

# FORESTRY AT CROSSROADS IN NIGERIA

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## MOVING NIGERIAN FORESTRY FORWARD THROUGH URBAN FORESTRY DEVELOPMENT: LESSONS FROM THE UNITED STATES EXPERIENCE

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### Abstract

This paper examined the potential of urban forestry development in the overall development of forestry in Nigeria. It showed how urban forestry succeeded in shooting forestry into greater prominence and therefore greater achievements in the United States. The roles of prominent actors such as the professional and citizen organizations, the public, media, politicians, government functionaries and the academia in urban forestry development were investigated. Lessons learnt from the United States experience include placing a challenge on the Forestry Association of Nigeria to spearhead the formation of urban forestry movement in Nigeria, setting up of national urban forestry working group, organising regional technical seminars and conferences on urban forestry as well as expanding forestry curricula to accommodate changing demands of managing trees in the modern urban environment. The study concludes by recommending the immediate setting up of National Urban Forestry Working Group to start putting together in earnest the blueprint for urban forestry development in Nigeria.

### Introduction

The expression "bringing the gown to town" is often used to remind the academia the need to make its activities relevant to the day to day public life. This expression is very apt for the present situation in the Nigerian forestry profession. It is time the forest is brought to the door step of the citizenry in Nigeria in order to make the holistic relevance of forestry felt in the day to day life of the Nigerian public.

Historically forestry as a profession has a long tradition of activity in the more remote and rural regions of the globe. Thus the forest, to many people particularly in Africa is a huge tract of remote land or wilderness where trees, wild animals and demons are present in an almost inexhaustive quantity. This perception has an untold adverse effect on forestry development in Nigeria, since the citizenry in general and the policy makers in particular tend to see the forest either as a resource base to exploit or as a development barrier that must give way for civilisation. This notion will have to change if forestry will move forward in Nigeria. One of the salient ways to achieve this is for the Nigerian forestry professionals

to borrow a leaf from the American foresters who having realised that political power base had shifted to cities and need to be relevant in the unfolding political movement, started the development of urban forestry in the 1960s in order to deal with the increasing demands of the urban residents for nature, and thereby make themselves relevant in the cities- the political power base.

Urban forestry which has been defined as the planned, integrated, and systematic approach to the establishment and management of entire tree and woodland (forest) resources in urban and peri-urban areas for their contributions to the physiological, sociological, psychological and economic well being of the urban society (Ajewole 2005) is a deliberate effort to develop sustainable city greening programme. Urban forestry conveys a powerful image, tying together the cultivated and civilized aspects of the city and the rural and the unmanaged forest. Urban forestry has been used to push forestry profession into greater prominence especially in the United States. The diversity and the number of activities involved in urban forestry development in this country has made forestry to inadvertently enter into the consciousness of an average citizen in the country including politicians, policy makers, bureaucrats, academia and the youth. An x-ray of these contributions can therefore serve as basis and motivation for Nigerian forestry profession to embark on sustainable urban forestry development.

#### **Urban Forestry Development in the United States**

Prominent actors involved in urban forestry development in the United States consist of professional and citizen organisations, the public, media, politicians, government functionaries and the academia.

#### **The Roles of Professional and Citizen Organizations in Urban Forestry Development**

Several professional and citizen organizations played major roles in the development of urban forestry in the United States. Prominent among them are the International Society for Arboriculture (ISA), the Society of American Foresters (SAF) and the American Forestry Association (AFA). The International Society for Arboriculture (ISA) played a leading role in promoting urban forestry since the early 1970s, not only in North America but also throughout the world. Prominent ISA members have consistently been at the forefront of the urban forestry movement working within the ISA itself, and in partnerships with other organizations and groups. The ISA understood from the on-set that any movement for urban trees, which prompted increased efforts and higher standards in planting and management, had to be good for its members. As early as 1973, the ISA convened an urban forestry committee to encourage interest and new developments in this area among its membership.

