African Americans with large tracts, like White owners with large tracts, were more likely to harvest timber. However, African-American farmers were less likely to harvest timber than their White counterparts, and the existence of forest management plans was an important predictor of African-American owners seeking technical and financial assistance. Gordon et al. (2013) note that the multiple owners of heirs' property make forest

management practices such as thinning, harvesting, and prescribed burning difficult because these activities require proof of ownership and a contract signed by each owner.

There have been a number of efforts to develop extension and outreach programs for underserved and African-American forest landowners to address the issues described above (Hughes et al. 2005). The community-based forestry approach employed by the Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund went beyond technical assistance for individual landowners to also include networking, coalition-building, and cooperative development with the goals of increasing land retention, improving access to public and private services, and implementing land-based income-earning strategies (Diop and Fraser 2009). Alabama A&M University and the Forest Service developed community-based workshops designed to build community capacity and networks, stimulate land management, and build connections among landowners and technical personnel (Hamilton et al. 2007). The Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN) in Alabama facilitated access of African-American landowners to NRCS cost-share programs, helping to overcome a longstanding disconnect (Christian et al. 2013).

In summary, there is evidence of declining African-American land ownership and low participation in forest management, and these show strong links to heirs' property. Recent outreach efforts have focused on community-based programs to address these issues. The community-based SFLR represents an intensive, multi-year effort to simultaneously address land ownership issues and promote sustainable forest management across the southern Black Belt region. The size and comprehensiveness of this program provide an opportunity to gain insights that can be useful for addressing heirs' property more broadly. In this paper, we summarize research associated with the SFLR, including our results on land ownership and the meaning of the land, historical and current participation in forestry, and the role of forestry in addressing heirs' property. More details can be found in Hitchner et al. (2017) and Schelhas et al. (2017a, 2017b, 2018).

METHODS AND STUDY SITES

In 2014, near the start of the SFLR, we conducted baseline research to understand the characteristics, land ownership situation, and forest management involvement of landowners in the three pilot project sites—North Carolina, South Carolina, and Alabama. Our research approach was inspired by interdisciplinary rapid appraisal techniques developed in association with international agriculture and agroforestry development programs. This approach helps research teams to gain a broad understanding of complex social and agricultural systems in a short period of time as a precursor to conservation and development projects (Russell and Harshbarger 2003).

Accordingly, we utilized an interdisciplinary research team working on the ground for a period of 3 weeks in each of three States and conducted qualitative interviews sampled at the household and/or family level (i.e., landowners). The research team consisted of social scientists and foresters to facilitate simultaneous engagement with the social and forest conditions within which African-American landowners operate.

We chose family land ownership as the unit of analysis because heirs' property land is often owned at the family level. Interviews were arranged with one member of each family landowning group, and that member was asked to invite other members to be present, including those residing in other households and of different generations. A purposive sample of 20 landowners was assembled by the partner organization in each of the three States. Landowners with 10 or more acres of land were selected and were evenly distributed between core participants in the pilot projects and non-participants. Core participants were from families already engaged in the pilot projects, which had begun about 10 months before the research was undertaken. Non-participating families were identified by project foresters through extension agents and other community contacts. The purposive sample was intended to represent the diversity of family land ownerships present in the project sites, and the samples were chosen to represent diversity in parcel size, forest conditions, gender, income, employment status and occupation, management objectives, and experience with forestry.

The social science team conducted a lengthy interview with each of the 60 landowning families. The interviews ranged from 2 to 4 hours and were conducted in the families' homes, land, or nearby community centers. Interviews were often followed by property visits and/or less formal conversations. Landowners were encouraged to have multiple family members present for the interviews in person or by phone. We believed that including absentee landowners in our sample was important, and several interviews of absentee landowners residing in other States were conducted entirely by phone. The research team was introduced by pilot project foresters at the beginning of each interview. A forester also visited each property to conduct a rapid assessment of forest conditions.

