LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BRITTONS NECK COMMUNITY FOREST: CLIMATE RESILIENCE & REPARATIONS

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NARRATOR: While our weekly shows are edited to time for broadcast on public TV and community radio, we offer to our supporting members and podcast subscribers the full uncut conversation. The following is from our episode on the Britton's Neck Community Forest for climate resilience, the South's first environmental justice training center. Discover how BIPOC-led frontline Carolina communities are combating industrial logging and building a sustainable future. These audio exclusives are made possible thanks to our member supporters.

LAURA FLANDERS: Scientists say that a functional ecosystem is our single most important resource, not only when it comes to reducing the risks associated with climate change like flooding and storms, but also as it concerns resilience, being able to change and adapt. The US South is lucky enough to have huge diverse wetland forests along its coastal plains. They're some of the most biologically diverse habitats on the planet. They're more precious than ever. They're also under constant threat. Did you know that the rate of logging in the US South is estimated to be four times that of South America's rainforests? That's right. The US South is already the so-called "wood basket" of the nation. And increased tariffs on Canadian timber and wood products are only going to speed up the ongoing process of deforestation at serious cost, especially to the low income people of color and Indigenous people who live in the midst of all this. What is to be done? Well, we try on this program to bring you models of making change, and today we have an exciting one to share. In Brittons Neck, a place prone to severe flooding, the South's first environmental justice training center opened in 2023 to teach and provide clean water and experience for locals wanting to help themselves and others build resilience. They have also just acquired 300 acres of former plantation to create what they're calling the Brittons Neck Community Forest. It's the product of years of work by two Carolina-based organizations, a land back initiative and among others, the guests we have with us today from Florence, South Carolina, we have Reverend Leo Woodberry, who is the pastor of the Kingdom Living Temple and Executive Director of the New Alpha Community Development Corporation. Also joining us is Danna Smith, the founder of Dogwood Alliance, an organization based in Asheville, North Carolina that's been working on these issues for over 25 years. And also from Dogwood, we have Lucia Ibarra, the Director of Conservation there. We are always excited to bring audiences inspiring, good news. And today it seems that we really have some, so thank you all for joining us. I'll start by just kind of settling us in place a little and asking you who is uppermost in your

mind as we begin this conversation? And I'll start with you, Danna. You're in Asheville. People think Asheville, they think Hurricane Helene. How are you?

DANNA SMITH: Yeah, we are surviving. The hurricane hit hard. Climate change is real. And when it hits hard like that at home, it just underscores the need to advance solutions and solutions that are equitable. And so it's exciting to be here today to talk about the Brittons Neck project and the work that we're doing to protect forests as a part of that climate solution.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, Lucia, take us to those coastal plains. Describe, if you will, a little bit of the area that we're talking about and how it's been affected by climate change.

LUCIA IBARRA: Well, like you guys all know, we have a tremendous beautiful habitat here in the Carolinas. And it's sad because these amazing ecosystems are threatened by industrial logging and the wood pellet, just to mention a few. So this beautiful ecosystem has, like you say, has one of the most biodiverse, and endemic species of in each area, and help the communities to actually build resilience and really safeguard them for natural disasters. In this case, in the South and the East is a lot of flooding, kind of like different than the West that right now we are facing the fires. But I think it's really essential for these beautiful ecosystems, just not for the beauty, but the ecosystem services that they provide. And we can talk a little bit more about that later.

LAURA FLANDERS: Reverend Woodberry, this is personal for you in lots of ways as I understand it. What's your connection to this place?

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: We actually have traced my family's history back to 1794. And so the parcel of land that we purchased, my ancestors actually were enslaved there. And the first time I visited Brittons Neck, I was six weeks old. And so I really know the history. My grandmother worked the land as a single mother from the depression days to the 1960s. And I grew up hearing stories about flooding back in those days. And so we're talking about a historical and very resilient community that has been in place since its incorporation in 1747. But the threat from industrial logging, clear-cutting is just making not only climate change impacts worse, they're actually creating new impacts. So now we're starting to see extreme heat, creating heat islands in places where they never existed before.

