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## **New Opportunities for Social Research on Forest Landowners in the South**

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**ABSTRACT** Many of the issues of importance to forest management and policy have important social components. Yet, in the South, social research on forests has lagged behind economic and biophysical research. In this paper we identify some important new opportunities for social research on forests in the South, focusing on non industrial private forests because they represent the majority of the South's timberland. We identify six important areas for social research. One, research on diversity of forest land owners and how different landowners relate to and use their forests. Two, social relationships of forest landowners, including household and family structure and social network analysis. Three, research that applies recent advances in common pool resource management to issues such as forest health and water quality. Four, qualitative research that seeks to understand how environmental values are constructed and operate in complex decision-making processes and social relationships. Five, work on forest-related rural development, particularly the in poor, non-urbanizing areas of the South that have been affected by globalization and declines in agriculture. Six, research on urbanization and forests.

The South's forests are, among other things, social spaces. They provide important benefits to people, and are shaped in fundamental ways by the values, behaviors, and social structures of the people and communities that populate them. The recent Southern Forest

Resource Assessment (SFRA)(Wear and Greis 2002) identifies important forest management and policy issues in the South today, which include: (1) the impact of urbanization and exurban development, population growth, land use change, ownership change, structural changes in the timber industry, and laws and policies on forests and forestry; (2) the importance of, and threats to, the biodiversity and watershed benefits that society receives from forests; and (3) the importance of, and threats to, forest health. The SFRA takes an important step in identifying many trends in people-forest relationships. Addressing many of the forest issues of concern, however, will require linking these trends to social science theory and analysis. Social research on forests has long lagged behind biophysical and economic research in the South, but the SFRA highlights a number of issues that can only be addressed with a combination of in depth social science research and problem-focused interdisciplinary research that includes a strong social component. In this paper we identify some important new opportunities for social research on forests in the South on issues that emerge from our reading the Southern Forest Resource Assessment (Wear and Greis 2002) and the literature on private forests. We focus here on nonindustrial private forest (NIPF) land ownerships, which represent about 95 percent of the private forest landowners and 63 percent of the private forest land in the South (private forests comprise 89 percent of the South's timberland)(Birch 1996; Wicker 2002).

### **Forest Owner Diversity**

There are many differences among forest landowners. Some, like age and occupation, have been regularly documented. However, it has been only recently that natural resource scientists and managers in the United States began to pay much attention to basic social dimensions of race and ethnicity, class, and gender. There is a need for considerable research on how different forest landowners use, relate to, and value forests if we are to provide benefits and services to people across all segments of society. There have been some studies of private forest landowners (Birch, Lewis and Kaiser 1982; Birch 1996), but they have not consistently reported data on a number of important social characteristics. The Census of Agriculture

collects data on the demographics of farm ownership, but there is no comparable, systematic data collection for forest owners. Yet forestry rivals farming in land area and economic importance in many southern states, and farmers represent only 6.5 percent of NIPF landowners in the South (Birch 1996). We currently lack even rudimentary demographic knowledge of forest ownership, although the Forest Service's National Woodland Owners Survey, which currently is being implemented, will provide contemporary, if not historical data.

Why is such knowledge important? We know, for example, that African Americans have histories of land ownership, hunting, recreation, and access to extension services and programs that are dramatically different from those of white landowners and that these differences impact natural resource management in important ways today (Schelhas 2002). We know that the South continues to change and diversify. U.S. Census data shows that Hispanics/Latinos have migrated heavily to the South in recent years, and research shows a growing number of African-Americans with familial roots returning to the South (Stack 1996). We know little about female forest landowners in the South, in terms of how they may differ from male owners, although research in other nations suggests that significant differences may exist (see, for example, Rocheleau and Edmunds 1997). Simply put, we need to know how diverse groups of people differ in their forest uses, values, and management approaches because one-size-fits-all management strategies and policies will be neither productive for forest management nor provide benefits across all segments of society. The need for reaching and influencing various segments of the NIPF public has never been greater. Yet we know little of the relative efficacy and feasibility of different communication means for educating diverse land resource decision-makers about new practices and possibilities for achieving personal, community, and societal objectives.

