



Rory Fraser (1953-Present)

Associate Professor
Alabama A&M University

Director
Center for Forestry and Ecosystem Assessment

"For students of color, it is particularly important for them to develop confidence in their ability to work in situations where they are in the minority and to be prepared to handle the challenges associated with race relations." Rory Fraser, 2005.

Overview

Dr. Fraser's research involves examining the social and economic relationships between forests and people in rural Alabama, the role of minority landowners and entrepreneurs in forestry and forest products economies of the United States and the building of a forestry outreach program for Alabama's under-served woodland owners. He works closely with the National Network of Forest Practitioners, the Alabama Forestry Commission, the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the Alabama Consortium in articulating opportunities for underrepresented minorities in forestry and service delivery to underserved forestland owners.

This interview was conducted in 2010.

Early Life and Education

Rory Fraser was born in Guyana on September 5, 1953. He is the second of five children of the late George Fraser, a former diplomatic service employee and lawyer, and the late Bhanu Fraser, a former geography teacher. Growing up in Guyana was a major influence in his decision to pursue an environmental career, since it allowed Fraser to live close to nature. When he was a growing up, the country was heavily forested. As a result, Fraser developed an interest in forest resources at a young age. As a high school student, he worked for the Forest Commission in Guyana and later he worked as a science teacher. His informal mentors included the chief of the Forest Service in Guyana, who played an important role in arranging a scholarship for him to attend the University of New Brunswick in Canada at the age of twenty-five.

During his time as an undergraduate, Fraser held several summer internships, including: work with the Canadian Forest Service Laboratory, a sawmill project in Guyana, and a project at Virginia Tech working on improving the strength of materials. He graduated from college and worked as an executive assistant to the Chief Executive Officer of a forestry company in Jamaica for three years. This experience gave him an extensive overview of the forest products industry – from tree plantings to marketing.

Later, with encouragement from his Virginia Tech internship supervisor, Fraser returned to school. He decided to pursue a master's degree and a doctorate in forestry services from the Pennsylvania State University (Penn State). Upon completing his coursework in 1991, he decided to leave Penn State to work as an international trade specialist at the West Virginia University while finishing his dissertation.

Career

After graduating in 1993, the former director of the Forest Economics Program at West Virginia University offered Fraser a teaching position. His appointment came at a time when the Society of American Foresters (SAF) was pressuring the university to recruit more minorities to serve on the faculty and to attend the university. This caused tensions to escalate during Dr. Fraser's last two years in the department. Fraser often felt that some of his colleagues viewed him simply as a minority-hire who lacked the merits of other faculty.

Fraser left his position at West Virginia University after five years; this marked the lowest point of his career. He felt disenchanting with the systems of preference and racism in the United States and he seriously questioned whether he should return to academia. Ultimately, however, Fraser decided to continue in academia and he eventually found another teaching position in 2000 at Alabama A&M University's Department of Plant and Soil Science. One of the missions of Alabama A&M was enhancing the diversity of the forestry profession. At the time Fraser was hired, the university was also in the process of obtaining the SAF accreditation, a move that would make it the first of the 1890 institution to achieve such a status. That was an exciting time for Fraser and he found his new position far more rewarding.

Since that time, Fraser has been busy working in a variety of roles. He has served as interim director of the Center for Forest Ecology at Alabama A&M and is currently the director of the Center for Ecosystem Assessment at the same institution. He is also the principal investigator in several major projects, including a five-million-dollar, five-year project sponsored by the National Science Foundation. This grant funds a major environmental impact assessment study of Bankhead National Forest, as well as an initiative to increase the number of African Americans involved in science and engineering; the project is considered, by Fraser, to be the highlight of his career. Additionally, Fraser works on a project designed to train minority landowners about land management. He is also part of the W.K. Kellogg Foundation's Leadership Program, which assists colleges and universities in adapting to the changing economy and its impacts on agriculture. He selected the president of Alabama A& M University to be his sponsor for this initiative.

Mentoring Others

Fraser has taken his vast knowledge and experience and has used it to develop new leaders. One of the reasons he has remained in the environmental field is his desire to give back to others, as many individuals

have assisted him throughout his career. He also enjoys his work and sees his role as encouraging cultural diversity in environmental management. At present, Fraser's mentorship activities include his participation in the Cultural Diversity Working Group for the National Network of Forest Practitioners and the SAF's Committee on Cultural Diversity. Additionally, he mentors several current and former students, as well as faculty.

Importance of Mentoring to Career

Fraser has had several mentors during his career. At the Pennsylvania State University, professors such as Dr. L. Yapa in the Geography Department and lecturers and philosophers associated with the Science, Technology, and Society Program, such as the late Ivan Illich, broadened Fraser's perspective of his field. He graduated with a better understanding of the impacts of environmental services on social welfare and economic development for developing countries.

Advice to Young Professionals

Fraser believes that every student entering his department should be guaranteed a job upon leaving. He utilizes his professional networks with government agencies, such as the United States Forest Service and the Alabama Forest Commission, and private industry to connect students with employment opportunities. He also advises students interested in environmental careers to be fully committed to their work and to try new experiences. For students of color, Fraser feels it is particularly important for them to develop confidence in their ability to work in situations where they are in the minority and to be prepared to handle the challenges associated with race relations.