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## Integrating Research and Outreach for Environmental Justice: African American Land Ownership and Forestry

**Abstract:** *Issues with land ownership and engagement in forestry have been intractable problems that have long impeded wealth development among African Americans in the rural South. Over a 6-year period, an integrated outreach and research program, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program, implemented community-based projects, built networks among relevant organizations, changed policies, and developed new knowledge to address these critical issues of environmental justice. In this paper, we discuss how anthropological practice was integrated into a program of community-based projects to create a platform for long-term change in land ownership, forest management, outreach practice, and policy environments. The results provide an example of how anthropological methods can contribute to social and institutional change by listening and documenting stories and through long-term engagement with a diverse coalition of researchers, practitioners, landowners, and funders. [African American landowners, community-based research, forestry]*

### Introduction

**T**he concept of environmental justice is rooted in the disproportionate burden of low environmental quality, often related to pollution that has frequently been borne by minority and low-income communities (Getches and Pellow 2002). Mutz, Bryner, and Kenny (2002), however, argue for a broader concept that includes inequities associated with natural resource extraction, management, and preservation—for example, access to land and water for economic activity and quality of life. African American landowners in the U.S. South have long faced two interrelated issues that are rooted in histories of social and environmental inequities: the lack of clear title to land and low levels of engagement in economically productive forest management (Bailey et al. 2019; Hitchner, Schelhas, and Johnson-Gaither 2017; Schelhas et al. 2017a). While these issues have received some research and outreach attention the past few decades, those efforts have been neither sufficiently integrated nor enduring to make a significant and widespread impact on these critical foundations of family and community well-being for African Americans in the South.

Anthropologists have long recognized the importance of local people and organizations in facilitating their research, although they have often not been viewed as research partners with a role in shaping the work (Schensul, Weeks, and Singer 1999). Action research has been one way to address this with its emphasis on joint problem definition, selection of research methods, data collection and analysis, and applying the results (Schensul, Weeks, and Singer 1999). Guides to action research often suggest formalized roles (formal guidelines establishing roles and activities, advisory boards, etc.) and formally defined methods (participatory action research, rapid rural appraisal, participatory rural appraisal, etc.) (Pelto 2013; Russell and Harshbarger 2003; Schensul, Weeks, and Singer 1999). Other anthropologists have focused less on

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formal methodologies and more on long-term and sometimes ad hoc coalition building (Morris and Luque 2011). While the benefits of integrating research and practice are many, so too are the challenges (Morris and Luque 2011; Schensul, Weeks, and Singer 1999). Because each effort likely differs in its impetus, focus, scope, time period, funding, and way of unfolding, general principles may be drawn from many methods and experiences and innovatively combined and applied to meet the particularities of a given effort. Here we report a multiyear, evolving research and practice collaboration designed to address a rural natural resource justice issue. This collaboration allowed practitioners to focus on developing community-based outreach programs and anthropologists to focus on field research and analysis, while maintaining ongoing interaction and communication. This approach allowed both groups to jointly learn and produce larger impacts across scales such as individual landowner assistance, community-based institution building, and national policy change. At the heart of this effort were anthropological methods rooted in listening and documenting stories, along with long-term engagement among a diverse coalition of researchers, practitioners, landowners, and funders. This paper reflects on and shares these experiences.

African American rural landholdings in the South have declined precipitously over the past century due to a number of factors, including outmigration, voluntary sales, foreclosures, poor access to capital and credit, lack of access to farm and conservation programs, illegal taking, purposeful trickery and withholding of legal information, actual or threatened violence, and various forms of individual and institutional racism and discrimination (Daniel 2013; Dyer and Bailey 2008; Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Zabawa 1991; Zabawa, Siaway, and Baharanyi 1990). The rate of African American rural land loss has far exceeded losses for other racial and ethnic groups since the turn of the 20th century (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002; Dyer and Bailey 2008; 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, Bailey, and Van Tran 2009; Zabawa 1991). Heirs' property, or "tenancy in common," is inherited land passed on intestate, without clear title, typically to family members. Land loss and heirs' property have contributed to a significant loss in assets and inhibited economic development among African Ameri-

can families and communities (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002).

Over this same time period, limited engagement in forest management has resulted in reduced returns from land and decreased land value for African Americans. This is particularly important in that forests, both naturally regenerated and plantations, now grow on a great deal of former agricultural land in the South (Rudel 2001; Rudel and Fu 1996). Over a 30-year period, concerns about African American participation in forest management have been voiced and an enduring set of obstacles identified: lack of trust and a disconnect between African American landowners and forestry professionals, discrimination and perceived bias in access to the conservation programs that support family forestry, and a legacy of land ownership issues such as heirs' property that grew out of historical racial inequalities in the South (Gordon et al. 2013; Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985). 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 requiring low labor and periodic attention, making it appropriate for the many landowners who are employed off the land or retired—increasingly common situations with the decline in small farming and rise in industrial and service sector employment. The persistence and linkages of heirs' property, lack of professional forestry assistance, and limited access to financial assistance programs provide a compelling reason for research and outreach on African American land ownership and forestry.

