How sustainable forestry can help the legacy of African American Landowners

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 important parts of African American history. Following the Civil War, many African American families took to the land to seek their futures. By 1910, many black landowners had accumulated 4 million acres across the U.S. by the 1930s, 80% of all the land, 40% of all the farmland, were owned by black families.

However, due to lack of legal resources, many landowners either never prepared wills or prepared wills and most of all, many of their children as heirs. As these properties were passed down through the generations, the land became “family property,” and locked their heirs into owning it. Unable to sell the property, they became a financial burden as opposed an asset. Frequently, this resulted in heirs selling off their interest in properties or in a fraction of the land value. Even then, these estates were owned by the state’s property and agriculture. The state failed to meet the potential of innovation, cleaner production, or wildlife habitat.

This is why the Sustainable Forestry Initiative has partnered on three projects to help conserve this land property created through sustainable forest stewardship, wood products, and legal support.

6. Present Assets Through Managed Forestry

In Virginia, a group talking with the Virginia Land Trust Board of Directors, seeks to offer an in-depth training series on managed forest for African American landowners as an asset protection strategy. Ethena Alexander, Executive Director of the Scott Land Trust and FTF Board member explains that families in her program frequently overlook the value of their forest land.

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C. Current People in Forests Across Generations

The Sustainable Center, and numerous other initiatives, are promoting the link between people and forests through the Sustainable Forestry and African American Landowner Project (SAFLAP). 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.

SHARE!F Director, Allen Perry, says that, “Landowners whose primary income comes from farming sometimes don’t realize for their forest land could provide. They think of them as more of a liability. We’re trying to change the way of thinking by showing them how productive these lands could be.”

This multiyear project is already showing great gains, including:

- 10% of landowners have participated in training and assistance
- Landowners have been able to access over $5,000,000 through state and federal conservation incentive programs
- 12% Forest Management Plans covering over 6,000 acres

You can learn more about this work on the Sustainable Center’s project site: https://www.sustainablecenter.org/

3. Vincent Threatt Jr. Tribute to Honor the Forester

The Georgia Forestry Law Property Law, Southern Regional Extension Forestry, and Georgia UPL Implementation Committee partners in developing a free workshop on best forestry practices for the Hughes and Forestry profession.

In Georgia, between 3-5% of the property in the state are prime black species; they either farms on these acres of the socio-economic landscape, whole forests provide the ability of valuable wildlife, as well as their income from legal services to manage their land. The project helps protect biodiversity, promote best practices, and connect to legal services in order to manage the system as a whole.

Forest Forestry, some of may have achieved its own level of success and challenges, and best practices, its a critical link to forest management. Forest education programs, like the ones offered by the Georgia Forest Law Project, focus on effectively engaging opportunities for good stewardship, and creating long-term value for landowners.

To learn more about SFIs work, visit http://www.sustainablecenter.org/