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ARTICLE



Understanding black landowner's engagement in forestry in Georgia, United States: a closer look

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ABSTRACT

Black rural land ownership and agriculture in the U.S. South have declined markedly over the past century. The challenges of farming and the rise of off-farm employment mean that forestry is often the most appropriate productive land use choice, yet engagement in forest management is often limited in Black landowners. The literature has identified the primary obstacles for forestry as land ownership issues such as heirs' property, a disconnect between Black landowners and forestry professionals, and poor access to the conservation assistance programs supporting family forestry. Yet our understanding of these factors is incomplete. This paper provides an in-depth exploration of the factors influencing forestry engagement by Black landowners in the U.S. South based on in-person, semi-structured interviews and analysis of the resulting quantitative and qualitative data. The results suggest that past discrimination has often led to smaller landholdings and insecure land tenure, which limit forestry engagement. In addition, we find that forestry engagement is further hindered by family disagreement, as well as research and outreach initiatives that fail to acknowledge traditional forest use and management practices and narrowly focus on technical forestry while ignoring social contexts.

KEYWORDS

Black landowners;
sustainable forestry; forestry
engagement; Georgia; U.S.
South; heirs' property

Introduction

Black rural land ownership in the U.S. South¹ has declined considerably over the past century,² with negative economic and social implications (Zabawa et al. 1990; Gilbert et al. 2002). In a region where agriculture has declined, and family-owned forestlands make a significant economic contribution to a strong forestry sector and resilient rural communities (Goyke et al. 2019a, Wood and Gilbert 2000), increasing sustainable forest management by Black family forest landowners represents an important strategy to build wealth, encourage land retention, maintain family legacies tied to land ownership, and enhance social capital to counter past discrimination (Goyke et al. 2019b; Schelhas and Hitchner 2020; Hitchner et al. 2021). While concerns about the lack of participation of Black landowners in forestry have been recognized for several decades (Hilliard-Clark and Cheney 1985), recent research has increased our understanding of key underlying factors, elements of successful outreach, and the benefits of community-based approaches (Hitchner et al. 2017; Schelhas et al. 2017, 2018). We know that Black landowners often face unique

challenges related to land ownership, forestry engagement, and participation in conservation incentive programs (Gan and Kolison 1999; Christian et al. 2013; Gordon et al. 2013; Dwivedi et al. 2016; Schelhas et al. 2017). Yet research also shows a range of levels of engagement in forestry, with some landowners having little to no forestry knowledge and experience. In contrast, others have a great deal of experience, comfort, and capability participating in all aspects of forest management (Schelhas et al. 2018). This variation is not sufficiently explained in the current literature on Black forest landowners. Our goal in this paper is to explore the complex interplay of factors that differentiate landowners in their choices and ability to engage using quantitative data on landowner demographics, land ownership characteristics, and forestry engagement, as well as qualitative data on how landowners talk about their land and forest management decisions. In particular, we focus on these research questions: (1) How do demographic and ownership characteristics influence forestry engagement? (2) Under what circumstances does heirs' property obstruct forestry activities? (3) Which owners are most likely to use forestry assistance providers and programs? (4) How is forestry practiced by Black landowners, and how do they become interested in and gain experience with forestry?

Background

Hilliard-Clark and Chesney (1985) were among the first to investigate why there were low levels of forest management among Black landowners relative to white landowners, identifying three reasons: (1) clouded title and heirs' property, specifically fractionated land ownership, which occurs when a landowner dies intestate, leaving land held in common by multiple family members; (2) lack of experience with forestry; and (3) lack of awareness of financial assistance programs and a history of discrimination against Black landowners in their implementation. More recent research, as described below, has confirmed the importance of these issues while refining and expanding our understanding of them.

Land ownership issues

Rural Black land ownership in the U.S. South has its roots in farming (Gilbert et al. 2002). As farm mechanization increased the minimum viable size of farms and decreased the demand for farm labor at the same time as industrial job opportunities became available in urban areas, many Black Americans left rural areas in what is known as the Great Migration (Trotter 1991). Discrimination against Black Americans by majority White institutions was widespread in this region and hindered their engagement in forestry even as the regional forest products industry grew. Concurrently, Black families lost a substantial amount of rural land through limited trusted access to the legal system, lack of capital to invest in productive land uses, outright theft and chicanery, and forced and voluntary sales associated with heirs' property (Zabawa et al. 1990; Gilbert et al. 2002). Yet many families who migrated to urban areas around the country retained rural land in the South and maintained connections to it through kin relationships, regular visits, and circular migration among family members (Gottlieb 1991; Hitchner et al. 2021). Much of this land has been underutilized and is now covered in naturally regenerated pine forests (Schelhas et al. 2017). With the recent return migration of Black citizens to the South, many families have reclaimed land that is often collectively owned and/or in heirs' property (Dyer and Bailey 2008; Goyke