The social science interviews were conducted conversationally using a semi-structured interview guide (see Schelhas et al. 2017b). The interview guide covered: (1) land and forest characteristics (e.g., acreage held, land uses, forest conditions); (2) land and forest owner characteristics (e.g., demographics); (3) present and past land and forest management practices and forest conditions; (4) early and recent experiences, values, and attitudes related to land and forests; (5) forms of ownership and heirs' property, tax status, and informal land

allocations; (6) social relationships relating to forestry and membership in forestry organizations; (7) future interests and plans for family land and forests; and (8) interest in working with other forest owners, for example, to market timber.

In 2016 and 2017, we conducted followup research focusing on successful engagement in forestry in the same pilot project sites. For this research, we developed a qualitative interview guide in consultation with SFLR personnel that focused on both broad questions and specific issues, including: (1) how African-American landowners had become engaged in the SFLR projects; (2) types and assessments of relationships that landowners had formed with forestry professionals and markets (including consulting foresters, agency foresters, and timber buyers/forest product industries); (3) types and assessments of systems that had been developed for forest landowners to obtain necessary technical and financial assistance; (4) whether and how landowners with smaller tracts and lower quality timber stands had been able to obtain services and access markets; (5) types of timber and nontimber forest products African-American forest owners had sold; (6) specific new ideas and arrangements that had emerged during the course of the SFLR projects and potential for replication; and (7) accessibility and benefits of forest owner organizations and certification for African-American forest owners as they become engaged in forestry.

We then worked with project foresters to identify landowners and forestry professionals to be interviewed, developing a purposive sample focused primarily on those involved in new and innovative relationships but also including some landowners who had challenges or difficult experiences. We interviewed pilot project program foresters, program collaborators, landowners, and forestry professionals. We began with in-person interviews, but followed up by phone when in-person interviews could not be arranged. A total of 33 interviews, ranging from 1 to 2 hours, were conducted with a broad range of individuals. We emphasized successful landowners and ones facing enduring obstacles (nine in Alabama, five in North Carolina, and six in South Carolina). In each State, we also interviewed one or more individuals in each of the categories: project foresters, State forestry agency employees, and NRCS employees. We also interviewed two cooperative extension agents (South Carolina and North Carolina), one forest industry employee (South Carolina), one private forestry consultant (Alabama), and one logger (South Carolina). Total interviews by State were 13 for Alabama, 8 for North Carolina, and 12 for South Carolina. As before, we analyzed data from these interviews using NVivo software, beginning with our key themes but also identifying and exploring new themes as they emerged.

RESULTS

Landowners and Land Ownership

Nearly two-thirds of the primary interviewees were between 51 and 70 years old, and only five were under 50 (table 1). Interviewees tended to be highly educated (nearly 60 percent had advanced college degrees, compared to 23 percent of forest owners Southwide.³ Many were or had been employed in professional occupations (particularly teaching and educational administration), although 60 percent of the interviewees were retired (table 1). However, incomes were generally modest (table 1)—perhaps because many interviewees were retired public school employees. All interviewees were African-American, and the gender split was nearly equal (table 1). In sum, interviewees tended to be older, more highly educated, slightly less wealthy, and more likely to be retired than the larger population of family forest owners in the U.S. South (Butler et al. 2016). Landholding sizes were modest but appropriate for forestry, with the majority between 21 and 100 acres (table 2). About 40 percent faced heirs' property issues on some or all of their land, while 60 percent reported having a title to their land (sometimes jointly with other family members) (table 2). More than two-thirds of the respondents had inherited land, and about one-fifth had purchased all or some of their land (table 2). A number of retirees had lived and worked in other parts of the country (typically New York for South Carolina interviewees; Washington, DC, for North Carolina interviewees; and often Chicago and Detroit for Alabama interviewees). Several had been born in northern cities but maintained ties to family land. Many interviewees were now living on family land that they had some association with when growing up, either living there or visiting as children. Notably, only 12 percent reported making a profit from their land, while the remainder incurred net costs (generally taxes) to maintain their landholdings (>50 percent) or were just breaking even (25 percent) (table 2).