LAURA FLANDERS: So let's tell a little bit of the backstory of the creation of the Environmental Justice Center to begin. Reverend Woodberry, as I understand it, this wasn't entirely unrelated to your experience with your brother. He was evacuated in 2018.

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: Yeah. My cousin, a lot of my family members. So we actually started back in 2015, which is the year in which New Alpha Community Development Corporation was incorporated. And that's when the residents was hit by Hurricane Matthews.

And so after the flooding, we came in and helped to train a group of really wonderful people on how to test their well water that had been impacted by pesticides, herbicides, and effusion from septic tanks. And that's when we started talking and organizing down there. The next year, 2016, the same thing happened. 2018, the same thing happened. And so during that course, we continued to organize. And so today, we have a approximately 45 individuals down there who work in organizing five areas, mitigating flooding, working to reduce logging, creating small scale agricultural enterprises, working on recreation, and of course, working with policymakers. And so it has been a long-term effort that we are really pleased that the community is involved. We're not just looking at problems, but actively creating community-led solutions.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, let's play a clip of the ribbon cutting ceremony for that training center to give you a sense of the landscape and the people that we're talking about. Check it out.

- (REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY:) With this training center, we're going to create a model for communities that are being impacted by climate change daily, the floods, the wildfires, the hurricanes, all of those things that are devastating communities and which have impacted this community. But we're not going to give up. We're not gonna watch this community dismantle like so many others that could not withstand the climate impacts, where we will teach people how to grow food, so no matter what happens, you won't go hungry. We're going to teach people how to install solar panels. We have to invest in our community and give back. And all of you out there can be a part of this movement.

- (SPEAKER): This is something that really is for the community, by the community.

- (RW) By cutting this ribbon, opening this facility and showing people that this is the country of the people, by the people, and we will make a difference.

LAURA FLANDERS: It is great to see, Danna, people taking initiative and creating this project. There's more to come, you're gonna tell us, but I do have to ask, where's government been in all of this? The Reverend described year after year of flooding. Was there no response from people who are supposedly in charge?

DANNA SMITH: Well, I think when it comes to the South, you have to understand the context. And the South is, as you explained earlier, the world's largest wood-producing region. And so where government is largely is in perpetuating industrial logging: policies, tax codes, even government agencies that are over forestry. Their job is to ensure that there's a constant supply of low cost material to go into the big factories to produce wood. And so the government has been failing us when it comes to protecting forests across the Southeastern United States. And in fact is perpetuating the idea that logging is some kind of an economic rural development savior,

when, in fact, if you look at the communities where industrial logging is concentrated, the communities are suffering economically. So there's really no evidence that wood production is a good economic strategy for rural communities, and yet the government continues to promote industrial logging and wood production as a rural economic development strategy.

LAURA FLANDERS: So how did you settle on the strategy of, as it were, acquiring your own forest, Danna?

DANNA SMITH: Well, it's not our own forest. This particular forest is owned by New Alpha, and it will be put in trust for the community in Brittons Neck. But Leo and I have known each other for years. And we were working together when we first started out on an effort, which we're still working on, to try to stop the expansion of the biomass industry, which is tearing down Southern forest to burn for fuel for electricity in Europe as renewable energy. And in our conversations, we were talking about how if we don't get to the root of the problem in the Southeastern US around industrial logging, we won't actually solve the problem. We need to start thinking about what are the solutions to logging forest and how do we create value in communities by leaving forest standing? Because too often, there's this narrative about logging for economic development. And we need to be able to show the counter to that, which is actually that leaving trees standing is actually much better for the rural economy than industrial logging. Outdoor recreation, for example, that depends on intact forest, standing forest, creates way more jobs than the forest industry does, contributes way more to the tax base. But when you have a community where industrial logging is rampant and dominant, it restricts the community's opportunity for developing outdoor recreation as an example. And so we decided that we needed to, in a landscape that's largely privately owned, that we needed to demonstrate and to show the alternative and how you can keep forest standing in a community in a way that benefits actually benefits the community that's good for climate, it's good for biodiversity, it's good for climate resiliency, and it's good for the local economy.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what is that model? And, Lucia, coming to you, the community conservation model is different for a lot of people is a new concept. How would you describe it? What is it?