The ISA publication, the *Journal of Arboriculture*, played an invaluable role in the early promotion of the concept by regularly publishing papers on the subject from 1978 onwards. Its support for urban forestry continues to be expressed through its publications and its annual conferences. The first issue of the ISA's newsletter "Arborists News" in February 1992, appealed to arboriculturists to embrace urban forestry and work in partnership with other organizations, government agencies and community groups, to promote the concept, which it described as "an idea whose time has come".

In a similar trend, the Society of American Foresters (SAF), the professional body for forestry in the United States, formed an urban forestry working group (UFWG) as early as 1972 (Miller, 1997). The profession of forestry and the SAF itself had not always championed the cause of the urban trees. The formation of the UFWG was therefore, an indication that American foresters were now becoming more conscious of their urban role. In 1974, the SAF approved the definition of urban forestry, which described it as a specialized branch of forestry (Miller, 1997). From the mid-1970s, the SAF organized a number of technical seminars on urban forestry, began publishing papers on the subject in its *Journal of Forestry*, and compiled a *Directory of Urban Foresters* (Johnston 1996).

Furthermore, in the late 1970s, other professional bodies with an interest in urban trees, such as the National Arborists Association, the American Society of Landscape Architect, and the American Association of Nurserymen, also became aware of the growing interest in urban forestry and the contribution their memberships could make to its development. With most of the relevant professional bodies taking a positive attitude towards urban forestry, the subject began to be featured at their annual conferences and other conferences related with the urban environment. The first comprehensive urban forestry conference, although not called by that name, was held as early as 1971 at the University of Massachusetts, entitled "Trees, and Forests in an Urbanizing Environment. However, the first national conference on urban forestry to be called by that name was held in November 1978 in Washington, DC. The conference was a landmark in the development of urban forestry because it undoubtedly achieved its aim of bringing together large numbers of researchers and practitioners, and firmly established the concept in the United States (Johnston, 1996). Following the interest generated by the first National conference in 1978, the American Forestry Association (AFA), a national voluntary sector organization, decided to take the lead in promoting the concept. The AFA decided to place its considerable influence and resources behind the development of a national urban forestry movement. While the conference had firmly established the concept, the organizations with an interest in the subject were still working largely independently without any recognized national network or widespread public support. The AFA rapidly became a voluntary sector catalyst for urban forestry and to this end was instrumental in establishing the National urban and community



forestry leaders' council in 1981, later to be called the National urban forest council (NUFC). The NUFC continues to be an organization independent of government, with a brief to represent all the elements of the urban forestry movement. The establishment of urban forests councils in individual states followed the formation of the NUFC, with a similar brief at state level. Both the NUFC and the states' urban forest councils were later to evolve into a highly effective national network for urban forestry and provide a powerful voice for the movement within federal and state governments. In 1981, the AFA began publication of a newsletter, the urban and community forestry forum later called the URBAN FOREST FORUM and now entitled "Urban Forests" (Johnston, 1996). This publication has been invaluable in reinforcing the networking role of the urban forest council by linking together the urban forestry movement with news, features, and information.

It would be difficult to estimate the AFA's role in the development of the United States urban forestry movement, for without the AFA's commitment and leadership, urban forestry may have remained a largely professional and academic pre-occupation without any significant impact on government policy or public attitudes. Urban forestry needed a major national organization that would "champion" its cause and the AFA, with its substantial resources, political influence, and distinguished track record of campaigning for trees and forests, was ideally placed to provide this. The development of the urban forestry movement in the United States can be measured by the National Urban Forestry Conferences, which are documented through their proceedings. The conferences are unique events, which gather and bind together the different organizations and individuals that make up the movement. Each successive conference acts as a measuring stick of the progress made in the science and politics of caring for the urban forest and has the effect of renewing the personal contacts and commitments of the individuals and organizations that make this progress possible.

