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Gatekeepers, Shareholders, and Evangelists: Expanding Communication Networks of African American Forest Landowners in North Carolina

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ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR) was launched in 2012 to increase adoption of sustainable forestry practices among African American landowners in the southeastern United States to prevent land loss, increase forest health, and build economic assets. One of its main goals was to build communication networks through which African American landowners could obtain and share information about forestry practices and landowner assistance programs independent of public agencies. To measure and examine the growth of these communication networks over a three-year period (2014–2017), we conducted 87 interviews with landowners (24 of whom were interviewed multiple times), SFLR personnel, and Federal and State staff members in North Carolina. We used complementary methods of data gathering and analysis, including social network analysis and qualitative analysis. Our results showed expanding communication networks will be sustained independently of the program over time, although there is still a heavy reliance on program personnel.

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African American landowners; mixed-method approach; qualitative analysis; social network analysis; sustainable forestry

Introduction

African American landowners face an interrelated suite of constraints affecting their active involvement in forestry (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985; Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2003; Dwivedi, Jagadish, and Schelhas 2016; Hitchner, Schelhas, and Johnson Gaither 2017; Schelhas et al. 2017a). These include a long history of discrimination, exclusion from landowner assistance programs, lack of capital to participate in cost-share programs, shortage of time due to work and family obligations, and a deep distrust of governmental institutions, independent loggers, and others who have historically cheated them in forestry transactions (Gordon, Barton, and Adams 2013). Further, a variety of factors have led to widespread loss of land among rural African Americans in the rural southern United States over the past century, including inability to pay property taxes, deception or outright theft by outside interests, and insecure land title (Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi 1990; Zabawa 1991; Wood and Gilbert 2000; Gilbert,

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Sharp, and Felin 2002). The prevalence of heirs' property or land passed on through generations without a will (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Dyer, Bailey, and Tran 2009; Gordon, Barton, and Adams 2013), a common landholding arrangement within African American families, restricts owners' ability to conduct forest management activities that require signed consent of all landowners (Hitchner, Schelhas, and Johnson Gaither 2017, Schelhas et al. 2017b). An integrated approach that simultaneously addresses these intertwined historical, cultural, social, and political factors is vital for increasing opportunities for African American landowners to achieve forest management objectives.

Several efforts to develop extension and community-based landowner outreach programs have been specifically designed to facilitate access of minority landowners to forestry information and federally funded cost-share programs (Gan et al. 2005; Hughes et al. 2005; Hamilton, Fraser, and Schelhas 2007; Diop and Fraser 2009; Christian et al. 2013; Dwivedi, Jagadish, and Schelhas 2016; Schelhas et al. 2017a), helping to overcome a long-standing disconnect between minorities and government programs and institutions. Building on the legacy of these programs, in 2012 the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (hereafter called "the Endowment"), in partnership with the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service, launched the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR), a pilot project (which has since expanded to include other locations and more landowners across the U.S. South) to help African American landowners in northeastern North Carolina, coastal South Carolina, and west-central Alabama adopt sustainable forestry practices to prevent land loss, increase forest health, and build economic assets. The mechanisms employed to reach these goals included workshops on estate planning and forest management activities, legal assistance in clearing land title, and consultations with natural resource and forest professionals to develop and implement forest management plans.

One of the main goals of the SFLR was to create support systems for African American forest landowners by bringing together non-profit organizations, academic institutions, for-profit service companies, and governmental agencies in order to help landowners gain clear title, create estate plans, obtain forestry services, and access markets for forest products. Developers of the program aimed to create communication networks among landowners and forestry professionals so that informed landowners could share information and reach out to other landowners in need of legal and technical forestry assistance. It was the hope of program developers that the networks created would outlast the funding of the program itself, thereby increasing the engagement of southern African American landowners in forestry in a self-sufficient manner.

Program developers envisioned a research component of the program that would involve qualitative data collected by social scientists and result in contributions to the scientific literature on forest management among African American landowners. To meet this goal, the program developers reached out to authors of this paper, who advised in program development and worked collaboratively with project personnel and partner organizations in the research design. Together, they developed specific research objectives, which included monitoring and demonstrating the growth of communication networks and the level of increase of forest management activities of SFLR participants over the course of three years (2014–2017). In addition, they documented challenges

faced by interviewees regarding forest management and assessed the impact of the SFLR program.

Previous studies have examined communication networks and peer exchange of forestry information among private forest landowners using social network analysis (SNA), though to the best of our knowledge, none have applied it to African American forest landowners in the southeastern United States (Rickenbach 2009; Knoot and Rickenbach 2011; Kittredge et al. 2013; Kueper, Sagor, and Becker 2013). Rickenbach (2009, 599) states: “How emerging associations and peer-to-peer learning change the relationships within the network of institutional, community, and market actors are considered important in determining the long-term viability and effectiveness of those initiatives.” Therefore, the research component of the SFLR included monitoring the growth and efficacy of these networks using both SNA and qualitative data analysis to show information flows among people about forest management. Our analysis employed a mixed-methods approach to demonstrate and contextualize the communication networks of SFLR program participants who interact with program personnel, agency staff, and other landowners about forest management, the SFLR itself, and NRCS landowner assistance programs¹. Here, we present a synopsis of these findings to help address the overarching research question of how communication networks among African American forest landowners and forestry professionals associated with the SFLR can operate independently and continue to grow.