Land Ownership Values and Status

We found family land to be very important across generations, especially for land obtained by ancestors during times of slavery and Reconstruction, and an intense desire for future generations to retain family land. Eighty percent of the interviewees had at least some inherited land, and the depth and strength of attachment to family land were notable. Interviewees told stories of childhood experiences on the land, often about working on the family farm but also enjoying the freedom of rural life in fields, forests, and streams. These early experiences played a key role in forming identity and character among many interviewees, which led to strong attachments to family land and the memories of ancestors and experiences associated with them.

Table 1—Demographic characteristics of principal interviewee of African-American families owning ≥10 acres of land (n=60)

Demographic	Number	Percent
Age (in years)		
<50 ^a	5	8.3
51–70	40	66.7
>70	15	25.0
Gender		
Male	21	35.0
Female	23	38.3
Couple	16	26.7
Education (primary interviewee)		
High school ^b	2	3.3
Some college	14	23.3
Bachelors	7	11.7
Post graduate	35	58.3
No response	2	3.3
Employment		
Part-time employed	3	5.0
Full-time employed	20	33.3
Retired	37	61.7
Income		
<\$25,000	8	13.3
\$25,000–\$50,000	8	13.3
\$50,000–\$100,000	13	21.7
\$100,000–\$250,000	5	8.3
>\$250,000	3	5.0
No response	23	38.3

^a Four additional young people (age <20) attended interviews with family members.

^b Three parents in multi-generation interviews had less than a high school education.

Rooted in memories, land was often viewed as an intergenerational family resource. People acknowledged and sought to honor the hard work their ancestors had undertaken to buy and hold on to land during times when this was difficult for African Americans in the U.S. South. The message to “never sell the land” had often been passed down for generations and was repeated to upcoming generations. Landowners were often trying to resolve land ownership issues and bring the land under management for the benefit of future generations as well as for themselves. For many families, there was an unwritten rule that if you needed to sell family land, you sold it to another family member. And many family members were prepared to buy

³ African-American and White landowners in the Southern United States are very similar in education levels (Butler et al. 2016).

Table 2—Characteristics, ownership, and productivity of family land ownerships ≥ 10 acres (n=60)

	Number	Percent
Acres held		
<20	8	13.3
21–50	15	25.0
51–100	16	26.7
101–500	21	35.0
Tenure		
Title	36	60.0
Heirs' property	16	26.7
Both ^a	8	13.3
How land was obtained		
Purchase	11	18.3
Inherit	39	65.0
Combination	9	15.0
No response	1	1.7
Productivity		
Makes money	7	11.7
Costs money	32	53.3
About even	15	25.0
No response	6	10.0

^a Some families had parcels of both titled land and heirs' property.

any such land, even if it was financially difficult, in order to keep it in the family. Landowners reported efforts, with varying degrees of success, to involve future generations with the land and reinforce the importance of keeping family land, although urban jobs and lifestyles at times made this difficult.

The difficulties of managing land that was heirs' property, as well as the difficulties of resolving ownership issues, were widely acknowledged. The number of owners of individual heirs' property parcels was at times large; the highest reported number was "around 200 co-owners," although the number involved in decision making was typically in the single digits because there were generally designated representatives for each family line. Resolving heirs' property begins with constructing a family tree and contacting all family members and generally requires the assistance of an attorney. While several interviewees had resolved ownership issues prior to the pilot projects, it was more common for them to be planning or just beginning to work with pilot project attorneys. The acquisition of signatures of all co-owners of heirs' property is legally required for many forestry activities, which makes timber sales difficult and participation in government assistance

programs typically not possible for heirs' property owners. Equitable payment of property taxes by all heirs was often an issue; frequently heirs who live on the land or have been paying property taxes feel more entitled than other heirs to make land management decisions, although the entire property is actually held in common by all heirs. This can create discord and inhibit agreement about a path forward.