#### **The role of the Public and Media in Urban forestry Development**

Two major issues have been identified to be responsible for the United States urban forestry movement involvement of the public in urban forestry development. The movement first recognized that if urban trees were to be promoted in the nation's political agenda, the movement would require widespread public support that would influence the actions of politicians. The movement also recognized the social and psychological benefits accruable to community involvement in urban forestry development.

Urban forestry in the United States has always been something of a visionary movement, not concerned simply with highlighting the technical deficiencies in current standards of planting and management, but inspiring the public with a vision to join with professionals to create the green cities of the future (Johnston, 1996). The early 1980s saw the emergence

of a number of visionary urban forestry projects and campaigns that were to transform the movement by inspiring public action on a vast scale. One of the first and most significant projects of this type was the Million Tree Campaign of the Tree People organization based in Los Angeles. The project's aim was to involve the city's residents in planting one million trees for the 1984 Los Angeles Olympic Games. Tree People based its planting target on Los Angeles City Planning Department figures, which claimed that one million trees, when mature, would be capable of filtering up to 200 tonnes of particulate smog from the air everyday. *This figure sounded both solid and inspirational.*

This project was the first major urban forestry project to employ advertising and marketing techniques to great effect in promoting its message. Its highly imaginative and exciting campaign captured the attention of the media, not just in California but also nationally. This not only ensured the participation of thousands of Los Angeles residents in practical tree planting schemes, it also attracted the substantial amounts of commercial sponsorship, which financed the projects. Through the Million Tree project, Tree people demonstrated dramatically the power of the urban forestry vision to motivate the public, private and voluntary sectors to work together to heal the urban environment.

Thereafter, Tree People continued to develop a wide range of practical projects that have involved Los Angeles residents in planting and caring for tree. Its citizen forester's scheme, which trains volunteers to become catalysts for action in their neighbourhoods, has been particularly successful in encouraging countless local projects and initiatives throughout the city. The success of Million Tree campaign in Los Angeles helped inspire many similar initiatives by citizen groups throughout the United States using the same populist approach. The Trees Atlanta programme in Georgia and the friends of the urban forest in San Francisco are just two of many initiatives that have also been highly successful in attracting widespread public participation and private sector sponsorship.

Encouraged by the impact of these local citizen based initiatives, the AFA launched a national campaign in 1989 to involve the private and voluntary sectors in a large tree planting effort throughout the United States called Global Releaf. This focused on the importance of tree planting and management in the local community as a way of helping to mitigate global environmental problems. Its message imaginatively expressed in the slogan "plant a tree-cool the globe," was promoted through a highly effective advertisement and marketing. Though, not an exclusively urban initiative, much of the impact of Global Releaf has been through the urban forestry movement.

The significance of global Releaf has not just been its success in encouraging community action and attracting private sector sponsorship on a national scale. In addition, the AFA for

the first time was able to link urban forestry and the planting and care of trees in local neighbourhoods with global environmental issues. It successfully harnessed growing public concern about the global environmental crisis and channelled it into a major new driving force for the urban forestry movement (Johnston 1996)

#### **The Role of Politicians and Government Functionaries in Urban Forestry Development**

The trend of urban forestry in the United States succinctly displayed how politics can affect sustainable urban forestry development. Like any other public service, the management of urban trees is largely dependent on central and local government funding and is similarly prone to changes in political priorities. The first seemingly official/government recognition of urban forestry concept in the United States was indicated by the acceptance by the President, of a report by the Citizens Advisory Committee on Recreation and Natural Beauty in 1968. This report recommended that USDA forest service should:

- i. Initiate an urban and community forestry to encourage research into urban trees.
- ii. Lends financial and technical assistance for the establishment and management of urban trees, and
- iii. Develop federal training in urban tree care.

In response to the recommendations of this report, the Pinchot Institute of Environmental Forestry Studies was created in 1970. This was an interdisciplinary division of the USDA forest service's north eastern forest experiment station in cooperation with several universities, with the aim of improving through environmental forestry research, human environments in the Northeast.