Methods: Integrating Social Network Analysis and Qualitative Interviews

Data used for both the SNA and the qualitative analysis were extracted from interviews conducted and transcribed by a team of social scientists. The SFLR employed a multi-pronged research effort, which included multiple interviews with some of the same people over a period of three years. We collected data from four distinct sets of interviews; two sets of interviews (in 2014 and 2017) focused specifically on the communication networks of interviewees, and another two sets of interviews (in 2014 and 2016) focused more broadly on land ownership, history, and management objectives. All four sets of interviews documented increased communications over time and highlighted mechanisms that encourage more interactions among landowners and resource professionals.

In 2014 and 2017, we conducted interviews specifically about communication networks, with the aim of interviewing the same people two years apart and using SNA to determine changes in their communication networks over time. In September and October 2014, we interviewed forty-three SFLR participants, selected and initially contacted by the program forester working in the area. We asked interviewees to name people from whom they had received information about forest management, the SFLR, and forest landowner assistance programs, and people to whom they had given such information to determine egocentric networks² (Korhonen, Hujala, and Kurttila 2012; Kittredge et al. 2013). The SFLR program began in 2012, and some of these interviewees were already enrolled in the program (but still in the beginning stages of active forest management), while others were not. Of those forty-three interviewees, we re-interviewed twenty-four of them in April 2017; this second set of interviews aimed to determine the impact of the program on forest management activities and the

communication networks of program participants over the course of three years. While we tried to re-interview all forty-three, several were unreachable for various reasons, and several declined to be interviewed again due to time constraints or the lack of interest.

The third and fourth sets of interviews were part of a broader research effort within the project, and these interviews were not limited to SFLR participants. These interviews (conducted in 2014 and 2016) were less structured than the interviews specifically focused on communication networks; instead, we aimed to document a range of land histories, memories and sentimental attachments associated with family-owned properties, and forest management objectives and actions. Of the twenty-four people that we re-interviewed in 2017 regarding SNA, we conducted more in-depth interviews with four of them in November 2016 and thirteen of them in August 2014. While this second set of interviews was less strictly related to communication networks and more expansive in subject matter, these interviews also revealed important insights into interviewees' social networks, patterns of communication, and levels of trust in people from whom they received information about forest management.

For all four sets of interviews, the sample was purposive, with participants chosen by the program forester in North Carolina to represent a range of circumstances, networks, forest management decisions, and personality types (i.e., private people or extroverts and community leaders). We acknowledge that having one forester decide whom we should contact for the interviews was not ideal, but this approach was practical and appropriate given the situation. The overlap in participants between the interviews focused on SNA and the more broad interviews was the result of the guidance of the program forester with whom we were working; he knew these participants were particularly vocal and active in the SFLR and were willing to be interviewed multiple times. Interviews with landowners, which usually lasted one to two hours, were conducted in a variety of locales (including homes, on forestland, and in public areas) and often included other family members involved in land management. In November 2016, we also conducted interviews with several of the key personnel involved in the SFLR in North Carolina (program forester, state forester, and NRCS District Conservationist) about their involvement with the SFLR and their observations on communication networks and changes in them over time. This article draws on the eighty-four interviews with forest landowners as described above, as well as the three interviews with SFLR program personnel, for a total of eighty-seven interviews.

We transcribed all qualitative text from notes taken during all the interviews and analyzed these data using NVivo software by coding text thematically. The codes, or themes, emerged from the data rather than from a pre-conceived set of themes; while these themes were influenced by the structure of our interview question guides, we did not restrict our analysis to these themes. Because our interviews were semi-structured, we allowed people to talk at length and to answer questions in their own way, using their own words. For the SNA, we coded people's names (interviewees and people they mentioned by name) to protect their identities and tabulated coded data within Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. P001–P024 refers to the forest landowners that we interviewed, and the three program personnel are coded as P027, P030, and P068. In addition to these people, each person mentioned by name by any interviewee was also