## The SFLR Program

In 2012, the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Program (SFLR) was launched by the U.S. Endowment for Forestry and Communities (the Endowment) in partnership with two U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) agencies, the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) and the Forest Service. The Endowment endeavors to catalyze innovative approaches to community forestry by engaging with forestry research and practice to develop model approaches and programs. The SFLR was developed as 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.<sup>1</sup> The program began with three 30-month pilot projects initiated with community-based partner organizations<sup>2</sup> working in multicounty 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 three more years and new projects were added in Georgia, Arkansas, Mississippi, and Virginia. The SFLR included a research component from the beginning 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 literature on African American forest owners.

The SFLR has aimed to stabilize ownership and increase the economic value of land by resolving ownership issues and increasing the use of sustainable forest management, principally by providing financial and program support to community-based projects. The Endowment took the lead on the program and solicited proposals for community-based projects that included certain key elements but allowed for flexibility in approaches. Each community-based project was required to design, build, and coordinate a system of support for African American landowners involving nonprofit organizations, academic institutions, for-profit service companies, and government agencies. The primary activities of the projects were to provide information and legal assistance for resolving heirs' property issues and estate planning (through project legal staff and partners), raising awareness and educating landowners about forestry (through state forestry agencies and private foresters), and building linkages among landowners and providers of technical and financial assistance for forestry and conservation (through local NRCS offices, state forestry agencies, and forest industries). The SFLR had a central administrative structure to coordinate information exchange and learning among the individual projects, including regular conference calls and annual retreats. The SFLR leadership also engaged USDA policy makers and program personnel at the state and federal levels to bring attention and support to local projects, strengthen the funding base, and encourage policy changes to address enduring obstacles.

The community-based projects of the SFLR have achieved many successes. Specific accomplishments as of December 2018 include serving 1,076 African American families collectively owning

77,095 acres across seven states.<sup>3</sup> These landowners had an average landholding size of 81 acres, and a median of 40 acres (Schelhas, Hitchner, and Dwivedi 2018). Specific outcomes attained include forest management planning; access to programs, loans, and financing; implementation of diverse forestry practices (e.g., thinning, harvest, site prep, 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. A Woodlands Advocate Program began in South Carolina and has expanded to other states, in which peer-to-peer learning networks have been established. Program participants have been enlisted and trained to reach out to new landowners in order to expand the networks and multiply outreach efforts. Additional funding for the SFLR and individual projects has been obtained from USDA and several foundations. Beyond specific accomplishments, the SFLR has brought attention to the issues of heirs' property and African American engagements in forestry, and it has stimulated new partnerships and policies to address these issues. Following the 6-year duration of the U.S. Endowment-funded project, the project has transitioned to a new phase. In this third phase, the community-based projects established a formal network to create increased independence and the administrative, fund raising, policy advocacy, and technical support functions were transferred from the Endowment to the American Forest Foundation, a forest owner support organization. The SFLR has achieved considerable success, and attention in both popular media<sup>4</sup> and scientific literature indicate that it has become a model program for addressing the issues faced by underserved landowners.

## Methods

The importance of co-producing knowledge through close collaboration between scholars and practitioners has been increasingly recognized in recent years (Clark and Dickson 2003). The concept of innovation platforms, which are broader than projects, provides a framework that includes networked institutions, spans scales from farmers to policies, and promotes co-production of knowledge for broad and enduring transitions in sustainable agriculture and community forestry (Grove and Pickett 2019; Röllings and Jiggins 1998). While

centered on community-based projects, the SFLR had the broader aim of creating a long-term platform to change policies and institutions over time, build networks, and produce new knowledge to facilitate sustainable forestry and African American land ownership in the South.

The concept of platforms refers to long-term, multisectoral and interdisciplinary collaborations to address both short-term issues and long-lasting complex problems in land systems (Grove and Pickett 2019, 8). Platforms are longer term, less tightly bound, and more durable than projects, and they bring multiple perspectives to bear on complex problems and advance knowledge over time (Grove and Pickett 2019). Platforms for land systems, such as sustainable forestry or agriculture, can be seen as “soft,” or informal, systems that (1) go beyond technologies and markets; (2) span multiple scales; (3) include landowners, outreach, and research; (4) require collaboration among diverse stakeholders; (5) go beyond landowners to include support institutions and networks, as well as policy contexts; and (6) require institution building and collective learning (Röllings and Jiggins 1998). The idea of platforms has provided a conceptual basis for addressing long-term sustainability in diverse land systems in agriculture and forestry around the world (Hounkonnou et al. 2018; Jiggins et al. 2016; Kafle 2001).