### **Forest Land Owners as Social Actors**

Most social research on and programs for forest landowners views them as individuals, and is oriented toward transferring new knowledge, technical assistance, financial assistance and even cultural content to autonomous forest landowners (see, for example,

Chapters 4 and 5 in Best and Wayburn 2001). However, sociology and anthropology have long recognized that a great deal of human experience is relational, not individual, and that there is value in studying the patterns of relationships among individuals. These patterns, or social structures, are less easily seen than individual actors but are of fundamental importance to human lives (Halperin 1994). Social science research around the world has, over the past few decades, devoted considerable attention to social networks and structures as both enabling and inhibiting sustainable forest management and equitable forest benefits (See, for example, Gibson, McKean and Ostrom 2000), but research in this area in the U.S. South has been more limited.

There are several fruitful areas for research on social relationships in forestry in the South. In one example, considerable attention has been focused on the advanced average age of African American farmers and forest landowners. When viewed as an isolated criterion, the impact of age on landowner technology adoption, innovation, productivity, and intergenerational transfer is cause for concern. Traditional actions to address these areas include social service referrals, farm cut-back strategies (e.g., leases), and farm and land sales. If, on the other hand, age is viewed within the context of a life cycle process integrated into the farming system, then a different set of actions becomes available. These include the creation of life estates, trusts, corporations, and limited liability companies. This life-cycle of context can then be viewed within a larger macro-economic perspective (i.e., farm economy/national economy)(Bennett 1969) as well as a cultural perspective (Salamon 1979, 1980; Salamon, Gengenbacher and Penas 1983).

On another front, while the use of foresters, extension agents, and other formal forestry assistance by landowners has been studied, we know very little about larger social networks (formal and informal) of forest landowners. Research on forest landowners social networks has the potential to teach us a great deal about how forestry information, technology, and values spread and are implemented, which in turn would point the way to new forestry outreach and extension approaches that could reach many more landowners. A very practical area of research and action related to social networks is the use of community-based approaches, such as county forestry planning committees, to build new social networks that

facilitate forest management. Social network analysis also could be used to direct attention to communication gaps, uneven resource allocations, and power balances among landowners and other forestry actors that influence private forest management.

### **Common Pool Resources**

More than 30 years ago, Garrett Hardin (1968) published a seminal piece, *The Tragedy of the Commons*, in which he maintained there is an unavoidable tendency for resources in common ownership to be degraded through the rational decisions of individual resource users. In response, sociologists and anthropologists have devoted considerable attention over the past few decades to common-pool resources and common property institutions. It has been clearly shown that Hardin's solutions—private property and government ownership—to the Tragedy of the Commons were incomplete because he conflated open-access with common property (Burger et al. 2001). A robust literature has emerged on the many social, cultural, political and economic factors that enable or inhibit the management of common pool resources. Many of the forest issues facing the South involve common pool resources (resources that can be consumed or degraded but can be kept from other users only with great difficulty or cost).

For example, the Southern Pine Beetle, a significant threat to forest health, does not recognize human property boundaries and can spill over from one land ownership area to another. Southern Pine Beetle management and control activities must find ways to work with landowners with diverse objectives and characteristics for the common good of forest health. In another example, measures of Total Maximum Daily Load (TMDL) have become central mechanisms for pollution regulation in water bodies, and in many cases TMDLs are influenced by forest practices on NIPF lands (National Research Council 2001). In similar ways, wildlife and biodiversity issues are of broad concern and benefit to society but can only be addressed by considering large land areas that are comprised of diverse private and public ownerships. Research has shown that southern forest owners value their private property rights, but they also care about the health of their forests, watershed benefits, wildlife, biodiversity, and other environmental issues (Bliss et al. 1997;

Wicker 2002). The next step is to conduct research that can improve our ability to develop institutions for managing common pool aspects of resource use and degradation found across the mixed forest ownership mosaics that dominate the South.