and Dwivedi 2018, Schelhas and Hitchner 2018; Stack 1996). Collective ownership, common when land is owned across generations, complicates decision-making when multiple owners have disagreements about objectives or cannot come together to sign contracts for timber harvest and management (Bailey et al. 2019; Gordon et al. 2013, Goyke et al. 2019b). Heirs' property, which may have hundreds of geographically dispersed co-owners, adds to the difficulties of collective ownership by limiting access to capital and fostering tenure insecurity and land loss, as well as by discouraging individual owners from investing in improvements on the land when benefits must be shared with co-owners (Gordon et al. 2013; Bailey et al. 2019).

Forestry engagement

Historically, rural Black experience with forestry was often limited to labor-intensive jobs, such as pulpwooding, tree planting, and labor at mills, which, combined with lack of exposure to educational opportunities in natural resource fields, has resulted in a disinterest in forestry (Bailey et al. 1996 ; Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985). Farming was often preferred because it provided greater independence and community well-being (Gilbert et al. 2002). This historical lack of knowledge and connections to forestry has several outcomes. Handicapped by the limited use of forestry professionals, many forest plots are unmanaged and have made minimal contributions to landowner income (Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003). Black forest landowners have also faced multiple forest management difficulties due to discrimination, economic status, and smaller forest tracts (Gan and Kebede 2005; Gan and Kolison 1999, Gan et al. 2003; Gordon et al. 2013). Finally, Black landowners often received low returns from timber harvests when timber was sold to unscrupulous loggers without forest inventories and competitive bidding, a problem exacerbated by the legal constraints associated with heirs' property (Schelhas et al. 2017; Bailey et al. 2019).

Conservation assistance programs³

Black landowners have historically faced discrimination in the administration of federal conservation assistance programs (Daniel 2013, Gilbert et al. 2002). As a result, Black landowners lack trust and confidence in these programs and have had a longstanding perception that they are biased (Christian et al. 2013; Gordon et al. 2013, Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985). Participation has also been hindered by barriers to participation, such as heirs' property and the inability to afford cost-sharing (Christian et al. 2013; Dwivedi et al. 2016). While participation in conservation programs is low among all landowners, Black landowners have been found to be less likely to participate in some programs; they also enroll fewer acres and are more dissatisfied with programs (Gan et al. 2005).

None of these three issues is unique to Black landowners. Heirs' property occurs among populations of all races who have access and trust issues with the legal system (Gaither 2016), and surveys of forest owners in the South find that small ownerships, lack of engagement in forestry, and limited use of conservation assistance programs are widespread (USDA Forest Service 2021). Although other forest landowners may share some of these characteristics, here we emphasize Black landowners because they are a distinct group that has been historically subject to discrimination and

therefore often face multiple obstacles. We know that Black forest landowners, like forest owners in general, operate in a diversity of circumstances and have diverse interests, and that the effects of common obstacles are not always shared or universal (Hilliard-Clark and Chesney 1985; Schelhas et al. 2018; Goyke et al. 2019a). The shortcomings of comprehensive surveys, as well as the diversity and complexity in forest ownership and forestry engagement, underscore the importance of more nuanced research on the factors influencing Black forestry engagement.

Methods and study area

Identifying, reaching, and interviewing Black landowners is challenging because they are widely dispersed, unidentified in databases, and often distrustful of outsiders due to historical discrimination (Schelhas et al. 2017; Schelhas and Hitchner 2020). Because of these challenges, our research was carried out using a semi-structured survey and a purposive sample obtained through recommendations from key contacts. We focused our interviews on the Black Belt of Georgia, a region with a higher-than-average Black rural population; counties where interviews took place are shown in Figure 1. This is a major timber producing region utilizing native pines (*Pinus taeda* and *P. palustris*). We contacted most of our interviewees through the Fort Valley State University (FVSU) extension program, which works across Georgia's Black Belt. FVSU is a Historically Black University and Georgia's 1890 Land Grant Institution, with a long history of serving Black farmers, landowners, and communities. We reached additional interviewees through local land trusts, churches, and professional colleagues. We endeavored to reach a diversity of landowners in terms of land ownership and personal characteristics (landholding size, participation in forestry and farming, ownership characteristics, as well as landowner age, gender, and socio-economic class). However, our use of outreach and extension programs for referrals likely resulted in sampling landowners more engaged in active management and more likely to be farmers.