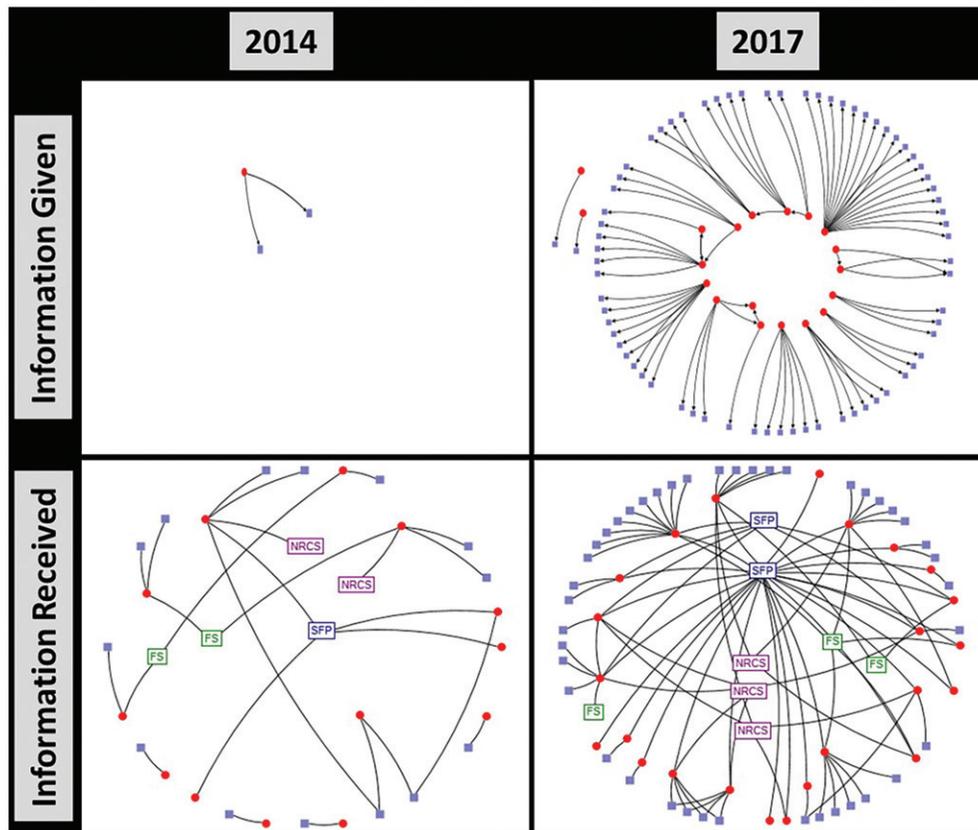


Figure 1. Information exchanged among respondents about forestry.

given a unique code, for a total of 189 coded names. If a person, for example, P180, was mentioned by more than one interviewee, the same code was used for the person in the Excel spreadsheet and SNA software. As we will describe below, in many cases, specific names were not given, and thus these individuals were not given unique codes; these unnamed people were therefore eliminated from the SNA. However, the qualitative analysis highlighted their importance to the development and maintenance of communication networks.

Results

Demographic Variables

Of the twenty-four African American landowners that we interviewed at least twice over a period of three years (2014–2017), nearly two-thirds were between fifty-one and seventy years old (seventeen of twenty-four), and only one was under fifty. Interviewees tended to be highly educated; seventeen interviewees, or 71%, had college degrees and six had graduate or professional degrees. Many were or had been employed in professional occupations (most frequently teaching and educational administration), although 50% of the interviewees were retired. All interviewees were African American, and

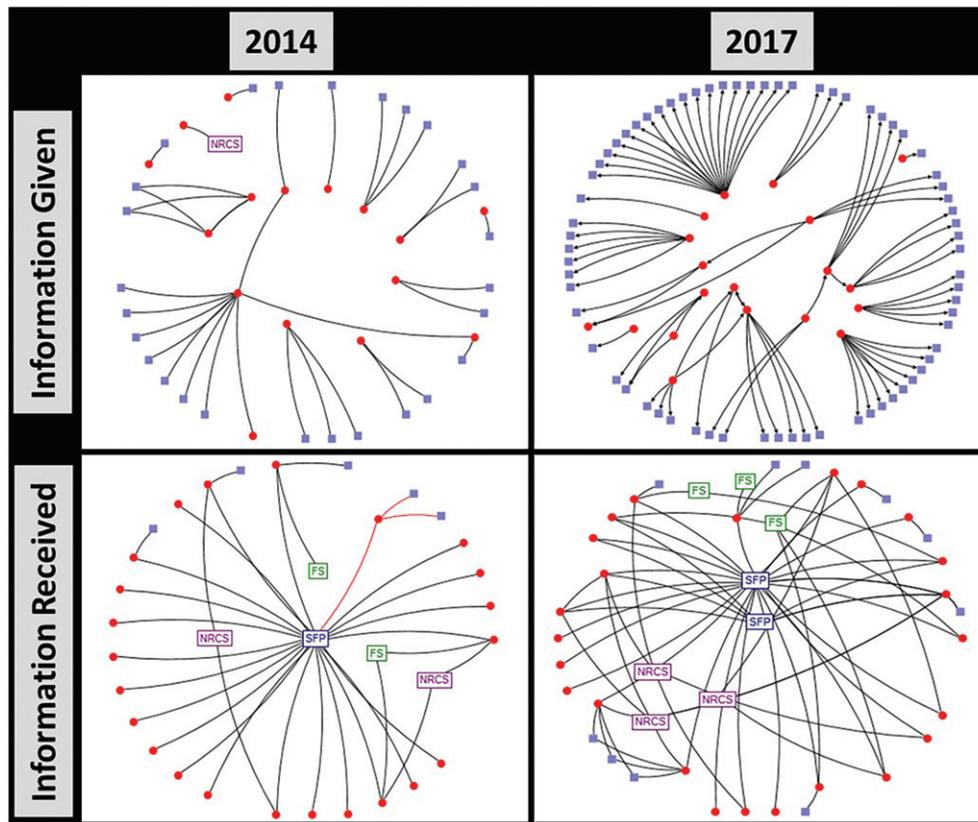


Figure 2. Information exchanged among respondents about the SFLR program.

women comprised 25% of the interviewees. In sum, interviewees tended to be older, more highly educated, and more likely to be retired than the larger population of family forest landowners in the US South (Butler et al. 2016). Landholding sizes varied, although two-thirds of interviewees owned between twenty-one and 100 acres. About 30% of families faced issues regarding heirs' property on some or all their land and lacked a clear land title, while 70% reported having a title to their land (sometimes jointly with other family members). Fourteen respondents had inherited family land, while eight had purchased land and two owned both inherited and purchased tracts. Three people with purchased land had bought it from relatives.