This paper reflects on the process of integrating research and outreach in the SFLR as an example of going beyond a project to establish a platform for long-term, multiscale change in community-based forestry. The overall structure of the paper reflects the chronology of the collaboration, highlighted by insights that emerged from formal interactions between researchers, practitioners, and landowners over more than 8 years of collaboration. We also interviewed six key practitioners from the SFLR prior to writing this paper, in order to discuss the ways that research involvement and results benefited the project. We have drawn on the presentations and publications that are our research products, as well as our notes, observations, and discussions from throughout the duration of the collaborative effort and follow-up. Essentially, this paper represents a capstone exercise by anthropologists involved in all aspects of the project to reflect on our experience of close collaboration with the SFLR as the original effort drew to a close. In all phases of the research, we used semistructured interview guides, extensive note taking, and qualitative analysis of field and inter-

view notes with NVivo using both themes based on key topics in interview guides and emergent themes identified during the analysis. Research methods for different phases of the project are discussed in greater detail in cited publications; all research was submitted to and approved by the University of Georgia’s Institutional Review Board prior to fieldwork.

## Background

The history of rural African American landownership in the South is rooted in farming. Historically, almost all black-owned farms in the United States have been in the South (Wood and Gilbert 2000). Concerns about land and natural resources have a long history in African American thought and environmental justice from the slave era through the civil rights era and beyond (Jordan et al. 2009; Rickford 2017; Smith 2007). Black farmers emerged from slavery into sharecropping and, when possible, farm ownership (Daniel 2013). However, black-owned farmland peaked around 1920 at about 926,000 acres, and dropped precipitously over the course of the century at rates higher than the decline in white-owned farms (Wood and Gilbert 2000; Zabawa 1991). While small farms declined most rapidly and black-owned farms tended to be smaller, black-owned farms decreased at a higher rate even when controlling for farm size (Wood and Gilbert 2000). Over this same time period (largely beginning with World War I), in what is known as the Great Migration, millions of black Americans moved from the South to northern (as well as western) cities for industrial and service sector jobs (Trotter 1991). Kinship relations between migrants and their southern homes both facilitated the Great Migration and were maintained as migrants made regular visits South, and some families retained their southern farms against all odds (Gottlieb 1991, 72–73). This pattern continued until the 1970s, when return migration of blacks from the North to the South, often to urban areas but also to rural homelands, became dominant (Stack 1996). Some of these return migrants returned home to care for elders and/or take over the management of their family lands (Stack 1996).

For both long-time residents and return migrants, family land was often in heirs’ property. Land was often passed on across generations without wills due to distrust of and disenfranchisement from the legal system (Zabawa 1991). Heirs’ property

is held in common by individual shareholders who each own a fractional interest in the entire property, which generally remains in a deceased owner's name (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Johnson Gaither et al. 2019). Shared ownership in the form of heirs' property often makes it difficult to use land productively and reduces the wealth of affected families (Bailey, Barlow, and Dyer 2019; Dyer and Bailey 2008). The benefits of any individual shareholder investments in the property are shared by all owners, which reduces the incentive for any one individual to invest in the property. Furthermore, heirs' property owners may be restricted by co-owners from many land-use and improvement options, such as 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, Bailey, and Van Tran 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. When heirs' property has been passed down through several generations, such agreement may be very difficult because there are many geographically dispersed heirs who have different levels of familiarity with the land and diverging interests in its future. Many family-held parcels of land are lost due to delinquency in paying property taxes, difficulty of agreeing to an equitable payment distribution, or organizing a number of heirs with varying levels of engagement with the land (Reid 2003; Rivers 2006).

As the viability of small family farms declined, heirs' property and other land often became covered in unmanaged second-growth forest (Schelhas et al. 2017a). Yet African Americans had low levels of engagement in forest management, a problem that is intertwined with the issue of heirs' property (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985; Gordon et al. 2013). Our knowledge of African American landowners and forestry has long been limited. 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). Our only regional understanding of how African American forest owners and ownerships differ from white forest owners and ownerships comes from recurring Forest Service studies of what have been termed nonindustrial private or family forest owners. Birch, Lewis, and Kaiser (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 and the relatively small percentage of African American forest landowners in the samples limit comparability.

Most of what we know about African American forest owners comes from relatively recent, isolated research projects, which tend to be local and lack representative sampling but have provided critical insights. These studies have found that African American forest owners have both similarities and differences when compared to the broader population of family forest owners. They are similar in having diverse ownership objectives and occupations, but differ in tending to have smaller tracts of land and either to not engage in forest management or to manage land less intensively than the broader forest owner population (Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2003). African American forest owners have also been found to be generally unaware of or unlikely to use assistance programs, and they have faced more constraints in their use than their white counterparts (Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2003; Guffey et al. 2009). A class action lawsuit, *Pigford v Glickman*, alleging discrimination against black farmers by USDA, was settled in 1999 with a consent decree that established a process for redressing claims of discrimination, although issues with access to farm and conservation programs in county offices were not fully resolved (Daniel 2013; Schelhas 2002a). Studies of participation in USDA conservation programs found that white landowners were more likely to participate in some conservation programs, and nonwhites were more likely to be dissatisfied with program participation and less likely to be able to afford the cost share (Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2005). 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 (Gan and Kebede 2005). 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 legally require proof of ownership and a contract signed by each owner.