Each interview was conducted by a pair of researchers, one male and one female. While neither was Black, both were anthropologists experienced in cross-cultural research, and together they had over thirty years of experience conducting research with Black landowners and communities. A total of forty interviews, ranging between one and two hours, were conducted with Black landowners having 4 hectares and more of forestland. Interviews were conducted between January 2018 and January 2020 in family homes, on their land, or in nearby community centers or churches when possible, and by phone when this was the only option. Interviews were conversational but based on a semi-structured interview guide that covered various topics related to the history of land ownership and forestry. We paid particular attention to the issue of forestry engagement: how people thought about and valued family land, how they described their families' historical and current engagements with forestry, and how landowners with little prior engagement made the transition to active forest management. We transcribed these interviews in real time. We then used NVivo qualitative analysis software to explore nuances in the key research themes established in our interview guides, as well as to identify emergent themes that would not otherwise have been captured had we relied on structured interviews or surveys.

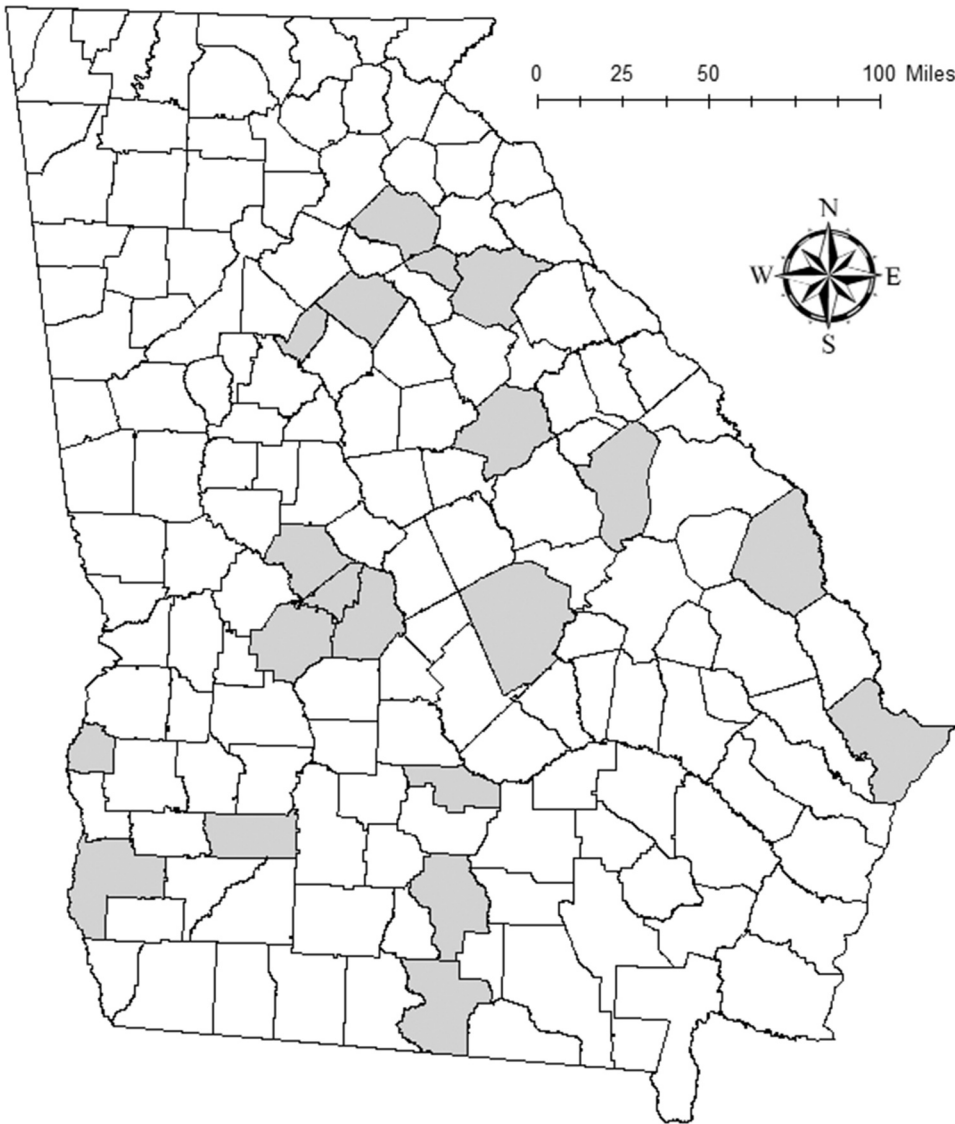


Figure 1. Map of the state of Georgia, United States, with shaded counties where interviews took place.