LUCIA IBARRA: Yeah. I'm glad that you asked. Yeah. So we have the regular conservation model that a lot of trust lands and a lot of, even the forest service, use to really kinda put large quantities of acreage as a conservation. But, let me just tell you a little bit of background of the culture here, specifically here in the South, that largely accept working forest conservation as a economic tie for industrial logging. When I mean working forest, they always say, okay. We're gonna conserve this. However, it's gonna be an amendment that we're gonna come in several times and cut this forest. Us. So with that mindset and that model, we were like, this model is not working. We need to develop something that is innovated to create solutions that actually put

justice, and equity, and community-led force protection at the center of here in conservation rural development here in South Carolina, North Carolina., and actually in the South. So with that concept, we develop this model that advance land conservation through the lens of environmental justice by working in partnership with communities that are targeted by industrial logging or vulnerable communities that are located, that are suffering from flood or other things regarded to climate change and is when we partner up with New Alpha. And then we actually implement this model that actually aim to advance not extractive generative economy. This generative economy is based in ecological restoration, community protection, and equitable partnership and justice. Within that model, we uses social and economical environmental indicators, which are different than the regular conservation model. And that's why we can apply and really choose this specific areas that are especially biodiverse, but also our need for green spaces and the community will benefit from it.

LAURA FLANDERS: So coming to you Reverend Woodberry, you talked about the long history of people and culture in that place. Do you look to that pre-colonial, pre-extractive history also for guidance as to how the forest could best be treated?

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: I'm glad that the word justice was used several times because this project is also something that we like to refer to as "restorative justice". So we know that people labored on this land and slavery without compensation. And so for them to have the land down and be able to use it for recreational activities, et cetera, can help them to create an engine of economic development. And so we see that as restorative justice as well for all of the people. I know personally with my family that it's 65 acres of land that was stolen from them along Highway 378. And when people were migrating up north into the Midwest, etcetera, you had high school students who were told that they could sell their land for $50, a hundred dollars. And at that time, in the sixties, they weren't even legal adults. Those were illegal transactions because it wasn't until 1971 during the Vietnam War when people say, hey. If we're old enough to die in Vietnam, we should be old enough to be legal adults. And so I look at that land today, that 65 acres of land in which the family, that portion of my family, not my immediate family, is worth something like, $70,000 today. And so you have a county that is 56.2% African American, but it has a long history of being one of the most impoverished counties in the state of South Carolina. So environmental justice, climate justice needs to also be in line with restorative justice to correct some of the injustices that have taken place not only with African Americans, but other people of color in the United States of America from the colonial period up to today.

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LAURA FLANDERS: So how did you get the land? Coming back to you, Reverend, I remember a story that we did about a black farmer's rice project in Louisiana, and people can find that in our archives. It was a long and complex process to get that land transferred. How did you get these 300 acres of a former plantation, Reverend Woodbury?

RW: Well, we were really fortunate in that our partnership with Danna and Dogwood Alliance, we were able to connect with an anonymous donor who paid for all of it. And even more than that, we're working in the area now where we wanna set up a land trust program, which will have a revolving fund where other people in other communities who want to have restorative justice and also maintain the biodiversity of their communities and work towards mitigating flooding, etcetera, while creating engines of economic development can also, be able to get land from this donor and others. So, we have been really blessed thus far. We have a commitment of $500,000 so that we can replicate this model in other parts of the South.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alright. Well, to help people with the replication, tell us a little bit more about this anonymous donor. Can you, Danna? Maybe no names, no identities, but what kind of person are we talking about here, or family? Because this is important for the degree to which this is replicable. Is this just one miraculous, miraculous, you know, angel that descended?