Recommended strategies for extension and outreach to address these concerns have included fostering awareness of the benefits of forest management, addressing obstacles (e.g., distrust, inability to afford cost sharing), increasing participation in financial assistance programs, and increasing technical assistance in forest management and timber sales (Gan and Kolison 1999; Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2003; Guffey et al. 2009; Schelhas et al. 2012). Extension and outreach programs have been developed for underserved and African American forest landowners prior to the SFLR (see, e.g., Hughes et al. 2005). Many efforts have used community-based approaches that go beyond technical assistance for individual landowners also to 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 (Christian et al. 2013; Diop and Fraser 2009; Hamilton, Fraser, and Schelhas 2007). While developing important methods and concepts, these efforts were local and short term. At the beginning of the SFLR, we knew that land held by African Americans has important social, economic, cultural, and political consequences for rural minority communities (Gilbert, Sharp, and Felin 2002), but had an incomplete picture of African American landowners and forestry and incomplete understanding of the keys to successful long-term change among the many factors underlying the combined issues of heirs' property and participation in forestry. The SFLR created an opportunity to develop research and outreach further.

## **Co-Producing Knowledge and Action**

The key to the development and implementation of the SFLR was a long-term and open-ended engagement among a group of funders, researchers, outreach personnel, and landowners. Not clearly defined in advance, this collaboration proceeded through information sharing and open discussions to coproduce new knowledge, develop and reshape outreach activities, and make a diversity of interested parties aware of issues and activities.

## **Forming a Partnership and Starting Research**

The outreach and research collaboration began in 2009 and 2010 as the SFLR concept was under development. Researchers from Alabama Consortium for Forestry Education and Research<sup>5</sup> (the Consortium) met with the Endowment to discuss their history, knowledge, and experiences of working with African American landowners and forestry. The Consortium, a Forest Service coordinated effort across three university forestry programs,<sup>6</sup> had engaged in an integrated program of research and outreach focusing on African American landowners and forestry for more than a decade (Schelhas 2002b). Consortium partners had carried out pioneering research to describe African American forest owners and learn about participation and obstacles to participation in conservation programs (e.g., Gan and Kolison 1999; Gan, Kolison, and Tackie 2003; Gan et al. 2005; Schelhas et al. 2012), and they also had developed and implemented a pilot series of community-based forestry outreach workshops in communities around the South (Hamilton, Fraser, and Schelhas 2007). In the initial meeting, Consortium researchers discussed their research and outreach experiences and ideas, helping the Endowment more specifically understand the underlying issues and clarifying the need and opportunity for a sustained effort to address African American landownership and forestry.

## **Baseline Research**

Subsequently, the Endowment launched the SFLR by soliciting proposals and awarding grants for pilot projects to community-based organizations in three states. Lead organizations with a history of working in their communities (but not necessarily experience in forestry) established networks of organizations to build trust; engage and educate landowners; and facilitate legal, technical, and financial assistance. The need to produce clear outcomes and advances during the 30-month pilot project time frame meant that, at this early stage of the SFLR, the Endowment focused on providing the attention, information exchange, and coaching required to help the projects and their networks get up and running. Once the three pilot projects were established, research and practice partners met to define and plan the research component, which involved discussing the role of research, the type of data needed, and possible research approaches. Relatively little was known about the African American landowners in the project areas

and the specific details of ownership and forestry issues that they faced, and it was important to the Endowment to be able to evaluate progress later based on concrete program outcomes (e.g., improvements in ownership situations and forestry engagement). Thus, we prioritized rapid collection of baseline data that would characterize landowners and their land ownership and forestry history.

Previous research experience with African American landowners had shown that formal surveys were time consuming and difficult to implement, and that returns were often very low from mail surveys. We sought an approach that would maximize our understanding of landowners in a short time period; we decided that face-to-face interviewing was important, and we chose a rapid appraisal model. Rapid appraisal methodologies have been used in international conservation and development work to obtain quick feedback from landowners for project design and identify future research themes, and to provide integrated social, economic, and ecological perspectives (Russell and Harshbarger 2003; Schelhas 1991, 2000). We jointly developed a rapid appraisal instrument to gather baseline data, and we made arrangements to work with the pilot projects to carry out the baseline research. At this time, the pilot projects were beginning their outreach work and were promoting the projects in community meetings and through their contacts and networks. They had developed sufficient on-the-ground contacts to be able to identify potential interviewees for the research. We assembled a core team of two anthropologists with experience in land-use choice and cultural values of forests, as well as a rotating group of forestry faculty and Forest Service research colleagues to join the core team for parts of the research. This team would collect the social science data, and project foresters would introduce the team to each landowner and also assess the forest conditions for each land ownership. The interview guide covered land and forest characteristics, landowner demographics, land ownership status, land use and forestry experience, experiences and memories related to the land, value of the land and forests, and future interests for the land and forests (see Schelhas et al. 2017b).