The Growth of SFLR Communication Networks

We conducted SNA to investigate changes in communication networks based on information given and received related to three factors: (1) general forest management, (2) the SFLR program, and (3) landowner assistance programs. We generated network diagrams using NodeXL to illustrate the information networks for the three factors for 2014 and 2017 (Figures 1–3). The red disks represent informants, forest landowners that were interviewed, while the blue squares represent people named by the interviewees. Squares labeled with boxes represent natural resource professionals and SFLR

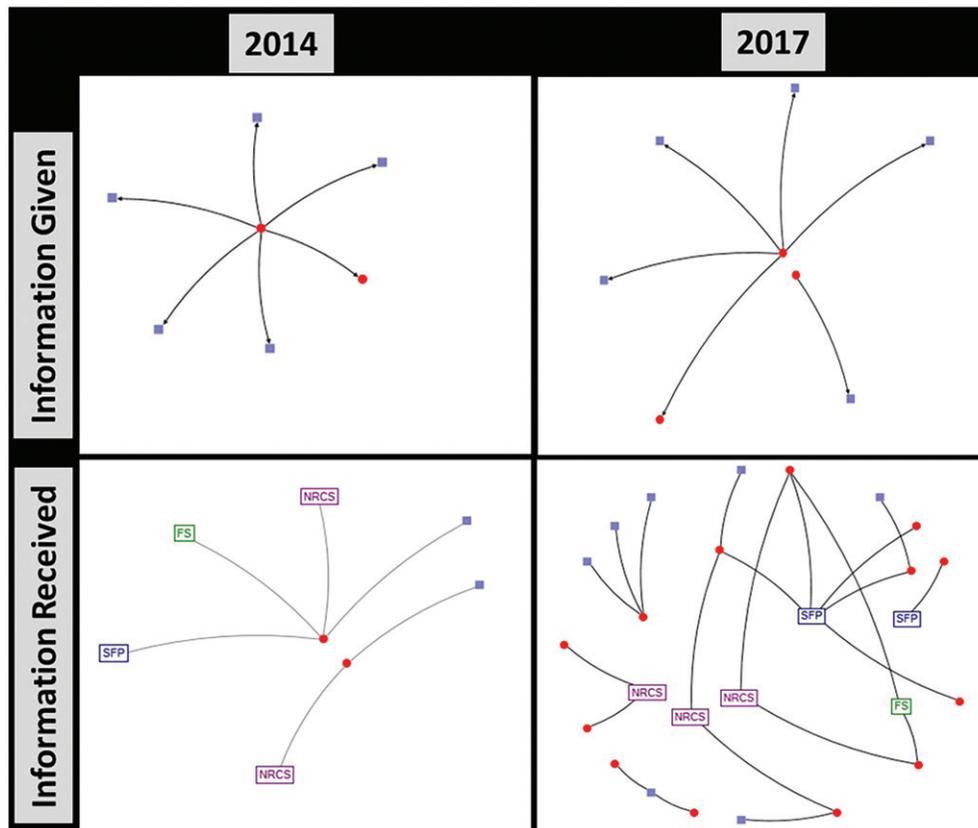


Figure 3. Information exchanged among respondents about landowner assistance programs.

program personnel that gave information to our informants. Excerpts from the qualitative interviews provide further details on what is, and what is not, visible in the diagrams. Both the social network analysis and qualitative interviews provide evidence that communication networks are forming and strengthening because of the program and that program personnel remains integral to the flow of information about opportunities for sustainable forestry.

Figure 1 shows the changes in the number of ties of the networks of people giving and receiving information about forest management, as reported by landowners. In both 2014 and 2017, SFLR personnel were the primary information disseminators, with four and thirty-one ties respectively. In 2014, NRCS had two out-going ties, whereas North Carolina Forest Service personnel had four ties. In 2017, these numbers increased to twelve and eight respectively. Except for three nodes, all informants received information from two or more sources, indicating a reinforcement of information from multiple sources. In 2014, eleven of the informants had not received information on forestry programs from anyone, and in 2017, all had received information. The average number of ties in 2014 was 1.08, which went up to 4.13 in 2017. This increase in ties demonstrates growth in communication networks between landowners and forestry professionals and among landowners.