Results

Landowner characteristics and forestry activities

All but one of the interviewees were over age 50, and about one-third of them were over age 70 ([Table 1](#)). About one-third of the interviews included a female owner, either alone or as a part of a couple ([Table 1](#)). In terms of education, interviewees were nearly evenly split between those with a four-year college degree and those without; among those without a four-year degree, about half had some college, often a technical degree ([Table 1](#)). More than three-quarters of the interviewees held more than 8 hectares, slightly less than two-thirds had greater than 20 hectares, and nearly half had over 40 hectares of land ([Table 2](#)).

While the majority had title to their land, more than half had inherited land, and about one-third had heirs' property (Table 2). Only 10% of the interviewees turned a profit from their land, with about 40% breaking even and another 40% paying more in taxes than they earned from the land (Table 2). Involvement in forestry was modest, with about one-third of the interviewees having engaged in prescribed burning and the same proportion having planted trees (Table 3). More than half had sold timber through a thinning or other harvests in the past, and about half of the interviewees had used some sort of conservation assistance program (Table 3). These results are generally in line with those found in other studies in the U.S. South (Butler et al. 2020, Schelhas et al 2017; USDA Forest Service 2021).

While the nature of our sample does not allow for statistical analysis, we used crosstabs to investigate some of the relationships between variables. While there is no single indicator of forestry engagement, we believe the three best indicators of a landowner who is engaged in

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of landowners interviewed.

	Number	Percent
Age (in years)		
<50	1	2.5
51–70	26	65.0
>70	13	32.5
Gender		
Male	28	70.0
Female	8	20.0
Couple	4	10.0
Education (primary Interviewee)		
High School	8	20.0
Some College	12	30.0
Bachelors	8	20.0
Post graduate	10	25.0
Nonresponse	2	5.0
Employment		
Part-time employed	3	7.5
Full-time employed	15	37.5
Retired	22	50.0

Table 2. Ownership characteristics of land for interviewees.

	Number	Percent
Hectares Held		
<8	10	25.0
8–20	5	12.5
21–40	6	15.0
41–202	16	40.0
>202	3	7.5
Tenure		
Title	28	70.0
Heirs Property	10	25.0
Both	2	5.0
How land was obtained		
Purchase	15	37.5
Inherit	20	50.0
Combination	4	10.0
Nonresponse	1	2.5
Productivity		
Makes money	4	10.0
Costs money	16	40.0
About even	16	40.0
No response	4	10.0

Table 3. Forestry experience of interviewees.

	Number	Percent
Activities		
Tree Planting – Yes	14	35.0
Tree Planting – No	26	65.0
Burning – Yes	14	35.0
Burning – No	26	65.0
Thin or Harvest – Yes	23	57.5
Thin or Harvest – No	17	42.5
Use Conservation Assistance		
Yes	18	45.0
No	19	47.5
No Response	3	7.5
Forest Management Plan		
Yes	10	25.0
No	30	75.0

Table 4. Crosstabulations of landholding size with having a forest plan, tree planting, and use of conservation assistance.

Hectares	Forest Plan		Tree Planting		Conservation Assistance		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No Resp
<8	0	10	1	9	2	5	3
8–20	1	7	2	6	2	6	
21–40	0	6	2	4	2	4	
41–202	6	8	8	6	12	2	
>202	2	0	1	1	1	1	
	9	31	14	26	19	18	3

forestry are having a forest plan, planting trees, and use of conservation assistance programs. The crosstabs (Table 4) clearly show a jump in all three measures of forestry engagement when landholding size exceeds 40 hectares. The results for heirs' property (Table 5), however, suggest that it may not have a strong relationship with forestry engagement. The results for farmers (Table 6), who generally had about one third of their land in trees, suggest that farmers may be slightly more likely to plant trees but are more likely to have participated in conservation assistance programs.

Table 5. Crosstabulation of land tenure with having a forest plan, tree planting, and use of conservation assistance.

	Forest Plan		Tree Planting		Conservation Assistance		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	NR
Title	4	24	10	18	14	11	3
Heirs	1	7	2	6	2	6	0
Both	4	0	2	2	3	1	0
	9	31	14	26	19	18	3

Table 6. Crosstabulations of farmer with having a forest plan, tree planting, and use of conservation assistance.

