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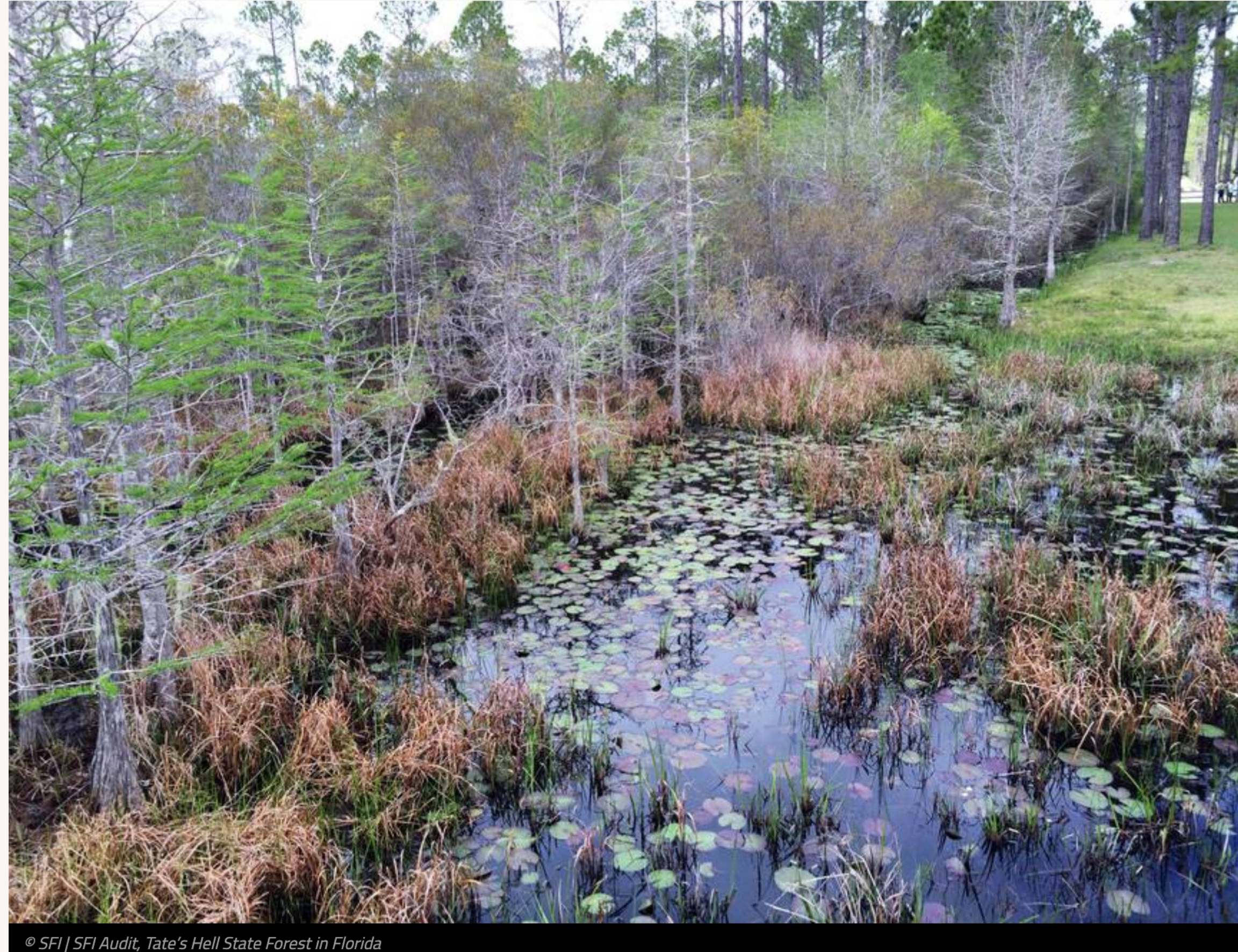
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Business / Corporate Responsibility

# How sustainable forestry can help the legacy of African American Landowners



Sustainable Forestry Initiative  
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As we recognize African American History Month, it is important to highlight a lesser known part of this history – the legacy of forest ownership among the black community, and the leaders who are working to preserve it.