Most interviewees had no experience with forestry prior to their involvement in the SFLR, and the clear majority (seventeen) stated that they and their family had no previous knowledge of forestry (three more did not provide a clear answer but stated that they know more than previous generations because of participation in the program). Several had already received information about forest management, mainly from older family members. Most interviewees with land inherited from previous generations said that the forests were not actively managed; rather, timber cuts were done opportunistically, and trees were rarely replanted. One woman said: “Father cut timber on the tract, but he was more of a farmer” (P007). Because of passive management, the forests they have inherited are generally naturally regenerated pine and mixed hardwood stands and of lower quality than more intensively managed stands. In at least three cases, families did have previous experience with active forest management and knowledge of forestry. One interviewee (P017) said, “I did the original forest management plan. I worked in forestry. I was a truck driver, hauled chips and logs. I knew about forestry already.” He inherited his land from his great-grandfather, who “purchased the land out of slavery,” and his father and uncles owned a forestry business. Even with this high level of knowledge and experience, he said: “The program [SFLR] has helped tremendously. They helped me to do what I needed to be done.” Another interviewee (P018) stated that her father had been a logger and had practiced rotational cutting of timber on the family land; she too said that she had benefitted greatly from participating in the SFLR. Thus, while there was some previous knowledge of forestry among interviewees, it was limited to only a few people, which is reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 2 shows how the flow of information about the SFLR specifically has changed over the three years of the study. It is evident that in 2017, the networks of individual landowners have increased regarding both information given and received, and there are more connections between landowners independent of SFLR personnel. For example, in 2014, only three landowners had given information about forest management to three or more people, while in 2017, fourteen landowners had. Also, in 2014, SFLR personnel and affiliated agency partners were the only source of information for most landowners, while in 2017, landowners were receiving information from many other sources, including other interviewees and other program participants who were not interviewed.

The SNA and the qualitative analysis both show considerable overlap between the networks of people communicating about forestry in general and about the SFLR specifically. This is consistent with the findings that only a few interviewees had previous knowledge of forestry before beginning to participate in the program. Most interviewees acquired much of their knowledge about forestry from other people involved in the program, both fellow landowners and forestry professionals. While it was possible for these individuals to talk to other people about forestry without mentioning the SFLR, it was uncommon, and most discussions about forest management emerged from a mention of the program (and vice versa).

Figure 3 shows that few landowners were exchanging information about landowner assistance programs in either 2014 or 2017. Our interviews in 2017 revealed that nine interviewees were currently enrolled in various landowner assistance programs and that three had applied to one (though two were not sure which program they had applied

to). One planned to apply to various programs, and ten were not aware of landowner assistance programs at all or had vaguely heard of them but needed more information to decide whether to apply. Even though most interviewees were either already enrolled or had applied to landowner assistance programs, most of them were not specifically sharing information about these programs with other people. Program personnel stated that this is likely because people did not feel confident to share technical information about programs or they did not want to divulge personal information about how much money they had received from participating in such programs. Also, some interviewees expressed reluctance or inability to participate in these programs themselves and believed that other landowners would not want or be able to participate in them. Several interviewees specifically mentioned the lingering distrust in government agencies. One person (P056) stated:

“African American landowners are not aware of what can help them because they don’t trust the past, because of what’s happened in the past. You bring them paperwork; they check out. Their reading levels are not there, or they think you’re going to trick them.”

Others indicated that lack of capital hinders involvement in landowner assistance programs. One man (P157) said that he and his family would like to participate, but that: “They cost money. There is grant money to help pay those fees, but I don’t know if it covers all those fees.”

Despite low levels of information sharing about landowner assistance programs, most interviewees did communicate with other landowners about forest management and convinced other landowners to contact SFLR personnel. In doing so, people contacted by the interviewees were likely to receive information about landowner assistance programs from someone else, such as a professional forester or NRCS employee.

As the social networks results show, for each factor analyzed (forestry, SFLR, and landowner assistance programs), there was an increase in the number of ties between interviewees and a strengthening of the communication networks because of reinforcing ties (particularly for the first two factors) over time. Next, we discuss several factors that have led to the success in increasing these ties based on the themes that emerged from the qualitative interviews.

Importance of Building Trust Within the Network

Communication networks are built upon and sustained by continued trust among the individuals within the network. Several interviewees specifically mentioned the importance of trusting people within the social networks created by the SFLR, given the discrimination faced by their older relatives and even themselves. Interviewed landowners and the program personnel noted the importance of African Americans passing along information and speaking about their own experiences to other African Americans. However, distrust of government employees stems from knowledge of historical wrongs enacted by the government on minority landowners. In many cases, African Americans have been used to perpetuate dishonest dealings, or have actively chosen to act in an unethical manner to take advantage of the trust given to them by other African Americans. One woman (P056), a dynamic speaker and active community member, said that she was aware of governmental agency efforts to include an African American

speaker to encourage other African Americans to participate in programs and use their services. In 2014, she said:

“We had a meeting with the Forest Service...they wanted to build rapport with the community – I don’t mince words, and I will address the elephant in the room. I will bring up the race issue, no matter who’s in the room. I told them, you might want me to come to talk to these people, but don’t think I don’t know that you’re using me as a pawn. But I agree that my face may help your initiative ... So I’ll go with you, but I’ll only tell my story ... I won’t pull the wool over anyone’s eyes. It’s a trust issue for me too. Building trust is very vital, paramount.”