There was not a list of African American landowners in the project sites that could be used to select a random sample for interviewing, and projects were in the process of identifying landowners. Yet careful attention to sampling was important in order to try to capture the full diversity of landowners and to maximize the usefulness of the

results. Our approach was to ask project foresters from each state to develop purposive samples of 20 landowning families with 10 or more acres of land according to specific guidelines. Since outreach efforts were already reaching and influencing some landowners and we did not want our results biased toward early adopters, the 20 landowners in each state were to be evenly distributed between families who had already become engaged in the pilot projects and landowners who had not yet become involved (who were identified by the foresters through their community contacts). Our sample thus represented a mix of engaged, early adopters and those with nascent interest but limited engagement in the SFLR. Our sample likely did not include families that were very difficult to reach or highly distrustful of outsiders and who could only be reached through long-term ethnographic engagement. Project foresters also were asked to choose a sample with diversity in parcel size, forest conditions, age, gender, income, employment status and occupation, management objectives, experience with forestry, and land ownership status.

Interviews of about two to four hours were conducted with each of the 60 landowning families. Our preference was to interview landowners at their homes and on their lands in order to best understand their circumstances and facilitate discussions of their forests (Fig. 1), but some interviewees chose other locations such as nearby churches and community centers. Landowners were encouraged to have multiple family members at the interview, generally in person but sometimes by phone, and we often visited the land together after the interview. Some absentee landowners living out of state were interviewed by phone. A project forester visited each property to conduct a rapid assessment of forest characteristics and conditions, either at the time of the interview or later. After field research, we provided each family with a written summary of their interview and a copy of the forestry assessment, and several interviewees sent us corrections and clarification. Interview notes were analyzed with NVivo qualitative analysis software, with coding developed as a hybrid of the interview guide and new topics that emerged from the texts themselves.

Our first outputs were organized summaries of our results that enabled program and project personnel to incorporate the research findings into their work immediately. We then produced publications for the family forestry literature that expanded the analyses, summarized important landowner



**FIGURE 1.** Interviews were conducted with groups of forest-owning family members at or near their property (Photo by Eleanor Cooper Brown).

characteristics and experiences in tables, and compiled extensive quotes and excerpts from our field notes to convey the deep relationships to land and complex experiences that landowners described. While these details have been reported elsewhere (Hitchner, Schelhas, and Johnson-Gaither 2017; Schelhas et al. 2017a, 2017b), here we want to highlight some of the key findings and the ways that they were useful.

### ***Who they are***

Landowners interviewed were nearly all over 50 years of age and were almost evenly split between male and female. Education levels were very high, and many interviewees were or had been employed in professional occupations (often education). Incomes were modest, with more than half being retired. Many landowners had lived away from the land for long periods of time, either in northern cities or mid-to-large southern population centers. Nearly half of the interviewees had heirs' property, which they generally considered to be family land. In summary, we found that there was a pool of landowners becoming more involved with their land, often recent retirees who were the vanguard of generational change in land management, and that this created an opportunity for the SFLR. The educational levels and professional careers of our interviewees suggested that we had reached a group of people who were prepared and capable to become engaged in the SFLR, which was a positive sign for the developing projects. However, it also became apparent that reaching landown-

ers who were struggling would be more difficult and time consuming for outreach personnel.

### ***Attachment to the land***

One of the ways we established rapport with interviewees was by asking them about the history, meaning, and importance of their land (Fig. 2). Many families had obtained their land long before the civil rights era, some in the mid- to-late 1800s. These lands were both obtained and retained through great effort and struggle, and in many cases some land had also been involuntarily lost to settle debts, as a result of failure to pay taxes, and through fraudulent surveys and records. These experiences, along with the specific tracts of land involved, had often been passed down through family stories. Early experiences and memories of the land included stories of childhood travels from northern cities to spend summers on the land with grandparents, the freedom of exploring the land and forests, lessons learned through helping with hard farm work, and the pleasures of partaking in farm-fresh produce. The results of these early experiences were strong attachments to family land, commitments to resolve property issues and make land economically self-sustaining, and desires to engage the next generation to ensure they would keep the land in the family. These stories were passed along to the SFLR projects in our earliest research reports, and they contributed to projects' understanding of the history and importance of landownership. Notably, the anthropological method of letting the landowner lead by telling





**FIGURE 2.** Forest service researcher John Schelhas and landowner Eleanor Cooper Brown discuss their family's land and forests (Photo by Sarah Hitchmer).

their personal story led to a very different flow of information than occurs when an outreach project recruits participants.