	Forest Plan		Tree Planting		Conservation Assistance		
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	No Resp
Farmer	3	10	6	7	10	2	1
Not Farmer	6	21	8	19	9	16	2
	9	31	14	26	19	18	3

Land ownership issues

Many Black landowners face complicated ownership situations as a legacy of discrimination and poverty, and heirs’ property has received considerable attention as a significant obstacle to forestry and conservation assistance programs. However, while heirs’ property was mentioned in our interviews, landowners talked more about the challenge of getting multiple owners from different family branches to agree on how to use and manage the land together regardless of whether the land was in heirs’ property or co-owned with clear title. One interviewee had several tracts of heirs’ property, one mired in historic disagreement and one in which the family was working together, and was able to highlight the difference:

The heirs’ property [in Georgia] is titled under [the great grandparents]. . . . The other is the heirs of [another branch of the family] . . . We have 40 acres of heirs’ property in North Carolina – it’s really cumbersome, and we can’t cut timber on it, because we don’t even know who all the heirs are. . . . A cousin is administrating that. . . . There are some hard feelings there between some brothers and sisters – some of them haven’t talked in 20-30 years. . . . In Georgia, we’re united on keeping it in the family. We’ve incorporated, created an organization. We’ve hired an attorney to see what we can and can’t do. . . . We’re focused more on being cohesive as a family and keeping the family together. That’s a rallying point. . . . If there’s not any cohesiveness in the family, there’s no incentive to come home.

This landowner, having experienced the costs of disharmony on one side of his family, prioritized family harmony for the other side of his family over resolving heirs’ property and using the land more productively. The second side of the family came together to form an organization and developed a structure for decision-making within the family.

Among heirs’ property owners, distrust within a family often impedes progress even when one family member is trying to bring the land into more active management. The seeds of distrust are often sown when heirs have different levels of presence on the land, with those physically closest to the land feeling they have more rights than others in spite of the fact that they legally have equal shares. In other cases, one heir might illegally harvest timber on their own, neither obtaining consent from all heirs nor sharing the proceeds. When this occurs, it can create long term disharmony in the family. One landowner, discussing family disagreement, described how when they talk about their land, “You can tell by the folding of hands and the frowns that are coming while they are listening” that no progress will be made without intervention from someone outside the family. As one landowner, a forestry professional himself, noted, “When you have a family dynamic, when you offer your ideas and suggestions, sometimes the family may view that as you

skewing that to your advantage, and they are not as receptive to information coming from a family member as they are to a total stranger.” Outside assistance from forestry professionals is sometimes helpful in overcoming distrust.

Because of differences in the ways that families are able (or not) to work together, the relationship between heirs’ property and forestry engagement was weak. However, regardless of ownership status, for many landowners the fact that tracts of land have been in a family for several generations often fosters a long-term perspective appropriate for forestry. Land ownership across generations makes the land more important to people, inspiring them to hold on to land and to manage it together for the benefit of future generations. One landowner expressed a common refrain: “My grandmother said we always keep the family home. Keep it. Don’t sell, and don’t stop the farm. We’ve been farming here for over 100 years.” Family history is an important element in ties to the land; even as lifeways have changed, landowners continue to look back to their family ties to the land and forward to the next generation. Many of these families were able to come together in various ways to manage their land as a family. Forestry fits in well with other long-term land management objectives, whether the land is being farmed or is primarily a family amenity. One person described managing a piece of family land with around 150 owners for which he had been designated the administrator. He has managed the land himself on behalf of his family for many years and was trying to prepare younger family members for future ownership. Another family had formed a committee, noting that, “We have a timber committee that reports biannually. All of us make the decisions, but the committee gives us the information.” Family land often continues to be meaningful even when most of the family members have professional jobs. Forestry serves employed and absentee landowners well by providing occasional income and accruing value over time while requiring less attention than farming or tree crops. It also provides a place for family get-togethers, recreational opportunities, and a sense of stewardship, illustrated by one landowner who is the primary land manager for a large tract:

I’m a descendant . . . Most of the 1700 acres are still owned by family members. The 1000 acres I manage with my brothers and sister is managed in an LLC [Limited Liability Company]. The 12 of us manage the 1000 acres together. My sister is the CEO [Chief Executive Officer]. My brother [name] is the Treasurer. I’m the Chief Operating Officer and make most of the management decisions. . . . It’s absolutely family land. Fishing, horseback riding – we want to keep it for future generations to enjoy. It’s something we want to keep in the family. . . . A lot of things we’re doing now, we’re doing for them. That’s why we’re doing pine trees and things you can do with a tractor, that don’t require a lot of manual labor. The next generation is showing a lot of interest. . . . I would love for them to come back, . . . , but [even] I have to work in [city name]. . . . We have family meetings and a spring and fall family cleanup. If you want to be descendants, you have to participate in two cleanup days a year – it’s an obligation. They enjoy it. It’s a family get-together. . . . We’re just trying to be good stewards. It was here before we came, and it’ll be here after we’re gone. We’ve been blessed, and we want to give other people the opportunity to enjoy it.