Forest Management

The landowners we interviewed in 2014 generally had very limited experience with forest management (table 3). The history of family land use was generally farming, often a style of small-scale family farming that is no longer viable. Cutting firewood for home heating and selling timber were common activities, with about half of interviewees having sold timber at some point. The most common strategy for managing forest lands in the past was allowing them to naturally regenerate, investing little or nothing in management, and then harvesting when cash was needed or when approached by a timber buyer. Only about 27 percent of landowners indicated that trees had been planted on their land, reducing future timber yields. Interviewees often felt that they or their parents had not been paid a fair price for their timber in the past. Fire is an important management tool for southern pine forests, yet very few study participants had formally engaged in prescribed burning (13 percent reported doing some burning). Concerns about past shortfalls from timber sales

Table 3—Experience of family land owners (≥ 10 acres) with forest management activities and assistance programs (n=60)

	Number	Percent
Activities		
Tree planting (yes)	16	26.7
Tree planting (no)	44	73.3
Burning (yes)	8	13.3
Burning (no)	52	86.7
Thin or harvest (yes)	31	51.7
Thin or harvest (no)	29	48.3
Use of cost share		
Yes (before program)	9	15.0
Yes (after program began)	9	15.0
Applied (after program began)	1	1.7
No	41	68.3
Forest management plan		
Yes (before program)	7	11.7
Yes (after program began)	7	11.7
In process	13	21.7
No	33	55.0

and desires to obtain greater returns in the future were widespread, motivating people to learn more and share experiences about forest management.

Most landowners had not participated in any government assistance programs⁴ prior to beginning to work with the pilot project [15 percent had participated prior to the program, and 15 percent since the program started (table 3)]. Many indicated that they had little awareness of these programs. There were, however, several interviewees who had participated in some part of an assistance program at some point themselves or had witnessed their parents' participation in one. Several had made efforts of their own to become involved in programs, often with difficulties and frustration, but showing high levels of determination and persistence. A number of landowners had recently become interested in applying through the SFLR program, and many were applying or preparing to apply.

Only 12 percent of landowners interviewed had a written forest management plan prior to the advent of the pilot project (table 3). However, an additional 12 percent had recently obtained a management plan working with the SFLR, and 22 percent were in some stage of obtaining one. Experiences with forestry information prior to the initiation of the pilot project varied widely. Several people indicated that they had sought help from relatives employed in logging or forest products businesses, but that they often did not receive the information that they needed. Because of labor specialization in the industry, it appears that even contacts working on logging crews or at mills were rarely able to provide all the information that landowners needed. Several landowners previously had trusted sources of forestry advice and other information, either through extension agents or university personnel, but these relationships tended to be with one specific trusted individual and were easily lost with transfers or retirements. For the most part, awareness of and participation in landowner organizations was very limited. Only three landowners reported belonging to one, and many knew little about them; as one said, "I never heard about there being ones we could join." If landowner organizations were mentioned, it was usually the community-based organization carrying out the pilot project.

Forestry experience was rare, and many landowners felt that they and their families had been kept away from information and programs and therefore lagged behind other landowners. For many owners, the SFLR was their first opportunity to become fully involved in forest management. The forestry program was seen as key to involving the larger African-American community with

the land and retaining land for future generations. Many landowners were just beginning to focus on their land and its management after years of inattention. The responses of these landowners revealed deliberate processes of information gathering, family discussions, and decision making that highlight the fact that people are making long-term decisions about a significant economic asset and place with meaningful ties to family history. Although the program was inspiring them to undertake this effort and helping them through this process, our observations suggested that progress takes time and requires sustained assistance as people need to learn about their options for land management, attempt to come to family agreement, learn more about the legal implications of customary land ownership patterns, become educated about forest management and the forest industry, decide which providers to trust, fulfill requirements for applications for assistance from various State and Federal programs, and develop and implement management plans.

