

The Forest Service Needs to Diversify

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“It might seem crazy for a single, 38-year-old African American woman to leave everything she’s ever known to move from Washington, DC, to Missoula, Montana, with a state population less than 1 percent Black. That statistic alone should have made me pause,” Gloria Brown, the United States’ first African American woman forest supervisor — a position that manages all people and programs on a national forest — writes in the opening pages of her new memoir, *Black Woman in Green* (co-authored by Donna L. Sinclair). Brown was referring to a move she made in 1986 after accepting a public affairs position in the US Forest Service’s Northern Regional Office. Twelve years had passed since she began working as a transcriptionist in the agency’s Washington, DC office, and five years since her husband had been tragically killed in a car accident.

Before her husband’s death, Brown had enjoyed her job with the Forest Service, but she’d been planning on transitioning to a career in journalism and television. After the accident, she entered a period of intense grieving that peaked with the heartbreaking loss on a commuter train of a box of her husband’s photos that she carried to work every day. “Losing those pictures,” she writes, “was like having Willie James taken all over again, this time for good. But somehow that loss disconnected me from my husband and sent me a message: Get your act together. Get on with life, if not for yourself, for his kids.”

“Getting her act together” involved a decision to not start over at the bottom elsewhere but rather set in motion ambitious plans to move up in an organization she knew and understood, but that was, and still is, predominantly White. While in the DC office, Brown’s supervisors told her the best way to advance was to get to know the “field,” that is, the individual offices of the nation’s national forests. Missoula became the first step along this path, though it was a difficult one — Brown transferred to Portland, Oregon, after facing racism there. That experience didn’t stop her from taking risks during her 33-year career with the Forest Service. In 1989, for example, she took an assignment in Silver Lake, a small city in southeast Oregon. As she drove into town, a police officer stopped her and inquired if she was lost. When Brown told him she was the new district ranger, “His mouth dropped open and we just stared.” Brown mused that as a Black woman in the White West she shouldn’t have been surprised. “But I resolved never to become used to those kinds of reactions.”

I spoke with Brown, who retired from the Forest Service in 2007, by phone and email this past summer about what she found most difficult about working for the Forest Service, the challenges it still faces with diversity, and what makes her hopeful about the future.

Why did you decide to write about your career with the Forest Service?

There were two reasons. One, I wanted to let people of color know what I did working for the Forest Service and how I did it. Two, I wrote it for my family. We, as a society, don’t pass stories down orally like we used to, so I did this for my great-grandchildren. When they wonder what I did, it will all be right there on the page.

What appealed to you about the Forest Service as a place to make a career? What are the agency’s strengths and what are its weaknesses?

After a decade of working in the Washington, DC, office, I literally fell in love with the Pacific Northwest. I spent time in the woods, seeing the big Douglas Fir trees, and I thought to myself, this place is much more beautiful than clearcuts. There were many open spaces, there was wildlife, fish,

wildflowers, roads, and rivers. One of the strengths of the Forest Service is that working for the agency provides one with all of these great opportunities to go rafting, kayaking, horse-riding. At the same time, all this is based on the cutting of timber and old-growth [some of the profits from which fund many Forest Service programs]. I got to the Pacific Northwest during the Forest Service and [timber] industry wars with environmentalists, and I knew I wanted to be a change agent. I wanted to have a voice, and to be the one to make decisions about what the Forest Service was doing. My love of communication, my listening skills, and ability to work with people were a prescription for success, in my opinion.

Another strength of the Forest Service is its camaraderie, but at the same time this has also been a weakness. This is because that camaraderie was more between the White men who hunted and fished. The majority of them grew up and worked in the woods and *loved* the Forest Service. The agency does take care of its employees, which is how I got out of Montana when I needed to, and they have a good promotion and reward system, though many rewards and promotions depended on who you were and who was supporting you, and sometimes your philosophy about cutting old growth.

It sounds like you're saying that much of what makes the agency strong has also made it weak, or vulnerable?

Yes, that's it. At the time I came in, the Forest Service was also hiring wildlife biologists, fish biologists, botanists, archeologists, and a few minorities, like me. Some of us did not receive promotions and rewards like our White counterparts.

I'm impressed with your ambition. What do you think is the source of your drive?

