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# **AN OVERVIEW OF AFRICAN AMERICANS' HISTORICAL, RELIGIOUS, AND SPIRITUAL TIES TO FORESTS**

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**ABSTRACT:** Forests have played a significant role in the development of American cultural values. Research has consistently demonstrated that a wide range of benefits accrues to people from contact with natural environments such as forests. Governmental agencies provide access to forests and support various forestry programs. It is generally known that African Americans are underrepresented in forestry and forest-related activities. However, African Americans have historical ties to forests that are not well understood by natural resources professionals.

**KEY WORDS:** Slavery, forests, religion, spiritual values

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Federal land management agencies such as the Department of Agriculture-Forest Service and the Department of the Interior-National Park Service along with state and local agencies, spend millions of dollars annually to provide access to forests. Some Americans view access to the nation's forests as a birthright. However, African Americans are conspicuously absent in actively using the nation's public forests (Dwyer 1994). An important question is: Why are African Americans underrepresented in the use of public forests? The question is important because it speaks to the issue of equity in public policy.

Researchers have attempted to determine why African Americans visit forests at a rate lower than others (i.e., European Americans). The two most frequently cited explanations are marginality and ethnicity. In brief, the marginality explanation attributes lower visitation by blacks to lower socioeconomic status. On the other hand, the ethnicity explanation attributes lower visitation by blacks to value differences based on distinctive cultural norms. Other researchers have challenged both explanations. They argue that both theories are part of a larger fabric that includes both cultural norms and socioeconomic factors. Under the sociocultural approach, historical experiences are assumed to be a factor that influences beliefs and attitudes toward forests. The sociocultural approach operates at two levels. On one level there are linkages between culture and ethnicity, and on another level the approach focuses on the meaning people give to a place. A key question is: What meanings do African Americans attach to forests? If indeed historical experiences influence perceptions of forests, it is important to understand the role forests played in the development of African American culture.

At the outset it is well to state the major premise upon which this discussion is based: namely, that the present level of involvement with forests by African Americans is not because they inherently dislike forests, but rather because certain historical factors have impinged uniquely upon African Americans. Because blacks were held in bondage and later subjected to systematic discrimination and terrorist acts, certain social and economic forces that do not generally impact other groups tend to complicate and confound present African Americans' connections to forests.

In this paper I explore the relations blacks have historically had with forests. I use the terms "African American" and "black" interchangeably. The former term is used to place race in a cultural context; the latter to describe race. A basic contention is that forests are embedded in the souls of black folks, and an awareness of the past connections to forests is an important element of love of forests. The intent is to give forestry professionals a glimpse of an aspect of African American history and culture that should be considered in the forestry policy and management arenas. The overview is based on a review of historical literature. I largely rely on slave songs or spirituals as they appeared in Dixon (1987) to show relations. Because of space limitations, the review is limited and cursory. However, it serves as a basis for placing African Americans' relations with forests in a historical context.

## SLAVERY AND RELIGION

Enslaved blacks were taken from the west coast of Africa, from an area bordering a 3,000-mile stretch from Senegal in the north to Angola in the south. They came from many different racial stocks and tribal groups. During the passage from Africa to North America, under the most extreme conditions imaginable, religious beliefs--the belief in a power outside of themselves--was the basis of survival.

In North America, former Africans sought to practice their homeland religions. Traders and owners, however, viewed African religious expression as not being in the best interest of slavery. Many rituals connected with African religious practices, including dancing and the use of drums, were prohibited (Harding 1981). Family and tribal groups were separated from one another. Africans with different beliefs, different cultures, and different languages were deliberately mixed together to hinder group unity or awareness. The use of African languages was banned. To replace African religions, the slave masters offered a religion that encouraged the slaves to believe their subservience was inevitable and ordained by God (Simpson 1978). In turn, blacks did not adopt such a selective version of Christianity, but instead adapted Christianity to the situation in which they found themselves. They converted Christianity to their emerging culture. It was not God the master or overseer who was the object of worship, but a God more like the Gods they knew from home. They worshipped God the transcendental spirit. Black Christianity assumed that God was just and loving, and that the human dilemma was that they could not always experience and see God's justice and love (Washington 1995).

## RELIGION AND FORESTS

There was an obvious disparity between the version of Christianity that owners taught to slaves and the version they taught themselves. To worship as they chose, slaves had to literally "Steal Away to Jesus" and, in the process, worship and forests became one. The spiritual, "Go in de Wilderness," captures the nature of forests and its significance to worship (Dixon 1987):

*If you want to find Jesus, go in de wilderness  
Go in de wilderness, go in de wilderness.  
Mournin' brudder, go in de wilderness  
I wait upon de Lord.*

Peter Randolph (1893), who received his freedom following his owner's death and served as a Baptist minister, related how forests were an integral part of worship:

*Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamps, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by first one arriving breaking boughs from trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot...*

Forests were central to worship and development of the spiritual self. When blacks worshiped "down in the woods" they were free. Worship in the forests allowed freedom of expression and served as a place where fundamental change in self-perception and moral status occurred. Forests served as a place of freedom, divine love, and deliverance. The following words from a slave song support such a view (Dixon 1987):

*I found free grace in de wilderness,  
In de wilderness, in the wilderness,  
I found free grace in de wilderness  
For I'm a-going home.*

Through praying, singing, and preaching, slaves were able to feel the spirit. Meetings formed and strengthened the group identity of blacks and maintained a remembered connection with Africa (Escott 1979). Armed with religion, they established a set of ethics and a view of the universe that gave them spiritual independence from white propaganda and oppression (Escott 1979). They strongly believed in freedom and somehow maintained an unshakable faith that God would deliver them.