The passing of Urban Forestry Acts in May 1972, which amended the cooperative Forest Assistance Act of 1950, followed this development. Following the passage of this Bill, many states amended their own cooperative forestry laws with provision for urban forestry initiatives (Miller, 1997; Johnston, 1996).

The Cooperative Forestry Assistance Act of 1978 expanded the commitment to urban forestry by the federal government by authorizing the Secretary of State for Agriculture to provide financial and technical assistance to state foresters.

This assistance, being a federal initiative, had a major impact in confirming official recognition of the concept of urban forestry throughout the United States.

Other federal agencies were also giving technical and financial assistance towards urban tree planting and management. The USDA cooperative extension services were particularly influential in transferring information gained through research to urban foresters (Johnston, 1996). Three other federal agencies, the Department of Housing and Urban Development, the Economic Development Administration and the Heritage Conservation and Recreation Service, contributed significantly towards the cost of replanting urban forests.

However, the steady growth in federal assistance for urban forestry came to a halt with the



election of President Reagan in 1981. During Reagan's eight-year administration, federal funding for urban forestry technical services was reduced from \$3.5 million to \$2.1 million (Johnston, 1996). The 1980's (Reagan's regime) were difficult times for the environmental movement and particularly difficult for initiatives such as urban forestry whose values are measured by ecological improvements rather than by economic products. The urban forestry movement, however, learnt rapidly during this period, how to promote itself and work effectively with government in order to compete with other demands on funding (Johnston, 1996). Nevertheless, the movement managed to survive these years and entered a period of renewed growth with the election of a new President.

President Bush immediately launched the America the Beautiful Programme to promote the planting of one billion trees for each of the next ten years. He also increased funding for urban forestry technical services to \$21 million, a ten-fold increase (Johnston, 1996). Bush administration also had two other major and significant contributions to urban forestry development. First is the passing of the urban and community forestry act bill in 1990, which made funds available to commence the National Urban and Community Forestry Program. The second is the passing of the Farm bill also in 1990, which has a section on Urban Forestry Assistance calling for the establishment of a National Urban and Community Forestry Advisory Council (NUCFAC), to provide direction, guidance and a voice for the urban forestry movement with the secretary of state for Agriculture.

While the 1990s began as a period of growth for urban forestry, the movement was once again under going pressure from budget cuts by both federal and state governments. In an effort to counteract such restrictions, the urban forestry movement strived towards more intensive lobbying of government officials. Considerable emphasis was then placed on attributing monetary values to the benefits of urban forest to illustrate the substantial savings and avoided expenditure on alternative environmental control measures. These include the large savings in health care, high water quality, and energy conservation and enhanced property values.

#### **The Role of the Academia in Urban Forestry Development**

The high standards of urban forest management that are evident in some cities in the United States could not have been achieved unless its universities had responded to the changing demands of managing trees in the modern urban environment and produced graduates who were capable of meeting those challenges.



The initial growth of interest in urban forestry as a multi-discipline subject by the relevant professional in the early 1970s was followed almost immediately by the development of appropriate academic education at university level. While urban forestry curricula were for the most part, served by colleges of forestry, it was recognized that their design must be flexible to ensure that sufficient courses from supporting areas were included, such as horticulture, landscape architecture and planning (Johnston, 1996). Universities in the United States have also been at the forefront of research into urban forestry topics and technology. Together with federal and state research agencies, they have led the world in research into urban tree selection, establishment, maintenance and management. The urban forestry movement has not only provided much of the impetus for this research, it has also been aware of the need to pass on the results and the benefits to urban foresters (Johnston, 1996). Another very important step taken in promoting the concept of urban forestry has been research into surveying and evaluating the urban forest on a local, state and national level. Urban foresters in the United States have clearly understood that without a comprehensive survey of the urban forest and its potentials for expansion, any claims at planned management of the resources are nonsense (Johnston, 1996). Once the urban forest has been surveyed, it can then be evaluated and this includes putting a financial value on the resource. The results of these valuations have often revealed the urban forest as a multi million-dollar value.