Similarly, SFLR personnel also directly addressed distrust that they have faced, even from other African Americans. One man (P030) said in 2016: “I am black, and you look at me and think that they listen to me. Listen, I’m a damn government employee. I have to deal with the same thing. I’m from the government, and I’m here to help you.”

The issue of developing and maintaining trust among program personnel and landowners was paramount, and the SFLR was rooted in the understanding that follow-through was vital, as broken promises are as damaging as intentional dishonesty. One woman (P056) stated in 2014 that her initial reluctance to join the program was due to experiences with other programs aimed at assisting minority landowners in which there was a lack of ongoing communication after initial contact. She said that the SFLR is different and that she has received the help that she needed and feels that SFLR personnel are responsive and have a genuine concern for her success.

The Role of Information Gatekeepers

While directly acknowledging the history of discrimination and subsequent mistrust of government organizations, the SFLR recognized the role of several centralized “gatekeepers” of information, in this case, the SFLR personnel. These included a coalition of foresters, NRCS personnel, and administrative assistants that coordinated forest management activities, organized events for landowners focused on knowledge exchange and social network development, and shared landowner case information to provide detailed recommendations for each landholding family. One of the program foresters (P027) noted in 2016 the importance of private “landowner partner meetings” in which landowners met privately with a small group consisting of SFLR personnel, NRCS and FSA employees, extension agents, and foresters to discuss the details of their landholding situation and goals for land management. He stated:

“The landowner partner meeting has been critical for getting landowners launched to be successful. We listen to their objectives, and we try to help them move forward. There have been ninety-five landowners in those meetings since we started. Out of those ninety-five, I can only think of about three that didn’t get something done ... they couldn’t decide what to do or didn’t have assistance from family members.”

Landowners also expressed the efficacy of having a coordinated group of experts help landowners on a personal basis. One interviewee (P001) stated in 2016: “These guys are like a treatment team, to be honest. We’re like the patient they’re talking about.”

The program forester and his administrative assistant worked closely with the landowners throughout their involvement with the SFLR. They were the primary points of contact for all landowners in the program, and all interviewees expressed a high level of trust in these two individuals. One man (P001) noted in 2016: “[*Program forester*]’s role has been pivotal and instrumental. I’d be lost without him.” In 2017, a participant (P011) noted that the program forester “can read a person and know whether they know what they’re talking about,” enabling him to connect with people on a level they can understand. An NRCS employee (P030) who worked with the program participants noted in 2016 described his role as a gatekeeper of essential information and access to funds:

“It can be information overload, too much government jargon – you have to be careful with that. These people are generations removed from dealing with FSA, NRCS. I’m the grandson of a sharecropper – but they’ve had no relation with USDA for generations. That makes education so important – they don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

In addition to acting as information gatekeepers themselves, SFLR personnel also talked about the role of influential community leaders as gatekeepers of information about the program and about sustainable forest management practices. One program employee (P030) said in 2016: “There are gatekeepers in every community, especially this black community. Once they get their blessing, they move forward.” Another (P027) said (also in 2016): “People don’t want people in their business. There are gatekeepers who don’t mind telling about their experience. That helps.” These community gatekeepers are people that are already trusted by others. Once they were enlisted in the program and began active forest management because of the opportunities provided by the SFLR, they began to see themselves as invested in the program and in the process of sharing it with others, in ways similar to the SFLR personnel.

Participants as Shareholders Invested in the SFLR

SFLR developers recognized the importance of ongoing participation in the program and connecting participants to one another through information exchange, hands-on activities and educational opportunities on participants’ land, and encouraging program participants to become “shareholders” in the collective experience of increased sustainable forest management. One program forester (P027) said in 2016:

“In the African American landowners’ community, there’s a limit to what they’ll share. We’re trying to get them to share more, which makes the community share more and become more knowledgeable.”

Participants often spoke directly about the benefits of connecting with other landowners. In 2017, one man (P021) said: “Knowledge is powerful. I make as many meetings as possible. I like talking with landowners. Everyone has a different story.” Participants especially benefitted from learning how to negotiate timber sales and vet loggers based on the recommendations and experiences of other African American forest landowners. In 2014, one man (P020) said: “My thing is knowing who to trust... At these meetings, we talk about who to stay away from.” In 2017, the same man said: “The program has really helped me. Through them, I have faith in the system now... I couldn’t get the truth from some people here in the timber business.”

Most interviewees specifically talked about the networking opportunities at SFLR events. One (P014) said in 2017: “With the networking, we’re starting to recognize each other. The networking capabilities of the SFLR are the best part.” Another (P001), facing complicated intra-family issues with heirs’ property, said in 2016: “There are times I want to quit, and they say, no, no, no, this is to be expected. It’s good to hear that other people are in the same position.” The systems of support and encouragement fostered by the program have been particularly important for some subgroups of African American landowners. For example, several female interviewees noted the importance of workshops and conferences they attended specifically for female landowners, who often inherit family land or are left to care for land once they are widowed.