These stories were very important both for the developing projects and for our future research. In particular, we have been collaborating on a law review paper with Professor Thomas Mitchell (Texas A&M Law School), who led the writing of the Uniform Partition of Heirs' Property Act (UPHPA). This is a uniform law for adoption by states<sup>7</sup> that, among other things, requires judges dealing with heirs' property cases to take into account the historical, cultural, and sentimental value of the land in addition to the economic value in order to help families retain land that has great meaning to them. Our rich interview data on the history and meaning of land to the families provide concrete stories of the value of land to families, and hopefully these will help attorneys, judges, and policy makers understand and implement this aspect of the law. The UPHPA is a significant development in addressing heirs' property, in that it requires recognition of the historical, cultural, and sentimental value of land when legal processes to partition heirs' property are invoked—although this is only one element of the heirs' property issue.

### **Heirs' property**

Heirs' property was a well-known issue from the very beginning of the SFLR. Baseline data showed

that about 40 percent of the interviewees had at least one tract of heirs' property (some had other property too)(Fig. 3). The qualitative data revealed that heirs' property was generally considered to be owned by the entire family, but that it was managed through many different arrangements. In some cases one individual farmed, lived on, or rented houses on the property and was responsible for paying taxes. In other situations, heirs shared the tax burden, often with one representative for each major family line. Collecting the money from family members to pay taxes was often described as difficult, with several individuals often reluctantly making up the shortfall. We also encountered cases where a tract of heirs' property had been divided into separate tax parcels, leading to a false sense of security since the entire heirs' property tract is actually owned in common. When timber was sold on heirs' property, returns were low, in part because the family member selling timber may not have been legally entitled to sell the timber, and consequently the proceeds were sometimes not shared among the family. Mostly we learned the many details rooted in family histories that complicate heirs' property ownership and management, as well as the challenges of reaching agreement among family members about nearly every effort to use the property or clear title. Many families noted the need for several years of discussion to come to agreement.



**FIGURE 3.** Catherine Braxton, Lloyd Fields, and Rebecca Campbell (left to right) manage family land in South Carolina (Photo by Sarah Hitchner).

### **Forest management**

Landowners had relatively little engagement in forest management for a number of reasons (Fig. 4). The history of land use was often small-scale family farming, and, although rarely viable today, among elders there was often an affinity to farming and some resistance to reforesting fields they had once cleared. While many landowners had large gardens and a few rented out fields to neighboring farmers, many former agricultural fields had already grown up in naturally regenerated pine forests. The resulting low-value stands were often harvested for immediate cash needs in response to offers from loggers working nearby, and people often felt they had been underpaid when they had sold timber. Few landowners had planted trees or conducted common forest management activities such as prescribed burning and thinning. While there is an economic logic to low investment and risk leading to opportunistic returns over time, returns were generally insufficient even to cover tax payments. Notably, people reported that they knew very little about forestry and had few contacts in the forestry community. They also reported low levels of familiarity with and use of financial assistance programs for conservation and forestry, which are important for family forest owners due to the high cost of initial forestry investment followed by a long wait for returns. Yet interest in forestry was high due to a desire to keep land for the future while gaining greater and more regular returns, and there was strong interest in obtaining professional assistance.

### **Building on and Understanding Success**

For several years after the baseline research, the research team presented the baseline results many times for both scientific and outreach meetings. The former helped promote the project within the forestry and natural resource professional community, and were often done in conjunction with SFLR staff and sometimes landowners. Presentations included webinars for extension agents and other professionals; papers, posters, and roundtables at Society of American Foresters (SAF) and Society for Applied Anthropology annual meetings; and a podcast for the SAF website. In 2015, when the International Symposium on Society and Natural Resources (ISSRM) was in Charleston, where one of the pilot projects was based, we organized a roundtable of landowners to directly share their experiences and facilitated a keynote address by the project director. The baseline research results were also presented at landowners' workshops from North Carolina to Texas. Landowners often told us how much they appreciated learning that many other people like them shared the same concerns and limitations regarding landownership and forestry, showing them this was not so much an individual family shortcoming but rather a larger issue.

