

# PROFILE: OPPORTUNITIES FOR COMMUNITY-BASED FORESTRY IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN COMMUNITIES IN THE SOUTHERN U.S.

The South, which includes 13 states, is heavily forested from Virginia to Eastern Texas and Oklahoma. Forestland totals 214 million acres, or 40% of the region's land area, with five states being more than 60% forested. About 96% of the South's forestland is classified as "timberland," 90% of which is private. Upland hardwood is the dominant forest type on non-industrial private timberlands, which are 38% of Southern private timberlands. Planted pine is the dominant forest type on forest industry lands, which are 14% of Southern private timberlands.<sup>1</sup> A large share of the timber market in the South is composed of fast-growing pine plantations, which account for approximately two-thirds of the tree plantations in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

## Trends in the Region

Over the past two decades, the rural South has undergone significant economic transformation in areas such as manufacturing, technology, service industries, agriculture, and forestry. While many of the transitions are directly related to global and regional market shifts, the impacts are magnified by the South's land, history, and culture.

The South is one of the country's fastest growing regions, yet compared to other regions its population is significantly rural – over 35% of the South's population (compared to an overall American average of 20%) lives in rural areas.<sup>3</sup> Poverty and rurality intersect to a high degree in the region: between a third and a half of the nation's rural poor live in the Southeast. The numbers and percentages of Southern black rural poor are substantially higher than the numbers and percentages of other ethnic groups in the rural South.

The history and legacy of slavery is mapped on the Southern landscape – 53% of the U.S.'s black population lives in the South. 623 counties have at least 12% African-American population and some with as much as 80%, 20-40% of whom live in poverty.<sup>4</sup> This region is known as the Southern Black Belt, referring simultaneously to the rich soils of the region, which became known for cotton production, and the predominantly African-American population, whose

ancestors farmed the cotton.

## African Americans and the Forest

Since the beginning of European exploration in the New World, black Africans have been involved in and connected with forests. While slaveholder interests drove African participation in logging, clearing for agriculture, and extracting turpentine for the naval stores industry, Africans concurrently sought spiritual renewal and protection in forests, which served as places of worship and as safe havens for escape.

Post-slavery, forests held different meaning through low-level jobs on pine plantations, which displaced much of the cotton economy. During the Jim Crow era, many of the sacred spiritual and protective properties blacks may have associated with forests were, in many cases, lost when the forests became the venue for extensive Ku Klux Klan activity and lynching.<sup>5</sup> In the first quarter of the 20th century, mechanization and low wages, along with racial hatred, pushed large numbers of Southern rural blacks, many of whom were working on pine plantations, to Northern and Western (particularly Californian) cities for employment.

To fully understand African Americans' shift from intimacy to disassociation with forests<sup>6</sup>, forests must be put in the broader context of African-American land ownership. Between the end of the Civil War and Reconstruction (1867-1910), African-American families and communities accumulated approximately 15 million acres of land, mostly in the South. This land represented one of the largest forms of wealth held by African Americans. Over the course of the 20th century, however, African-American landownership declined dramatically. Today, African Americans own less than 2.17 million acres. The reasons for the decline in landownership include tax and partition sales, mortgage foreclosures, failure to write wills, land ownership limitations on welfare recipients, eminent domain, and voluntary sales, in addition to outright intimidation and theft.

Today, the majority of African-American land loss results

<sup>1</sup> R. Alig, B. Butler, Area Changes in Forest Cover Types in the United States 1952-1997, with Projections to 2050 (A Technical Document Supporting the 2000 USDA Forest Service RPA Assessment). 2004. [http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw\\_gtr613.pdf](http://www.fs.fed.us/pnw/pubs/pnw_gtr613.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> The South contains two-thirds of the nation's tree plantations.

<sup>3</sup> Rural Population as a Percent of State Total by State, 2000. Washington, DC: Northeast Midwest Institute, 2002. [http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/rcipubs/what\\_is\\_rural.htm#RDM](http://www.nal.usda.gov/ric/rcipubs/what_is_rural.htm#RDM)

<sup>4</sup> Ron Wimberley, NC State University.

<sup>5</sup> A Brief History of African Americans and Forests, James G. Lewis, Staff Historian at the Forest History Society, 2006.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

from heir's property and fractionated land ownership. These challenges can be traced back to the historic lack of access to legal assistance and/or cultural traditions that focused on passing the land to all heirs as a means of keeping it in the family. Under current statutes in the South, it is relatively easy for developers, speculators and others outside the family to take advantage of the land's legal status to force "partition sales," putting it at high risk of being lost.

## Challenges to Forestry

In addition to the landownership and tenure issues described above, the concept of forestry, in and of itself, may be a challenging one from the perspective of many low-income African-American landowners. Tax and maintenance costs associated with forests can make them a liability as opposed to an asset. Forestry (including "sustainable forestry") may imply a long-term return on investment requiring specialized technical knowledge and expertise, financial resources, and time — most of which low-wealth landowners do not have. Furthermore, concepts of forestry may evoke negative past associations of low-wage or slave labor on pine plantations. They may also evoke more recent experiences among low-income African Americans of being paid below market value for timber or of discriminatory practices in certain organizations that make it tremendously difficult to access information, technical assistance, and financing to engage in forestry opportunities.