Evangelizing the SFLR and Benefits of Sustainable Forestry

The SFLR has actively promoted the role of “evangelists,” or program participants willing to spread information about the program within their own social networks (including churches, workplaces, sororities and fraternities, community action groups, and other organized social groups). Many people who are actively involved in the SFLR have directly benefitted from it, and they feel an obligation to give back and help other people by sharing information. One woman (P056) said in 2014: “I will work hard if I’m loyal to a project. So, I don’t have a problem giving back.” In 2016, the same woman said: “I’ll stay engaged with it forever ... I would like for other landowners to understand the importance of keeping what they have.” Several interviewees discussed how the history of discrimination, which resulted in the intentional withholding of information about land management assistance opportunities from past generations, encouraged them to become more active in sharing information among African Americans. In 2014, a man (P020) stated: “If my parents could have gotten this information back in the ‘40s and ‘50s, I would know a lot more about it now. As African Americans, we’ve been in the dark for so long. I want to pass on the knowledge to other people.”

Some forest landowners participating in the program identified themselves as “evangelists,” using language adopted from SFLR personnel. One program forester (P027) noted in 2016 that:

Now we can handpick the advocates or evangelists ... Some are good speakers, some more reserved. Some thinking more about themselves, some thinking more about the community. We’re trying to convince them that this is a community program [and that] there are community benefits.

One woman (P018), actively involved multiple community groups (including church and a community action group) said in 2017: “Evangelists – I’m one of them now.”

These evangelists that actively grow the network and maintain the bonds between landowners are the ones expected to reduce reliance on SFLR personnel. As noted by one of the program foresters (P027) in 2016, the role of these evangelists is to “be the catalyst in the community to draw people in and use that experience to show folks that it can be done.” When we asked SFLR personnel about their own roles as information gatekeepers into the future, they expressed a mixture of hope and doubt. One program forester (P027) stated in 2016:

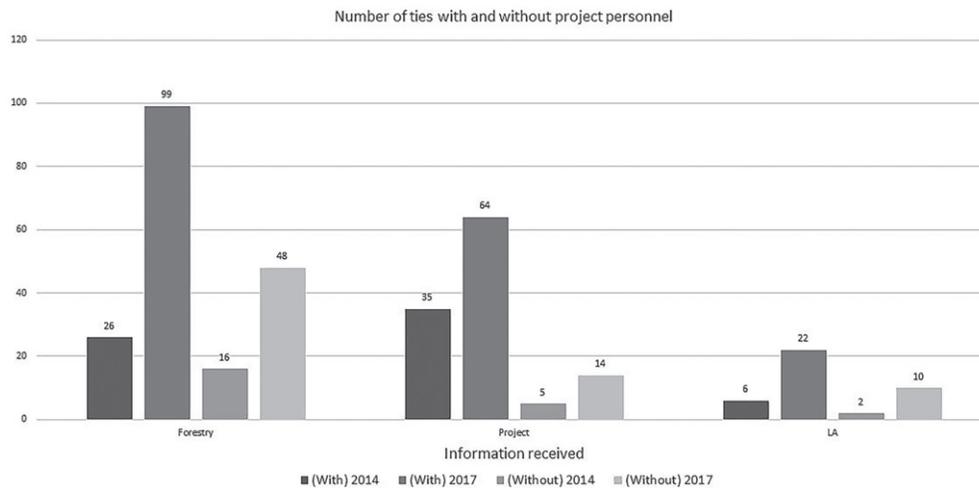


Figure 4. The role of SFLR personnel in information received by respondents.

“Our landowners are guided through the process well by the district conservationists and me in the county... folks come back to foresters. Will we ever break that cycle? They just haven’t had a point person that they can trust. Even if they work with the agency, they come back to the forester to vet what the agency has done. Like a mother hen, I reckon... The process that we use may be enabling them a little too much.”

A District Conservationist with NRCS (P030) focused more on the agency’s role in maintaining the social networks developed by the program. He stated in 2016:

“Can we get past having a coordinator like [program forester]? Depends... We have to hold hands until the agencies get to doing this before this thing is turned loose. Entities have to set out to do this; you can’t start it and let it go. People are going to move on, and it’s going to die. There’s no succession plan for this program.”

While this sounds like an inevitable failure, he went on to say that his organization, NRCS, started at the beginning and had not yet developed a core of engaged individuals in the African American community when they began working with the SFLR. Comparing NRCS to a local partner organization well established in the African American community, he said: “They were at a different starting point than we were. They had their rapport already built... They’re scoring touchdowns, and we’re still in training camp. We’ll score touchdowns later.”

Figure 4 shows that SFLR personnel continued to be a significant source of information about forestry, the program, and landowner assistance programs throughout the years of the study and into 2017. However, it is also evident that landowners were receiving information from many other sources as well. As this graph, the network diagrams, and the quotes extracted from the qualitative interviews show, the communication networks among SFLR participants have expanded over time, with a reduced (but still important) role of SFLR personnel in exchanging information and influencing landowners to adopt more intensive forest management strategies.

It is evident (Figures 1–4) that the number of people passing on information about forest management and serving as information gatekeepers and program evangelists has increased and that sources of information (both given and received) have diversified.