For over 150 years, forest stewardship and farming have been an important part of African American history. Following the Civil War, many African American families took to the land to seek their future. By 1910, black landowners had accumulated 15 million acres across the US South and by the 1920s, 14% of all farms in the US, nearly one million properties, were owned by black families.

However, due to lack of legal resources, many landowners either never prepared a will or prepared a will naming all of their children as heirs. As these properties were passed down through the generations, the land became “heirs’ property,” and lacked clear title of ownership. Unable to unlock the equity in the land, the property became a financial burden as opposed to an asset. Frequently, this resulted in heirs selling off their interest in properties for a fraction of the real value. Even forestlands that are retained as heirs’ property frequently lack appropriate management, and thus fail to reach their potential for recreation, timber production, or wildlife habitat.

This is why the Sustainable Forestry Initiative has partnered on three projects to help reverse this trend by providing sustainable forestry education, access to timber market opportunities, and legal support.



© Black Family Land Trust

## 1. Protect Assets Through Managed Forestry

In Virginia, SFI is teaming with the Black Family Land Trust to offer an in-depth training series on managed forestry to African American landowners as an asset protection strategy. Ebonie Alexander, Executive Director at the Land Trust and SFI Board member explains that families in her program frequently overlook the value of the timber on their property. “They’ll look at trees that already exist on their land as just part of the farm, the back acres or side of the yard,” said Ms. Alexander.

The “A Tree, Is A Tree, Is A Tree 101” series takes landowners through the principles of forestry and conservation, provides legal resources to resolve title issues, and explains the economics of timber markets. Ultimately, the program is turning family forests into sources of family pride and assets that are sustainable for the future. You can learn more about Ebonie’s story here: <https://www.treehugger.com/corporate-responsibility/saving-trees-saving-family-lands.html>

## 2. Connect People to Forests Across Generations

The Roanoke Center, and numerous other partners, are promoting the link between people and forests through the Sustainable Forestry and African American Land Retention Project (SFAALRP). This collaborative, community-based effort focuses on seven counties in North Carolina providing workshops, technical assistance in stewardship planning, and support in applying for state and federal conservation incentive programs.

SFAALRP Director, Alton Perry, says that, “Landowners whose primary income comes from farming sometimes don’t realize the benefits their forests could provide. They think of them as more of a liability. We’re trying to change this way of thinking by showing them how productive these lands can be.”

This multiyear project is already seeing great results, including:

- 180 landowners have participated in training and assistance
- Landowners have been able to access over \$500,000 through State and Federal conservation incentive programs
- 120 Forest Management Plans covering over 9,000 acres

You can learn more about this work on the Roanoke Center’s project site: <https://www.recforestry.org/>

## 3. Unravel Tangled Titles to Sustain the Future

The Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, Southern Regional Extension Forestry, and Georgia SFI Implementation Committee partnered to develop a free webinar on heirs property rights for loggers and forestry professionals. In Georgia, between 11–25% of the properties in the state are probable heirs’ property, meaning that they exists across the socio-economic spectrum. Heirs’ property hinders the ability of families who do not have access to legal services to manage their timber. The project helps timber professionals identify heirs’ property and connect to legal services in order to enable the management of timber as a sustainable asset. Work is ongoing in adapting the webinar for expansion to other states.

Foresters, many of whom may have little understanding of the unique circumstances and challenges of heirs’ property, form a critical link to landowners. Forester education programs, like the one offered by the Georgia Heirs Property Law Center, can effectively expand opportunities for good stewardship, and create long-term value for landowners.

To learn more about SFI’s work, visit <http://www.sfiprogram.org/>.



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