### **Environmental Values**

Studies of NIPF landowners have consistently shown that they have diverse reasons for owning forest land, they value many different benefits from their lands, and they share the environmental concerns of the larger population (e.g. Birch 1996; Bliss et al. 1997; Kluender and Walkingstick 2000). Values are complex. For example, timber ranks low as a forest value relative to air quality, scenic beauty, and cultural and natural heritage (Tarrant, Porter and Cordell 2002), although about half of NIPF owners (controlling a much larger percentage of forest land) sell timber from their lands at some time (Wicker 2002). This highlights the need to go beyond simple characterization of landowners' attitudes and values through questionnaires. New research on environmental values is treating the ways that environmental values are constructed and operate in the complex decision-making processes and social relationships that influence human behavior (Kempton, Boster and Hartley 1995; Pfeffer, Schelhas and Day 2001; Paolisso and Maloney 2000). Decisions related to streamside management zones, best management practices, forest health, timber certification, watershed management, wildlife, and biodiversity conservation all have, at their core, fundamental questions of values. These values are not static and isolated. They both influence and reflect dynamic social processes such as interest group formation and media messages. Furthermore, forest and environmental values are traded off in complex ways against other values, depending on the context of decision-making. We need a more nuanced and complex understanding of forest and environmental values, their relationship to other values, and their relationship to many of the other issues and research areas identified in this paper. One clear need is for better understanding of land management styles—clusters of practices and management objectives—and their consequences for forest health, water quality, and watershed integrity.

## **Economic Development**

In spite of the rapid growth, industrialization, and urbanization that typifies the New South, much of the rural South remains poor and continues to reflect the legacy of past inequalities and social conflict (see Wear and Greis 2002). For example, many of the counties with the highest African American populations, once the site of plantation agricultural and tenant farming, have high rates of poverty and unemployment (Wimberley and Morris 1997). Many of these same counties have high levels of land concentration (large amounts of land held by few people), with relatively low levels of forest and agricultural land ownership by African Americans (Bliss, Walkingstick and Bailey 1998; McGhee 1999). These same areas have declining populations and lower than median household incomes (Tarrant et al. 2002). White poverty in the South is concentrated in two different areas, the Appalachians and the Ozarks (Wimberley and Morris 1997).

With declines in agriculture and expanding forests in many of these regions, forest-based economic enterprises represent one of the best hopes for economic development. The Southern Forest Resource Assessment foresees strong demand for forest products into the future. At the same time, there is considerable restructuring of the forest product industry, with declining industry ownership of land, increased corporate ownership outside the forest industry, and consolidation and overseas expansion in the pulp and paper industry. Efforts to promote rural economic development must track and respond to these trends, requiring research on how these changes affect private forest landowners, and how landowners are responding to these changes. Landowner experimentation and research may also reveal and facilitate new economic opportunities from forests, including value added processing, non-timber forest products, tourism, wildlife and hunting, and agroforestry.

## **Urbanization and Forests**

Parts of the South are urbanizing rapidly, particularly in the Southern Appalachian Piedmont (Raleigh/Durham, NC, to Atlanta, GA), the Atlantic Coast from the Carolinas through Florida, and the portion of the Gulf Coast around Mobile Bay (Wear 2002). While



urbanization often leads to forest loss and change (Wear 2002), we need to know more about how different constellations of social, economic, and policy factors result in changes in forest cover and characteristics, and, in turn, changes in biodiversity, watershed, and social and economic values. Comparative case studies can reveal the influences of different factors. Research efforts will need to be interdisciplinary if we are to understand complex patterns of landscape change and their outcomes.

### Conclusion

These are just a few of the important research topics for social scientists studying forest landowners in the South today. There are certainly other issues of importance, and other ways to delineate research topics. There are many cross-cutting relationships between issues of forest landowner diversity, common pool resources, social networks, poverty and economic development, and urbanization. Social research must be integrally connected to biophysical, management, and policy research to contribute to the resolution of these complex issues. Similarly, collaboration across institutions, and between researchers and practitioners, is important. But these do not diminish our principal points: (1) that the full power of social research has yet to be brought to bear on forest issues in the South, and (2) that social research has a fundamental role to play in our efforts to maintain the integrity and enhance the benefits of southern forests. Social research can set the stage for shaping new policies, fostering public participation, and devising new social mechanisms that further society's multiple forest policy and management objectives.

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