Results from the qualitative analysis support these findings and provide evidence of the reasons why this is the case. The SFLR has allowed forestry professionals and NRCS employees to build their own base of community gatekeepers, stakeholders, and evangelists that will promote engagement of other African American forest landowners in sustainable forest management practices and landowner assistance programs in the future.

Combining Methodologies: Filling in the Gaps

While social network diagrams are useful for visually depicting changes in the networks and the individuals that serve as nodes or points of contact for other individuals, quotes from the interviews also fill in gaps for elements not captured in the network diagrams. While many of the interviewees did provide names of some of the people with whom they had spoken about forest management, the SFLR, and landowner assistance programs, in many cases they did not. Sometimes, they did not know the names of the individuals. Some referred to organizations and institutions rather than individuals. One woman (P007) said in 2014: “We mostly talk to FSA and NRCS. We haven’t talked with anyone from the extension. Also, the lawyer from the Land Loss Prevention. Also the local Forest Service, for the EQIP program.” Other times, they seemed hesitant to reveal those names. In 2017, one man (P001) said that he talks with “primary family and children only,” but did not provide their names. Some interviewees said they had spoken to many people either individually or in group settings, such as church congregations. One man (P016) said in 2017 that he has “had about fifty conversations with others” about the SFLR program. Another man (P014) said in 2017: “I let people know what I plan on doing. It’s a normal part of conversation these days.” In these cases, the unnamed points of contact were recorded in the interviews but not in the SNA; hence, we know that the networks are larger than the network diagrams show. The strength of the ties between the respondents and these unnamed contacts is difficult for the researchers to determine, especially if it is unclear whether the interviewee does not know the person’s name or just does not want to reveal it.

It is also difficult to measure the impact of these communication networks on forest management activities or to measure increases in management activities as a direct result of SFLR networking opportunities. One program forester (P027) noted the difficulty of knowing how the networks among landowners are expanding. He said in 2016: “We don’t know how much landowners are talking to each other. But some people call us because they’ve talked to someone else in the program.” He also mentioned that sometimes people provide the names of those contacts, and sometimes they do not. Again, this information is not captured in the SNA but reinforces the trends regarding the expansion of communication networks.

Discussion

Our mixed-method approach demonstrates the complementarity of SNA and qualitative analysis in determining changes in social networks among African American forest landowners in North Carolina. SNA serves as a tool for visualization, showing which

people serve as points of connection for others, and which people are giving or exchanging information more prolifically. It can help to pinpoint temporal trends, showing how these networks change and grow over time. But it doesn't account for vagueness or uncertainty, and thus is incomplete in itself, especially with smaller datasets. Qualitative interviews, conducted in a semi-structured manner over a period of several years with many of the same participants, provides depth and nuance that SNA analysis alone would not capture.

Both datasets (SNA and qualitative interviews) clearly demonstrate the importance of the creation of a network of trusted individuals to SFLR participants. The SFLR was structured from the beginning to promote increased communication networks, and many interviewees noted the networking aspect of the meetings as one of the most important benefits of program participation. The program also encouraged participation in Forest Landowner Education Networking Group, in which participants were specifically trained to inform other landowners about sustainable forest management and included public recognition of achievements such as enrollment in Tree Farm certification, awards such as the Forest Landowner of the Year, and plaques honoring the designation of Century Forest (provided when families can prove continuous family ownership of a tract of land for one hundred years) at SFLR events. These mechanisms served as positive social incentives to showcase the successes of program participants and encourage other people to become more active.

The success of the SFLR in helping African American landowners to develop networks of trusted individuals with whom they can consult about forest management activities is dependent upon understanding the challenges faced by African American forest landowners and avenues of communication among African Americans in the southeastern United States. The research results presented here clearly indicate that the SFLR underscored the importance of using extant networks, trusted professional African American individuals such as the SFLR program foresters and affiliated NRCS personnel, and SFLR participants that are active in the community and are enthusiastic to serve as "evangelists" of the program.

Conclusion

The main goal of the SFLR has been for the communication networks among participants to operate independently, eliminating reliance on SFLR personnel and on funding from the Endowment. The research component of this program, documented here, elucidates the elements of communication and flows of information that would make this possible. We found that holders of forestry knowledge, whether SFLR personnel or trusted community leaders become gatekeepers that facilitate entry into the world of sustainable forest management for other African American landowners. Program participants often become invested enough in the SFLR to consider themselves shareholders in it, and a few have become evangelists for the program and sustainable forest management activities they benefit from and enthusiastically support. As is evident from the SNA and the interview quotes highlighted here, the networks are continuing to grow and strengthen, though the roles of the SFLR personnel remain central. They express concern that while some particularly proactive landowners will operate independently of

them and serve as both gatekeepers of information and advocates for sustainable forest management, many landowners will continue to rely on the SFLR personnel, specifically the program forester. However, the growth and reinforcement of ties in the communication networks of landowners over time are encouraging.

Notes

1. The most common NRCS landowner assistance programs used by SFLR participants are EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program), CRP (Conservation Reserve Program), and CAP (Conservation Activity Plans).
2. A SNA focusing on an individual to understand the overall composition of the network.

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