Worship in the forests also prepared men and women for their part in the struggle to break with slavery (Harding 1981). Resistance movements were born in the forests and led by deeply religious men. Nat Turner, the leader of a revolt in Virginia, struggled for years to find meaning in the messages he received and the visions he saw. Following a month-long sojourn in forests, he emerged believing that it was God's desire that he lead the struggle for freedom (Harding 1981). In August 1831, he led a rebellion, but after two days the rebellion was crushed. Turner was the only man not killed or captured. He eluded capture for two and a half months by hiding in the woods.

Forests served as a sanctuary. Some slaves sought refuge from the tension and physical exhaustion of forced labor by slipping off to the forests. They would take to the woods and swamps, running away for short or long periods. In some places, for boys who sought to assert their manhood, the defiant act of running away became part of the rites of passage (Harding 1981). Other slaves established a more permanent existence in the woods. For example, Harding (1981) noted that during slavery the swamps of Louisiana were never free of colonies established by runaway slaves.

Being able to worship freely in the forests played a significant role in the ability of blacks to survive slavery. The traumatic experience of being uprooted from their homes and the absurdities of slavery had to be countered. Religion was the central way for blacks to maintain a sense of self and a collective sanity (Washington 1995).

## SPIRITUAL ASPECTS OF FORESTS AND OTHER NATURAL PLACES

Forests and other natural places evoked powerful emotions and took on profound significance in the struggle for freedom. The desire to escape bondage was strong, but the decision was deeply personal, a sentiment expressed in the following verse (Dixon 1987):

*You got to walk that lonesome valley  
You got to walk it by yourself  
No one here can walk it for you  
You got to walk it by yourself.*

To traverse such barriers for freedom became an important test of a person's faith in self and in divine power to bring deliverance. Mountains were associated with personal triumph and represented a conquering of despair (Dixon 1987).

*Wait till I get on the mountaintop  
Goin' to make my wings go flippity-flop.*

Reaching the mountaintop represented movement to an exultant state. On the mountaintop there was an intimacy with God, and God would provide what was due as is suggested in the spiritual (Harding 1981):

*Up on the mountain when my Lord spoke  
Out of his mouth came fire and smoke  
Looked all around me, it looked so fine,  
And I asked my Lord, if all were mine*

## PERSONIFICATION OF WILDLIFE

The emerging African American culture was an oral expressive culture that used storytelling as a means of teaching values and survival skills. The storytelling tradition was brought from Africa. Storytellers used metaphors that taught life-long lessons. Some of the stories used wildlife as the central characters—for instance, Brer Rabbit. The messages that parents gave were designed to address basic situations children would face throughout their lives and how those situations could be overcome. Preachers adopted aspects of the storytelling tradition to deliver their messages. The messages were designed to show by example that the enslaved would one day overcome their present state.

Slaves sometimes envied wildlife. To them, wildlife were free to roam in the forests, something they were not. In the desire to escape bondage, some wished they could simply fly away like a bird. Frederick Douglass, before successfully escaping bondage, lamented over the fact that he could not fly. Henry Bibb standing on the banks of the Ohio River, mused "Oh that I had the wings of a dove, that I might soar away to where there is no slavery."

## AFRICAN AMERICANS' 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY RELATIONS WITH FORESTS

The appeal of forests to African Americans has weakened during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, blacks are largely ambivalent toward forests. Why did this happen? An argument can be made that during slavery, forests were necessary for survival. Once freed, former slaves, no longer viewed the forests as an ally; many activities associated with forests assumed negative connotations. For

example, black labor was a significant and necessary element in the production of lumber and naval stores (Hickman 1986). However, blacks were restricted to the most dangerous, laborious, and tedious jobs. Black workers were a group apart--often living in a world encompassed by forests and having a standard of living lower than blacks in other occupations (Hickman 1986).

Much of the ambivalence, indeed anxiety, toward forests is colored by acts of violence perpetrated on blacks. Forests were avoided because the Klan or other terrorist groups who opposed their freedom could be lurking within. This was a real threat. Around the turn of the century, lynching of blacks averaged one every three and one-half days (DuBois 1961). Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, powerful negative images of forests provoked real and imagined fears. It was not so much the forests that were feared, but rather the people that might be encountered along the way.

The appeal of forests may have been weakened because millions of blacks left the rural South for the urban North and West. This movement, known as the "Great Migration," came about because blacks wanted to escape racism and low wages. By 1930, one out of every four southern blacks had moved north, and nine out of every ten northern blacks lived in cities.

## CONCLUSION

For most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, African Americans' attitudes toward forests have been characterized by ambivalence. Upon arrival in North America, a relation with forests was necessary. Black forefathers and mothers, in a time of great stress, discovered forests as a place to steal away and forget the burdens of the world and the lashes on their backs. Forests literally saved their lives and provided hope for a better future. But, in time, forests were rejected. The woods became a dangerous place. However, forests are embedded in the souls of black folks. Many African Americans are weary of roaming and seek to return home. The reverse migration of African Americans from North to South suggests a desire by some to return home. Now is a good time for African Americans to reclaim the comfort and safety that forests provided. My hope is that land managers and policymakers will work to facilitate the return to forests, and that African Americans will assume their rightful heritage and historical connection to forests. Langston Hughes wrote a poem in the 1920s that points out the connections African Americans have with natural places. "Forests" could replace the word "rivers." Hughes' poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," is the essence of African American ties to natural places:

*I've known rivers.*

*I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of  
human blood in human veins.*

*My soul has grown deep like the river.*

*I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.*

*I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.*

*I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.*

*I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New  
Orleans, and I've seen its muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.*

*I've known rivers.*

*Ancient dusky rivers.*

*My soul has grown deep like the rivers.*

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