DANNA SMITH: Well, clearly, this is an anonymous donor. And yet, clearly, this is a donor who really cares about nature, cares about climate change, cares about driving and investing in solutions that are equitable and just. And, you know, we need more donors like that. As you were talking about, and Leo, the restorative aspect of this. The South has such a long history of exploitation of land and people and discrimination against people of color, Indigenous and Black in particular. And over you know, we're sitting here in 2025, and from a land perspective, you know, white people still own 90 plus percent of the forest land in the South, whereas in a lot of these communities, especially in the black belt of the coastal plain where we're talking about with Britton's Neck, only 1% of the forest is owned by people of color. So four hundred years of oppression and discrimination, this is where we are at this moment, and that has gone hand in hand with the exploitation and the destruction of our forests. So we do need a new model. We need to repair nature, and we need to repair the harm that has been done to folks who are bearing the brunt of the impacts of that forest destruction in an industry that is, you know, not benefiting their communities. So, you know, that's the type of donor that we have that is investing in this conservation fund for Southern forests and communities is somebody who cares deeply about getting to the root of these problems, solving the climate crisis, but also understanding the deep connection between how we got to the climate crisis by exploiting nature and exploiting people.

And so if we're really gonna solve the problem of climate change and the ecological crises that we're in and the economic disparity crisis that we're in. We have to address these deep disparities, and we have to advance different types of models. Now there are people with those feelings and thoughts all over this country, but there's not that many that make this kind of a donation.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm imagining it was a process of talk and education that took place over time.

DANNA SMITH: Yes. This is a donor that's been funding our work, prior to this for several years and really understanding the problem of industrial logging, and has been working with both Dogwood and New Alpha, funding our work to stop the expansion of the biomass industry and understanding that we can't always just say no. We also have to have solutions. And so being willing to take a risk and, like, build out something that's so new is something we need from more donors.

LAURA FLANDERS: No kidding. Lucia, coming to you, we talk about biomass, a lot of people are familiar with wood pellets. And for a while there they were being promoted as a environmentally friendly alternative to gas. So what would you say to people that still have heard that wood pellets and this biomass solution to our climate change problem is viable?

LUCIA IBARRA: That's not clean, neither green. To the contrary, that is a foul solution that really goes with the flag of, oh, we're gonna have these jobs, but those jobs comes with a tag, a health tag of like probably developing cancer, all these other things. So that's not the solution. The solutions are project like this that can be replicated, projects like this that goes within the communities and really listen to the problems that they have. And with that understanding, develop the model that, this model that we have that is adaptable, that can be replicated, but is adaptable to each ecosystem, to each community. So they need to do that work. The solutions that are here coming from the bottom, not from that top down, it has to come from the bottom up. And this is one of the solutions. And just for the wood pellet industry, that's not a solution to the contrary. It is not green, is not clean, and really puts health and or communities in danger.

LAURA FLANDERS: Lucia, sticking with you for a second while we talk about the top and change coming from the top or not, we're seeing change with the change of administration from Tom Vilsack at the head of the Department of Agriculture to a very close ally of Donald Trump in that position. What are your fears?

LUCIA IBARRA: Well, one of our fears especially is that they will reverse a lot of things that we are work really hard, from the Clean Water Act to wetland protection, things like that that could be reversed. However, going back to this amazing project that is a solution, that if we work

together from the bottom up, and get these donors and get these people that really believe in this new solution, in this new ways of economic development from this, you know, like, communities that are kind of forgotten because the top, they do really, like they don't gonna go for a really small town that has, I don't know, like, 300 people. You know? But those are the towns that, like, reconnect, that suffered tremendously and, you know, flooding. And so these projects like this will help them not just to have hope, but really, rehabilitize and really have this drive or and just to be fair, to be value. And the same thing goes with ecosystem services. So when we really think that ecosystem services or forests or wetlands and communities, when they're healthy, we are healthy. And it's a thing that we need to figure this out and really figure it out to tell the, you know, like, high officials to do that. And I can tell you a little bit more about why this project kinda gets to another level and another goal that we really want to and goes with the electoral officials, but I wanna give space to other people.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, Reverend Woodbury, I was gonna come with you, but this question about the possibility that this model seems, if I'm understanding it correctly, to get us out of a bunch of binaries, neither completely deforesting, nor completely banning use of the forest in any way. Does it also perhaps bring people together in a different way than some of our environmental fights in the past and conservation fights in the past have?