Research team members were considered a part of the program and attended and presented at many SFLR annual retreats and conference calls, during which they heard grassroots reports from the project personnel and landowners about successes and ways



**FIGURE 4.** North Carolina forest owner Roger McGee with one of his young longleaf pines. (Photo by Sarah Hitchner)

that they had overcome obstacles. Largely from these experiences, we proposed a new round of field research to identify strategies for success to be funded by the SFLR. Most of the literature on African American landowners focused on identifying obstacles and problems, and we wanted to take advantage of SFLR experiences to document positive efforts and techniques to overcome obstacles and achieve successes. This work again focused on the three pilot projects, because they had been operating for the longest time. We again visited landowners at their homes and forests—often to warm welcomes and tales of their experiences since the earlier baseline interviews. A total of 33 interviews were completed in three states, in which we talked to landowners, pilot project foresters, program collaborators, and agency and industry forestry professionals. This led to a social science “practice of forestry” paper in the *Journal of Forestry* that provided detailed lessons for

reaching African American and other underserved landowners (Schelhas, Hitchner, and Dwivedi 2018). The paper outlined the process of raising awareness and engaging landowners by working through existing community groups (particularly churches), and the formation of peer-to-peer learning networks where participating landowners became involved in outreach. A key finding was that forestry opportunities and knowledge could stimulate resolution of heirs’ property; one or several of the joint owners of land with unresolved heirs’ property were often able to work with state and federal agencies to begin the process of forest planning. Then later, by showing a pathway to making the land productive, they were able to motivate their families to come together to resolve ownership issues in an effort to build intergenerational wealth and knowledge. The results also delineated a comprehensive ten-step process for bringing landowners with little trust and



**FIGURE 5.** Center for Heirs' Property Preservation forester Sam Cook shows longleaf pine on family forestland in South Carolina (Photo by Sarah Hitchner).

knowledge of forestry gradually into forest management, in which a forest management plan was a key component. Many landowners had positive experiences learning about and beginning to engage with financial assistance programs, and the research revealed some innovative work-arounds that projects and NRCS offices had developed to increase success rates for landowners when applying for assistance; this allowed these agencies and partner organizations to begin program support to landowners with heirs' property. We also documented innovative ways that project foresters had pooled small ownerships for timber harvests, encouraged landowners to work with a forester to get bids when selling timber, and, in one state, worked closely with a third-generation African American owned logging company. Finally, we detailed the critical central role the SFLR had played in building support among state and federal agencies, expanding networks to include new partners, facilitating information sharing among the different projects and landowners, and quickly removing roadblocks by establishing a forestry fund that could provide modest payments for expenses not covered by state and federal financial assistance

programs, such as the cost for conducting land boundary surveys.

Additionally, we collaborated with our University of Georgia forestry colleague, Puneet Dwivedi, to use social network analysis (SNA) to show how networks within the North Carolina project had changed over the duration of the program (Fig. 5). Dwivedi was involved in two quantitative analyses during the pilot project phase. One, an analysis of perceptions of different stakeholder groups (Dwivedi, Schelhas, and Jagadish 2016) was useful in bringing those stakeholder groups together to take ownership of the problem. The second involved social network data collected early in the NC pilot project, which turned out not to be particularly useful at that time. But by collecting social network data again 3 years later, we were able to illustrate how communication networks had expanded and changed as the project matured (Hitchner et al. 2019). By combining the quantitative SNA data with our qualitative data, we were able to show that there was still considerable reliance on project personnel in spite of expanding networks (Hitchner et al. 2019).

## Integrating Research and Practice

### *Benefits to Research*

Engaging in long-term and integrated research with the SFLR provided a number of benefits to researchers. Clearly the SFLR played a key role in helping us overcome difficulties in, first, identifying and contacting African American landowners, and, second, establishing relationships of sufficient trust so that we were able to conduct detailed and in-depth interviews about the full set of relevant topics. Based on our prior experience, research of this nature is basically impossible to carry out without community assistance in identifying landowners, a personal introduction, and some evidence that it is providing benefits and not simply extracting information from landowners. Many landowners ask what they will get out of the interview at the very beginning, and the link to a program that was rapidly providing assistance was important to the research process. Collaboration with the SFLR enabled us to assemble diverse, purposive samples across three states for baseline research. Previous research on African American landowners and forestry had all been in single states and often had used convenience samples. Given the absence of relevant census data and great difficulty in generating sufficient response to mail surveys, our papers characterizing African American landowners, the issues they face, and their behaviors make an important contribution to the forestry and social science literature in the South. In our second phase of research, we were able to add significantly to our knowledge about program approaches, successes, and expansion in a way that benefitted the SFLR, and also provides guidance for other efforts to reach underserved landowners. It is important to note that we did not bring a preconceived program of research to the SFLR; the research program developed over time through discussions, regular reporting of our progress and results, and built on our ethnographic experiences in fieldwork and familiarity with SFLR activities.

### *Benefits to the SFLR*

Working with the research team in the field placed a time demand on SFLR outreach foresters, particularly at the beginning of the outreach activities. This burden was eased through joint planning and flexibility on the part of the research team, and project personnel quickly came to appreciate many aspects

of the research. In particular, the opportunity to hear landowner voices and perspectives outside of a formal project relationship gave them important insights into the landowners they were encountering. SFLR personnel reported that as they observed the research process and people's responses, they better understood where people stood and also observed people becoming motivated to address the issues. It also increased their awareness early in the projects to the diversity and complexity of landowner situations in their project areas and allowed them to plan and adjust accordingly.