### Lessons Learnt

Urban forestry development in the United States is a success story of vision, challenges, strategies, lobby and networking. Although it involved many actors, yet the central roles of the Society of American Foresters (SAF), International Society of Arboriculture (ISA) and American Forestry Association (AFA) which are professional and citizen (non-governmental) organisations, in pioneering and sustaining the urban forestry movement can not be over estimated. This connotes that the Forestry Association of Nigeria (FAN) as the apex professional body for forestry in Nigeria has an unparalleled responsibility and role to play in sustainable urban forestry development in Nigeria.

One of the very important primary steps taken towards the development of urban forestry by SAF was the establishment of the Urban Forestry Working Group (UFWG), which was an indication that the American Foresters had become conscious of their urban role. In the case of Nigeria, the formation of Urban Forestry Working Group which is very germane and should be taken with urgency, will not only serve as an indication that Nigerian foresters are becoming conscious of their urban role, but more importantly, such a committee will serve as an engine room to start urban forestry movement, articulate and disseminate its vision, mobilise government and public support for urban forestry development and establish



a network of all categories of crucial actors essential for urban forestry development in Nigeria.

Another contribution of SAF which served as important catalyst to the development of urban forestry in the United States was the organisation of technical seminars and National Urban Forestry Conferences. The first of these conferences brought together large numbers of researchers and practitioners, and firmly established the concept in the United States. It was this conference that caught the interest of AFA, which eventually made use of its substantial resources, political influence, and distinguished track record of campaigning for trees and forests, for the development of urban forestry. The conferences also achieved among other things the renewal of personal contacts and commitments of individuals and organizations that make up the urban forestry movement. In the case of Nigeria, the country has a vantage position of spearheading a regional or at least a sub regional urban forestry movement, if urgent steps are taken in this direction. It is apparent that technical seminars and specialised conferences specifically named after urban forestry development will have to be organised from time to time in order to stimulate the interest of the general public and concerned essential professionals and practitioners. To achieve a far reaching impact, the invitation for participation in such seminars will have to extend across the country and beyond the purview of the traditional forestry practice to include other relevant professionals and practitioners such as town planners, landscape architects, civil/structural engineers, public utility services providers (telecom, electricity, water etc.); horticulturists, environmentalists, conservationists, etc working in the public and the private sectors.

The role of the members of the academia in the development of urban forestry in Nigeria is invaluable. Apart from the need for them to initiate and carry out researches in all aspects of urban forestry development, forestry curricula have to be expanded to accommodate changing demands of managing trees in the modern urban environment so as to produce graduates who will be capable of meeting those challenges. Such curricula must be flexible enough to ensure that sufficient courses from supporting areas such as horticulture, landscape architecture and planning are included.

### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

This work is intended to serve as eye opener and motivation for forestry professionals in Nigeria, to take advantage of the immense potential that urban forestry has to promote overall forestry development. This is evidenced from the way urban forestry development activities have shot forestry profession into limelight and attracted a wholesome support in the United States. An important case in point is the Global Releaf programme. Encouraged

by the impact of the local citizen based urban forestry initiatives, the AFA launched a national campaign in 1989 to involve the private and voluntary sectors in a large tree planting effort throughout the United States called Global Releaf. AFA through Global Releaf was able to link urban forestry and the planting and care of trees in local neighbourhoods with global environmental issues. Global Releaf also succeeded in encouraging community action and attracting private sector sponsorship on a national scale.

Global Releaf was not an entirely urban forestry initiative, but its conception was stimulated by the success of several local citizen based urban forestry initiatives such as the Million Tree campaign in Los Angeles, the Trees Atlanta programme in Georgia and the friends of the urban forest in San Francisco. Nigerian forestry can also achieve all these and much more if immediate steps are ~~be~~ taken to harness the great potential of urban forestry development. To this effect, this conference should not come to an end without setting up a National Urban Forestry Working Group to start putting together in earnest the blueprint for urban forestry development in Nigeria. This is a major way of moving forestry forward in Nigeria.

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