

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

BRITTONS NECK COMMUNITY FOREST: CLIMATE RESILIENCE & REPARATIONS

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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.

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: 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.

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: 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. You know, looking at the South, when we go back to the

1920s, African Americans owned 50 million acres of land. According to a study in 2022, that is now less than 5 million acres of land. Much of it lost through theft, red lining, and other activities. And so we know, I know you know, Laura, that land is the ultimate power, land is from where everything comes. And so when people are landless, they become powerless. And so we see that as restorative justice as well. 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.

LAURA FLANDERS: 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 an 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 come 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 go within the communities and really listen to the problems that they have.

LAURA FLANDERS: 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: 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 entire planet is at risk. [And 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 put in the atmosphere when the trees are cut down, also the diesel trucks that are transporting the wood, the ships that are using fossil fuels to ship it to Europe.

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 an 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: And Reverend Woodberry, can you hear your 18th century ancestors speaking to you?

REVEREND LEO WOODBERRY: Oh yes, absolutely. So the ancestral connection, 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 is a sharecropper. My vision for the future is a world where we are dealing no longer with civil rights, but with human rights and the basic human rights are that everyone has access to clean air, clean water, and clean land. And we can only do that when we do what, Dr. 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: Right. Sign me up for your church. Thank you, all of you. It's been a pleasure talking to you. We really appreciate it.

Biodiversity is the way of the world. Whether you're talking trees, or seeds, or people, or ideas, it's diversity that keeps us healthy, resilient, creative, and fed. It's that basic reality that Donald Trump seems determined to deny in his first executive orders issued forth in the early days of his new administration. Many came from an office named the Office for Defending Women from Gender Extremist Ideology, I don't need that kind of defense, and Restoring Biological Truth to Federal Government, but it's that biological truth part that's the problem. The biological truth you learn when you go into a forest, for example, is that trees are 75% of them, neither male nor female, but both. And others change from male to female with the seasons and the conditions or the age of the tree itself. That diversity, flexibility, creativity, and intelligence is the way of the natural world. It's our way too. And the great thing about the Brittons Neck project is it will engage more people with the ways of the forest so that we can tell a different, truer story about our best, most biodiverse and healthy selves. If you want to see more of our interviews and reports on projects like this one, go to our archives at our website. And if you want to get the full uncut version of each week's conversation, you can through a subscription to our free podcast. In the meantime, stay kind, stay curious, stay diverse. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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