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: First of all, I'm not as concerned or frightened as a lot of people are with the change in the administration. I understand that US politics have a sort of title nature to it. So, you know, you can have a John F Kennedy, a Lyndon Johnson, and then get a Nixon. You know what I mean? It's tied us back and forth. You know? You get a Clinton, and then you get a Bush. You get Obama, and then you get a Trump. And, you know, we actually were formed back in 2015. It's our organization actually ruled during the first Trump administration. But what really causes me to have my concern, not be as strong as some people is the fact that when we look at many things in this country, power and change comes from the bottom up. So, you know, we know that every child in America now can have breakfast whether they can afford it or not because, the Black Panther Party and other entities starting there. We know the Affordable Care Act has its roots and things that happen on a community level. We know that there was a time when there were no Goodwill stores, no Salvation Army with thrift shops. It's people working in a community level on a community level coming up with solutions. And being able to replicate, duplicate, and amplify that on such a widespread level that the policy makers cannot ignore what's what's going on. And so I really believe that. I know that is what has happened in this country. And more than anything else, we're facing an existential problem. We can't afford to give up, to give out because the very existence of not only communities, but this false solutions like biomass wood pellet industry is not taking into account the entire cumulative cost and impacts. So when you look at not only the carbon that is law that is put in the atmosphere when the trees are cut down, the also the diesel trucks that are transporting the wood, you know, the ships that are using fossil fuels to ship it to Europe. I've

been to Yorkshire, England, and you see all of the pollution that is being put up in the sky. So, you know, we have to also address the greenwashing and come up with solutions that actually help our environment and also create opportunities to move people from merely surviving to thriving. Because if we don't deal with the people who have been left out and left behind, then even as we move forward to a clean renewable economy, we're still gonna keep the same injustices in place.

LAURA FLANDERS: Lucia, anything you'd add to that story, particularly with respect to those policymakers you were referring to earlier?

LUCIA IBARRA: I'm completely agreeing with Reverend. And this specific, this beautiful thing that this project has actually a bigger goal in the sense. This is what I was gonna try to say, that this specific land acquisition, this 308 acres of beautiful land that is gonna create change within the community, but also in the ecosystems is essential step in an umbrella project for our communities, forests, and wetlands here in the South. And what I'm saying is this it's because we were gonna build these relationships, what I said, with these communities and organizations to unbind these solutions And these solutions are gonna be based and create in more healthier resilience, committed way. And when we have that, we will start beginning to develop this case studies and highlight it to policymakers. And when we do that, we are gonna expand upon these other communities and create other pathways to justice using this model. And this will help to build a foundation to create equitable policy that elevate people, ecosystem, the value of them over industries, over the industries that are greenwashing. Like they're with, "Oh, we are green, we're this, We're gonna do this." No. Let's dismantle that and really go to work and really see what is really is a solution and go with the lawmakers and really start making policies that really allow our communities and other green organizations to have this type of movement and policies that can really help them.

LAURA FLANDERS: Will policymakers and media be reporting on what you're doing? Have they been visiting, Danna? Is this part of the work of Dogwood Alliance to kind of bring attention to this and is it happening?

DANNA SMITH: Absolutely. The vision for this project is, you know, yes, we have this small, relatively small, conservation project right now. 305 acres is not a lot in the scheme of 200 million acres of forest across the South, right? It's a very small project. But the idea is to seed a vision and an example and to inspire a different way of thinking about how our forests can better benefit communities, better benefit the climate, better benefit biodiversity, and support communities to be more resilient in the wake of devastating impacts of climate change. And so we actually understand that we'll never have enough money to buy all the land that's needed to be protected. And that until we shift the thinking at the government level about the value of forest away from thinking that the only value we can derive from forest is to cut it down and turn it into

a wood product to realize that actually these forests have much greater value for the community economically and ecologically when they're left standing. And so this project is intended to provide that sort of counterpoint, if you will, to the status quo of industrial logging in the world's largest wood-producing region.

LAURA FLANDERS: If people came to Brittons Neck, to the community forest project there, what would they see?