Synergies Between Forestry and Heirs' Property

Obtaining clear title allows full participation in timber markets and government programs to improve and manage forests, and it also sets up a management structure that facilitates management and retention of land. In this process, landowners can choose to partition and manage land individually or to manage it collectively with a legal mechanism such as a trust or limited liability company (LLC). As noted above, family land often has deep meaning for family members; it is a tangible symbol of the hard work of ancestors, and both family history in the form of old home sites and cemeteries and personal childhood memories are embedded in these landscapes. The successes of the SFLR are the result of a multi-pronged approach to assisting families by simultaneously offering legal advice, providing genealogy assistance and family mediation services, educating family members about the benefits of establishing sustainable forestry practices on their land, and contributing technical assistance by local foresters (Schelhas et al. 2018). Efforts to simultaneously address heirs' property and forest management assistance were mutually reinforcing, with each facilitating the other.

The prospect of income generation from forestry activities, after title clearance, was often a great motivator for cooperation among family members. These dual activities demonstrate the synergies between resolving heirs' property issues and implementing sustainable forest management. Our 2016 and 2017 research shows that the prospect of turning land ownership from a liability to an asset can spur family members to reach out to other relatives and help them work together toward a common goal (Hitchner et al. 2017). In cases of heirs' property, one

⁴Forest management assistance programs play an important role for family forest owners by assisting with the substantial cost of establishing plantations that take several decades to provide significant economic returns.

or several co-owners often begin the process of resolution based on their more direct experience with and attachment to the land (Schelhas et al. 2018). Sometimes these family members have taken the initial steps of developing a forest management plan with assistance from Federal and State programs (Schelhas et al. 2018). In these cases, the more engaged individuals can bring a plan, and sometimes even an estimate of potential returns, to the family and thereby stimulate their interest and guide discussions. There are many differences among families, and some have a more difficult time coming to agreement than others. Yet, we have also observed that the geographical concentration of effort at each SFLR site results in landowners who achieve success more quickly because they serve as models and inspiration for their neighbors; these individuals also become actively engaged in peer-to-peer outreach to encourage and assist other families (Schelhas et al. 2018). The SFLR addresses factors that have led to heirs' property and limited engagement in forestry, while also helping families plan for a future that preserves important family legacies, increases families' engagement with land and forests, and produces multiple forest benefits such as income, recreation, wildlife, aesthetics, and hunting.

CONCLUSION

The SFLR has had considerable success. As of December 2017, 813 African-American landowners had engaged with the program. These landowners have a total of 65,447 acres (with an average landholding of 81 acres and a median of 40 acres), through eight projects in seven States. Specific outcomes attained include forest management planning; access to programs, loans, and financing; implementation of diverse forestry practices (e.g., thinning, harvest, site preparation, reforestation); improved marketing of forest products and other economic land uses (e.g., hunting leases); and education about heirs' property and legal assistance with its resolution through obtaining clear land titles. The research component of this project contributed to a more nuanced understanding of specific issues and challenges that African-American families face regarding land ownership. Baseline research provided a more precise demographic characterization of landowners (e.g., age, employment status, acreage owned); open-ended data on sentimental and cultural attachments to land, as well as current and past land management strategies; and information on landowner engagement with forestry practices and governmental land assistance programs (Schelhas et al. 2017a, 2017b). Followup research after about 4 years of program operation identified factors that were leading to success, such as an integrated program including integrated forestry and land ownership assistance, partnerships among agencies and organizations, and establishment of community networks (Schelhas et al. 2018).

In this paper we discuss how forestry outreach has played a key role in bringing attention to family land and helping families come together to resolve heirs' property conundrums. This process promises to increase the economic value of and income from the land, and this shift can reduce friction within families as well as overcome practical obstacles to retaining family land that is culturally important. The issue of heirs' property is pronounced among African-American landowners in the rural South, but it is by no means limited to them. It likely occurs wherever people have had limited access to and trust in the legal systems, which may include poor Whites in Appalachia, Hispanic populations in Texas and the Southwest, Native Americans where tribal common lands were allocated to individual families as a result of the Dawes Act and other allotment programs, and members of many of the same social groups who have migrated to urban areas. While the lessons of the SFLR are clearly directly relevant to rural forest land ownership, we believe that they also provide a larger lesson. Linking legal assistance for resolution of heirs' property to efforts to increase engagement with and productivity of land and property can stimulate a common future interest in land within families that both complements its heritage value and provides a stimulus for families to come together in new ways.

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