Forestry engagement

Many studies of Black forestry evaluate landowners’ engagement based on current technical forestry practices in the U.S. South that typically follow a set sequence: clearing land; using the proceeds from the harvest to plant pine trees from seedlings in single-species, even-aged stands; controlling competing vegetation with prescribed fire and/or herbicides; selectively

thinning; doing a final harvest; and preparing the site to begin the process anew (Gan and Kolison 1999; Gan et al. 2003; Schelhas et al. 2017, 2018).⁴ This type of management has dominated research and practice, and there are a number of benefits to it. These systems produce the highest volume of timber and economic returns per unit area, although with considerable upfront investment. Many providers of forestry services have costly equipment specifically designed for these forestry systems; they are unprepared for and uninterested in other types of management or harvest options.

Black forestry has often been quite different, in part because of exclusion from many aspects of technical forestry as it developed. It has historically been very common for Black landowners to allow land to regenerate naturally after a harvest. As one interviewee said, “People around here cut wood and just let it grow back on its own.” While this differs from technical forestry recommendations, it can be seen as a low-risk traditional forestry system that provides returns while minimizing investment costs. Landowners have also developed ways of working with naturally regenerated pine trees, sometimes including less intensive planting methods, to manage forests and improve yields over time. One landowner described visiting the dump during planting season to pick up discarded seedlings and planting these trees on their land to supplement natural regeneration. Another described how he and his brother would collect longleaf pinecones (*Pinus palustris*) and spread them out, later replanting the seedlings that came up to achieve more even spacing. One landowner clearly described this as a system:

Because of the location, our timber naturally regenerates. No cost to us. That further increases our return on our investment. Just a matter of managing it once it gets up. We have areas like that. We thin, burn . . . and then incorporate different management strategies once it grows up.

These traditional forest management methods have worked for some landowners but often have depended on the presence of small-scale logging operations that no longer exist. While traditional forest management persists, we found that some landowners choose to transition to more technical forestry practices. Landowners who were participating in conservation programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) were engaged in the typical sequence of technical forestry because certain management activities are specifically required and covered by program cost-shares. For example, one said: “The only time [I used a forestry consultant] is when they set out the longleaf [under CRP]. We contracted for site prep, pre-burn, and set out the trees.”

Participation in conservation assistance programs varied considerably. Many of the farmers interviewed were already involved with farm service agencies and conservation programs, and forests played a role in their overall land management and economic strategies. One farmer who also owns forestland discussed his intention to become more actively engaged in forest management:

Trees make the land more valuable. . . . I’ve not planted trees. I’m interested in doing it. I might. I want to talk to NRCS [Natural Resource Conservation Service] . . . about EQIP and CRP. . . . My goal now is to maintain and put value in it with timber – it’s worth more if you have to sell it. Timber grows faster than you think. You can spend \$5 to plant a tree now, then after ten years, that tree is big and you got something. Pennies make dollars. . . . My father did some pulpwooding on the side. One of my brothers had an accident on a tractor, he got medical debts. The timber was a source of income for . . . when my daddy had some debts to pay. . . . It’s good to have a mix of agriculture and trees. If the farm has a bad year, you have the trees. If they’re ready to harvest, that can help you financially.

Other farmers were switching to or adding forestry to their land use as a way of phasing out farming. One landowner with a strong identity as a farmer started out saying very negative things about trees but eventually talked about how he was now planting trees because they made sense for both him as he ages and his descendants who were unlikely to farm. Another landowner was turning to forestry because he farmed only 36 hectares, and the cost of equipment to remain in farming was too large for a farm of that size. He noted, “Pines are an investment . . . in the property and in the future. When I retire, at least I’ll have that.” Farmers often had a utilitarian perspective, were accustomed to active management, and were familiar with conservation assistance programs and the agencies that provide them. Owners who were retired or employed off the land were attracted to forestry but needed more guidance.