My children. I was a single parent, sole supporter of my family. It was not easy to find a job that matched the Forest Service pay I was receiving, so I stayed, at first, for economic reasons. Ask any Black mother: I was widowed and head of house without insurance or inheritance from my husband. They needed food, clothes, a good education, and money for college. I was always ambitious and smart, which came from life experiences, the local library, and the books I read. My mother and father never finished high school, but managed to move into a middle class neighborhood that had good schools, thanks to the GI Bill. My father worked for the [General Services Administration] and my mother cleaned houses. I knew early that I would *never* follow her path. Ambition is an outcome when you have had as many motivators as I did.

What did you enjoy most about your years working for the Forest Service? What were the biggest challenges?

I loved learning my job over and over again. I loved how comfortable I was working in the woods. I enjoyed having mountains and oceans to go to and seeing our projects from beginning to end and to know we were making a difference in our watersheds. I enjoyed our ability to form partnerships with communities and organizations. I appreciated how my staff could think out of the box. I enjoyed all of my employees and admired their work ethic and love for the forests.

My biggest challenge was when I accepted the job as Forest Supervisor for the Siuslaw National Forest [in Oregon]. I refused to cut old growth trees. That hurt me because I could not receive enough funding for employees and my programs. It was a horrible time because downsizing the agency really affected national forests. I would joke with my children that I had received a boat with a bunch of holes in it. I had to sink or swim and since I did not know how to swim I learned how to walk on water. Failure was never an option for me.

In your opinion, what can the Forest Service do to increase diversity in the workforce? Is the agency where it should be?

No, we are not. Why are so many of our leadership teams still all White? What programs are we putting in place to bring Black and Brown people into the organization? Are there follow up programs for these individuals to move up once they are recruited? This situation also applies to White women but for different reasons. Are there programs to teach a cadre of Forest Service employees how to mentor people? These are the kinds of programs that are needed. Is there a real desire for the Forest Service to change, especially at this pivotal time in our history? Are they looking at other agencies and organizations to understand what they are doing and learning about best practices that the Forest Service could take home?

At Mt. St. Helens National Monument in Washington, you worked to increase employee diversity, and seemed to have more success with interpretive/education jobs than with field jobs. What can the agency do to increase diversity in the field?

It really takes a certain persona and attitude to want to work in the woods for the Forest Service. I think one issue is that it's hard for people recruited from the East or the South to assimilate in the Pacific Northwest. These college kids would rather have jobs that require a suit and tie. On the other hand, interpretive jobs were desirable for young women of all ethnic groups, but these jobs were always administrative and movement upward through the agency was very limited with them. When I successfully changed the employment classification used by the Forest Service to the classification used by the Park Service these jobs offered some upward mobility.

I have often thought that many small towns where Forest Service district offices are located would be pretty difficult for people of color to find welcoming. Is this an insurmountable problem with an agency like the Forest Service, given that these towns are where many of the field jobs are located?

People in those towns have no exposure to us and that was one of the most difficult things for me. I had to know about them, but they didn't have to know about me. I had to learn all about their families and what they liked and didn't like, and I always asked many questions. People love being asked a lot of questions. I learned how to go into a room and be the only Black person there. My staff was mostly White, and you just have to get over it and get over the assumptions you make about people. For example, you can't assume people are racist and you can't think they don't want you to join them for lunch unless you ask to join them and they say no. You just have to do it; you have to ask them! So, for the people of color going to these places, it's up to them to make it work.

You strike me as an optimistic person; what do you feel hopeful about in today's world and circumstances relative to racial justice and awareness of inequality?

The current environment — including the demonstrations for social justice and equality — leads me to believe change is possible and gives me hope. This is just the beginning and we have a long road ahead. The systemic racism in all levels of our society will have to be addressed. I do believe the awareness is already happening and the understanding of White privilege is a great start to the work we have to do. I have told my children that we would not see real change until White people joined us in the battle.

Are your words and advice to young women and men of color who want to work in natural resource management different now compared to 30 years ago?

My words and advice are very different from 30 years ago. Thirty years ago, I did not know how to discuss the subject, nor was I interested. Now I can hold myself up as a role model to tell the story of how I did it and that they can do it too. I stayed away from the issue after I retired when it seemed to me the Forest Service was not really interested in bringing in men and women of color in any significant numbers. Now I have written the book, and I have a message and a platform to present myself in the middle of this "perfect storm." I can talk to as many people as possible about this

wonderful, challenging organization. I can tell them if they want change, they have to be the change they want ... New ambition and motivation has me fired up. I am ready to move the Forest Service towards the organization I know it can be, as well as to work to address the current changes happening in our country and even our world. I used to tell my children to reach for the moon and they are bound to catch a few stars.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

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