## Community-Based Forestry (CBF) in the South

Despite the above challenges, the reality remains that many African-American communities in the South are forest-rich (even if they aren't forest-reliant), and given the rapidly transitioning economies in the region, there is ample opportunity to access and integrate forest resources more into the local economies. CBF is a means for tapping the value of the forestland and adding a forestry sector to the economy. This approach may be interesting to low-income African-American landowners, communities, and community organizations in ways that conventional forestry might not be because of CBF's potential to:

- Respond to various issues related to black land ownership and land retention;
- Help landowners address their needs for short-term income (as opposed to long-term investment) sources that are compatible with continued (sometimes multiple) uses of their land;
- Help landowners improve management of their forests;
- Help landowners with product, business, and market development, including marketing skills, along with access to capital and financial education;
- Appeal to and involve youth in work related to the

land and forests so that aging landowners can pass their land (and hopes) onto the next generation;

- Increase organizational, community, and landowner capacity to understand and respond to global issues like climate change and more local ones like longleaf pine restoration;
- Help build new regional sustainable markets and economies; and,
- Build community.

## CBF Opportunities And Initiatives Underway And Under Consideration

**Land Retention:** Organizations like the Federation of Southern Cooperative/Land Assistance Fund (FSC/LAF), Black Family Land Trust, The Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities Program, and others<sup>7</sup> use CBF strategies focused through a lens of land retention to:

- Help landowners develop forest management plans that serve as a platform for broader land and estate planning and help landowners understand and develop wills to avoid issues related to heirs property;
- Work within state agencies to help landowners and farmers address discriminatory governmental practices that often hinder access to technical and financial resources; and,
- Provide hands-on technical assistance to implement projects that ensure long-term forestland stewardship.

**Carbon Trading:** Carbon trading programs provide economic incentives for landowners to adopt good forest management practices because the program eligibility requirements include forest management plans and third-party certification. The Mountain Association for Community Economic Development (MACED) and FSC/LAF seek to make carbon trading programs accessible to low wealth and underserved landowners by increasing access to eligibility through loans and technical assistance to fulfill carbon trading program requirements, such as management plan development, certification, and inventories and by increasing the flexibility of eligibility requirements (FSC/LAF). (See idea profile for more detail on MACED and FSC carbon programs.) The National Wildlife Federation is conducting outreach and education with low-wealth Southern landowners about carbon trading as one strategy among others (including certification and agro forestry) for longleaf pine restoration and climate change.

**Timberland Investment Management Organization (TIMO) Timber Sales:** The Conservation Fund's Resourceful Communities Program (TCF/RCP) in North Carolina is helping communities organize for forestland divestiture by exploring potential financing strategies that communities might consider for acquiring TIMO land in

<sup>7</sup> The Land Loss Prevention Project and the Center for Heirs Property Preservation also address issues related to African-American land loss and land retention, but have not, as of yet, worked in the area of community-based forestry.

their communities. Some examples include Department of Defense (DOD) funds, Forest Legacy funds (through state Forest Resource Departments) and New Market Tax Credits.

*Department of Defense (DOD) example:* In areas where TIMO land availability coincides with DOD operations and concerns about encroachment around the boundaries of DOD operations, TCF/RCP might propose that DOD buy the TIMO land and transfer it to the community. A locally- owned, locally-managed community forest foundation would be established to receive the TIMO land and, with technical support from TCF/RCP, would develop a management plan for the forest. The community forest foundation would partner with community development organizations, faith-based groups, and other community entities to manage the land.

**Community Forests:** In Cumberland County, North Carolina, the Sandhills Area Land Trust (SALT), the Sandhills Family Heritage Association (SFHA), Kingdom Community Development Corporation (CDC), and the town of Spring Lake are in dialogue to consider possibilities for using forestry as a means to discuss and address needs in the African-American community, including housing, jobs and income, forestland access, and recreation. At the center of these deliberations are questions like, *“How can the forest serve the community and how can we preserve the forest?”*

The “value streams” available through the community forest approach in Cumberland County would be economic activities, such as pine straw raking, sustainable timber harvesting, and/or land leasing for individual economic activities, such as beekeeping or meat goat raising; recreational and health promoting activities, such as hiking trails and horseback riding; and affordable housing that the Kingdom CDC would potentially develop, taking advantage of open space tax credits. In addition to exploring community management and multiple sustainable uses of the forest, this model is also experimenting with new ways for land trusts to work with communities that go beyond the real estate transaction component of land conservation.

## **Institutional Capacity**

The philanthropic and non-profit infrastructure in

the South is small, relative to the enormous income, employment, health, education, and natural resource issues the region faces. In particular, the infrastructure for supporting CBF is made up of just a few organizations. This is changing, however, with recent investments from the Ford Foundation and others to build organizational infrastructure for land-based community development (which will overlap directly with CBF) through a technical assistance group focused on facilitating and brokering technical assistance, organizational development, peer-to-peer exchange, coaching and other strategies for building institutional capacity. Another example of building CBF organizational infrastructure in the South is the Ford Foundation’s grant to the National Wildlife Federation (mentioned above) to undertake a one-year pilot project to identify and test opportunities (such as carbon trading, certification, and agro forestry) for CBF that address issues related to longleaf pine restoration and climate change.

Despite these steps forward, the need for CBF investment focused on building and improving organizational infrastructure is critical in a number of areas to move the field forward, including:

- Increased engagement and development of youth around issues related to building on forest assets and community;
- Strengthened institutional and social infrastructure through leadership development, networks, and collaborations;
- Enhanced grassroots capacity to organize, articulate, and promote CBF issues at state and federal levels;
- Improved organizational capacity to analyze, develop, and advocate for policies that support sustainable economies, and specifically CBF;
- Strengthened intermediary organization capacity to facilitate convening and collaborating on a regional basis to leverage opportunities to: influence policies that favor procurement of sustainably-produced wood products; develop regional markets for those products; promote regional learning and exchanges, etc.; and,
- Increased organizational capacity to raise philanthropic funds for CBF.