DANNA SMITH: Sure. And we'd love to have people continue to come. So the EJ training center that we have on, seven and a half acres of wetlands property, we've had people come from California, from Texas, from Canada, from the Northeast, from the White House, from different agencies. So as we walk on and develop the project, we wanna have hiking trails. We want people to be able to camp, to have, to have cabins there. We wanna put an eco lodge because in this impoverished county, we really don't have many hotels, and quality hotels. And so we we wanna be able to house up to 32 people, be able to feed them so that they can spend time there, hike, fish, get involved with nature, and then also to continue to work with some of the scientists that we currently work with so that they can look at ways that we can, safeguard the biodiversity there and make sure that the ecosystem is not being seriously eroded and impacted by some of the industrial things that are taking place there.

LAURA FLANDERS: It does seem as if in order to care for our environment, people have to feel some kind of connection to it. And so being able to spend time in the forest, it sounds like, could be transformational. To close, I just would love to ask each of you where your connection to this comes from. Where does your passion come from? And what's your aspiration, your vision, if you will, of what the story might be that the future tells of this work that you're doing today? Lucia?

LUCIA IBARRA: Yeah. Well, my passion goes that, you know, I love the forest. I love wetlands. I think this is a beautiful ecosystem. And just knowing that those wetlands are the solution, my passion comes to really shift the thinking of the mistake that a lot of people have here, specifically in the South. The forest are just focuses only for wood. That's the economy. And the wetlands are waste. You know? Shifting that, that's what give me my passion and, like, ready to really have, a new ways of working with nature, not against it, and really, like, educate, from communities to elected officials, other ways of doing so and taking the risk. And and and if you wanna call me crazy or, oh, we cannot do that, hey. That's how change is. It's started by just putting that idea out there. And, my other thing is to really like, one of the things that I will love to see, specifically in this project, is to have, the really focusing on mindful mindful, outdoor recreation. Because right now, it could be a lot of greenwashing happening with outdoor recreation. So just making, being mindful and really, in one with nature, I think that's one of my goals and passion.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alright. What about you, Dana? How did you get to be so in love with the forest, and what's your vision for the future? Well, I grew up in the rural South in the coastal plain, and I was fortunate enough to be a free ranging child and able to just roam around in the woods building forts with my sister and, you know, all day every day during the summer. And I thought everybody had dolphins in their backyard. I grew up on a salt saltwater creek. And I've witnessed in my lifetime the impacts of industrial logging in the South. I've seen forest after forest after forest laid flat. I've seen rows upon rows of pine plantations come in behind it, and I've seen and witnessed the impacts that this has had on communities. I've seen that myself over my lifetime. Also, a deep history of the South, my great great fourth great grandfather signed the declaration of independence for South Carolina. So was a settler and a colonizer that, you know, was part of the wave of genocide and slavery that took the land. And I feel a deep sense of opportunity and responsibility at this moment in time to be able to course correct some of the harms that have been done, both to nature and also to people and to repair those relationships. So that's really where my passion comes from. Love of forest, love of people, and a deep connection to the history of, you know, where I come from and what I can do at this moment in the world to make a difference. And Reverend Woodbury, can you hear your eighteenth century ancestors speaking to you?

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: Oh, yes. Absolutely. So the ancestral connection, you know, my family, my wife's family, both my parents are from this community. As a child, I remember going into the woods and chasing the chickens and being on my grandmother's farm and working with my grandfather, who was a sharecropper on the other side of my family. And, you know, I don't even remember the first time I went fishing and going hunting with my father. And my vision for the future is a world where we're dealing no longer with civil rights but with human rights. And the basic human right are that everyone has access to clean air, clean water, and clean land. And we can only do that when we do what doctor King said, but I'd like to paraphrase it. We must move swiftly from a profit oriented society to a people oriented society, and may I add a planet oriented society as well. And only when we put people and planet first and not profits will we be able to be good stewards of the land, to restore the land, and make sure that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not merely words, but a reality that is actualized for each and every human being every day.

LAURA FLANDERS: Alright. Sign me up for your church. Thank you all of you. It's been a pleasure talking to you. We really appreciate it. Thank you.

NARRATOR: Thanks for taking the time to listen to the full conversation from our episode on the Britton's Neck Community Forest for climate resilience, the South's first environmental justice training center. These audio exclusives are made possible thanks to our member

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