The interviews highlight the importance of trusted contacts and experience to improving confidence in forest management. Landowners that engage in forestry often have experiences that they have learned from, such as timber sales, enrollment in conservation programs, and tree planting. This knowledge has often been learned from family members or through neighbors and other personal contacts who worked in forestry or were more experienced in forestry. The qualitative results suggest that landowners who have a contact with expertise and experience in forestry, whether that is a consulting forester, extension agent, or neighbor, are more comfortable with the requirements of technical forestry. The landowners we interviewed were often geographically dispersed, and very few belonged to any forestry or landowner organizations that could provide information about and support for forestry. Farmers were similarly geographically dispersed but perhaps had more history with farming and support organizations, and almost all belonged to a cattlemen’s association or an agricultural cooperative. This difference merits further research.

Some landowners with limited experience had the ability and persistence to seek out, vet, and select public and private foresters to work with as they become engaged in forestry. This approach was more effective for those with large landholdings because higher timber value and more extensive holdings enabled them to attract assistance and gave them more opportunities to learn. Several people spoke about the importance of learning more about forestry through the process of actively engaging in it, saying things like, “I learned by word of mouth,” “I talk to my neighbor,” or “African American people . . . need hands-on experience.” One landowner described his experience with selling timber on his own, saying:

I feel like I got bamboozled. I didn’t know what I was doing. . . . I was over-trusting. . . . I dealt with [the timber buyer] directly, which was a mistake. You need a professional who knows timber pricing and the requirements to cut timber from your property. I just wanted to get enough to pay the taxes for the next few years. . . . They cut, cut, cut. I thought I’d be getting a big check [but I only got two small payments]. It’s a learning. A costly learning. I’d do better now. . . . Now I’m wiser. I would get quotes.

The qualitative results also revealed that individual landowners could have widely divergent views on forestry; at the extremes were those who saw significant risk and those who saw a safe investment, although the majority were somewhere in the middle. Several landowners saw many risks in forestry based on experience and stories of failures and lack of knowledge. They specifically mentioned risks associated with insects, low timber prices, and

unscrupulous and greedy loggers who want to take everything at once. Other landowners, generally those more experienced with farming and forestry, saw trees and forests as a long-term investment – “even better than the return on stocks sometimes.” Landowners new to forestry may require time, experience, and connections to other forest owners to overcome negative experiences or stories they have heard.

Discussion

The quantitative and qualitative results presented here suggest that a range of factors, and the interplay among them, are important in determining Black engagement in forestry. Our data conforms with the literature in finding that Black forest landowners are diverse in their landholding sizes, demographic characteristics, and occupations, but that they often do not often profit from land ownership (Schelhas et al. 2017). Among Black landowners, those with larger landholdings are more likely to engage in forestry activities. While this is not unlike forest owners in general (Butler et al. 2021), minority landowners statistically have smaller landholdings than nonminority owners (Butler et al. 2020). Thus, smaller landownership size, which has roots in the long history of discriminatory practices in the South, is a significant factor in explaining Black forestry engagement.

Heirs' property has been linked to poverty and/or limited access to the legal system across the South, although its characteristic, causes, and outcomes vary (Gaither 2016). It is well-documented as a factor in overall land loss among Black families and hinders productive land use (Bailey et al. 2019; Hitchner et al. 2017, Gaither 2016), yet its relationship to forestry engagement is complex. Landowners with heirs' property were sometimes able to productively engage in forestry, and landowners with clear title often still faced challenges. In our interviews, family disagreement was raised as a major obstacle to the productive use of co-owned land regardless of ownership status. However, we found some heirs' property owners were able to come together to productively use land without waiting for resolution of heirs' property issues. Family disagreements can have dramatic impacts on resolving heirs' property, planning land use, and engaging in forestry. In more positive cases, families have designated one heir as manager or administrator of the land and/or have created informal or formal ownership structures to make decisions and share benefits. This can enable them to productively manage their land even when it is in heirs' property.

The importance of internal family relationships is recognized in legal efforts to resolve ownership issues, and heirs' property attorneys are often very aware of their roles as mediators (personal communication Josh Walden, Center for Heirs' Property Preservation). Yet family relationships are generally seen as outside the purview of forestry outreach, and we know of few forestry programs that explicitly include them. We found here that forestry professionals can help families consider options for land use and move forward, but broader approaches may be warranted. Recognizing that family disharmony is one of the critical underlying obstacles to forestry in cases of joint ownership suggests the need for broader approaches to landowner engagement. For example, there could be benefits in the formal engagement of family services and mediators in forestry outreach programs, perhaps tapping into the family and consumer services side of cooperative extension programs. Reframing forestry outreach within more integrated approaches to family and landowner outreach may better serve many families.