Overall, the research contributed to the evolution of the SFLR as it was refined and adapted based on research findings. Notably, the early reports and presentations had the most impact on the program, as the journal articles took longer to produce and publish. Also, by observing the research process, the leaders of the SFLR came to consider the issue of trust between landowners and forestry providers to be less important than landowners becoming empowered by knowledge, connections to project foresters, and support from their peers.

Importantly, the research provided validation of SFLR in different ways and at various stages of its development. The concept of the SFLR was validated and refined through early meetings with researchers, which helped confirm the need for a long-term program bringing together land ownership and forestry. Studies carried out at different stages of the project were also helpful. Baseline data later proved critical to understanding how the program changed people's lives and to learn from outreach experiences, and the social network research showed how relationships between landowners and NRCS and forestry agencies could be changed over time. These studies were useful both internally and externally, as the research also played an important role in gaining legitimacy outside the immediate program. For example, potential collaborators and funders could be referred to research findings and journal articles. The publications also enhanced awareness of issues regarding heirs' property and African American engagement in forestry within the forestry and foundation communities. This was helpful with various types of funders, including the U.S. Endowment, USDA NRCS & Forest Service, and several foundations, and ultimately was integral to gaining support for long-term continuation and greater independence of the SFLR.

Finally, landowners also benefited from the research. One landowner told us:

I told [project forester], I will work with you because I have benefitted. . . . I talk to people in agricultural community that I've met at these conferences . . . . I knew I would need a networking system. . . . So I don't have a problem giving back, and I'm so fortunate in what I've been given through this project. I'm looking forward to the future. I'm interested in outreach.

Project personnel often discussed the specific benefits of research to landowners. As one project forester noted: "the research helped dispel the notion that their families had messed up; by understanding the larger problem, they were able to see that they were in the situation together and how they could help each other." Another project forester noted that when he had given presentations for landowners and engaged with them as part of peer-to-peer outreach, he was able to use quotes and data from the research. This was seen as adding legitimacy to their presentations, and helpful in informing and getting the attention of the upcoming generation. Ultimately, the research results, presentations, and publications were used in many ways to support and expand the program.

## Lessons Learned and Conclusions

A combination of research and outreach resulted in a successful program that addressed a set of complex and linked problems related to environmental and natural resource justice. The program has been able to grow throughout the South, and it has become a national model of a community-based, networked approach to addressing complex social and forestry issues through integrated research and practice. The collaborative effort helped solidify the program through contributions at different scales from projects to policy. Research shaped the understanding of the issues facing African American landowners and the ways that the networked approach was working, shaping many of the day-to-day activities of partner operations in the individual projects. But the work also brought about larger changes. Integrating research and outreach in the SFLR focused national attention on issues facing African American landowners in the South among the forestry community, government agencies, and foundations; inspired policy change by government agencies related to heirs' property; forged new alliances among landowners and agencies to improve

outreach; and made a scholarly contribution to issues related to underserved and minority landowners. In the end, the collaborative effort created a platform of institutions and knowledge for enduring work on land ownership and forestry among historically underserved groups. This began with researchers, practitioners, and landowners listening to each other, attending the same workshops, and interacting in the field. But broader scholarship, vision, and networking brought about changes beyond the projects themselves and led to enduring changes in policy and institutions. Finally, we want to emphasize the critical role of an anthropological approach. In-depth fieldwork and qualitative analysis made a key contribution by bringing out landowners' stories, perspectives, experiences, and interests in nuanced ways. The results show that a combination of sharing, listening, and documenting stories empowers participants and centers community-based projects on the participants themselves, even as it draws broader attention to and support for them.

## Notes

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

2. Center for Heirs' Property Preservation, South Carolina; Roanoke Center, North Carolina; and Limited Resource Landowner Education and Assistance Network (LRLEAN) and Federation of Southern Cooperatives/Land Assistance Fund, Alabama.

3. See <https://www.usendowment.org/sustainable-forestry-and-african-american-land-retention-program-set-to-grow/> (accessed June 5, 2019).

4. See, for example, Episode 3 of America's Forests with Chuck Leavell; <https://www.americasforestswithchuckleavell.com/watch/episode-3-south-carolina> (accessed February 16, 2020).

5. John Schelhas, as a Forest Service researcher, coordinated the Consortium from 1999 to 2010.

6. Tuskegee University and Alabama A&M University are historically black 1890 Land Grant Universities, and Auburn University is an 1862 Land Grant University. Tuskegee has had a pre-forestry program since 1968, and Alabama A&M and Auburn have Society of American Foresters-accredited forestry programs.

7. Currently, 13 states have adopted a version of the UHPA, and several others have begun the process.

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