The reported historical lack of engagement with forestry among Black landowners is also more complex than is often acknowledged (Gan and Kolison 1999; Schelhas et al. 2017). We found that many Black landowners used a traditional forest management system that went beyond simply natural regeneration followed by opportunistic harvest. Family members planted trees and managed natural regeneration to improve timber yields, and small-scale logging operations performed selective harvests. The loss of small-scale logging operations often has disrupted these traditional forest management strategies by eliminating selective logging and making uneven stand management no longer feasible. At the same time, the dispersed structure of technical forestry outreach and services requires a level of familiarity and coordination that is difficult for inexperienced landowners to navigate. While some landowners have continued with natural regeneration, they now shape forests over time toward stands that can be harvested by modern equipment, but Black landowners have historically had less trust in and more systematic difficulties with engaging the formal forestry sector (Schelhas et al. 2017, 2018). More attention in research and extension to a broader range of forest management approaches could facilitate wider landowner engagement in forestry. In particular, the development of new small-scale harvesting operations (Bliss and Kelly 2008) would support traditional Black forest management practices, particularly on smaller landownerships.

Black forest landowners often have had limited involvement with the technical forest management currently in widespread practice in the U.S. South, leaving them with a lack of experience, technical gaps, and a perception that forestry has excessive risks. Only when they are enrolled in conservation assistance programs that require and provide cost-share for forestry practices such as site preparation, large-scale planting, and prescribed fire do they entirely shift to technical forestry. Farmers were among the most likely to participate in these programs due to their existing connections with extension and conservation personnel and programs and their history of active management for economic returns. Few other landowners were profiting from their land, particularly family land. When families come together to manage land, often with assistance from forestry professionals, they often are able to actively manage forests for economic returns. Integrated programs that allow landowners time to learn, introduce them to peer landowners engaged in forestry, connect them to technical and financial assistance, and help them apply practices to their land are an important way to hasten the adoption of technical forestry and make the economic returns and benefits of land ownership more widely available to Black landowners in the U.S. South.

Conclusion

Focusing research on difficult to reach landowners and listening to their experiences with forestry provides a more holistic and nuanced understanding of why landowners do or do not engage in forestry and fills knowledge gaps left by other studies. While most timber-growing areas of the U.S. South have many technical services available for forest management, these often do not meet the needs of Black landowners. Furthermore, these services are often fragmented into separate agencies and businesses, and landowners struggle to put these together themselves into comprehensive forest management programs. Inexperience with forestry makes it particularly difficult for many landowners to do this. Broadening outreach and extension programs to help integrate and schedule technical and financial assistance is one way to address this issue. In addition, coordinating these programs with

mediation, legal assistance, and other family services is critical in addressing the legacy of racial discrimination in the U.S. South. Providing these services to Black forest landowners can help them achieve greater returns from their land, support many of their efforts to retain family land, and strengthen their families and communities. Other marginalized and underserved forest owners may face similar challenges, but further research is needed to identify similarities and differences.

While our research focused on Black landowners in the U.S. South, other racial and ethnic groups in the U.S. and landowners in the Global South may also seek to retain family land as economies shift from agriculture to wage labor. The value placed on rural family history and connections to the land and communities often continues even after landowners migrate to cities for new employment opportunities; however, keeping land productive can be a challenge, especially for absentee landowners and geographically dispersed families. Research that improves our understanding of these patterns, when used to develop assistance programs that help landowners resolve ownership issues and increase engagement in forestry, can make an essential contribution in a wide variety of cultural and geographic spaces. It can also help natural resource professionals understand that technical outreach is just one of many steps in developing appropriate programs for their constituents.

Notes

1. The U.S. South here refers to the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia (USDA Forest Service 2021)
2. The extent of this decline is difficult to determine due to the nature of sampling in the agricultural census. For example, Gilbert et al. (2002) report that landownership by Black farmers declined by 90% from 1910 to 1997, but only about 20% of Black-owned land is held by farmers. The only comprehensive survey of forest owners the National Woodland Owners Survey, is designed to report state-level results and may both send out few surveys and have low response rates from minority forest owners (Schelhas et al. 2017; Butler et al. 2020).
3. Conservation assistance programs are government cost share programs through which a portion of the cost of conservation activities, including planting trees, is paid by a state or federal conservation program, and the remainder is paid by the landowner. The most common federal programs related to forestry are the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) and the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP).
4. We will refer to this as “technical forestry.”

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