

**Chad Allen**

## **Biodiversity Conservation and Socioeconomic Conflict**

Liberty County represents a piece of old Florida boasting one of the states lowest population densities and highest amounts of forest cover. However, its bucolic charm is masked by the communities economic instability and increasing poverty. Earning its place among the states poorest, Liberty is also Florida's most timber-dependent county with more than 55 percent of its land belonging to the Apalachicola National Forest and nearly three quarters of its working population involved in the timber industry. Over the past two decades, Liberty County has seen a steady decline in its timber harvest and a drastic reduction in federal pilot payments for the sale of timber from the national forest. The major reason given for the decline is for the protection of one of the countries most endangered species, the red-cockaded woodpecker. With conservation issues becoming increasingly important, the preservation of this tiny bird has become a major point of contention among Liberty Counties residents, the parks and forest service, environmental groups and government officials.

In both US national and private forests, community involvement in forestry, as well as community exclusion from forestry, often involves endangered species management. The search for common ground between species conservation and economic use of forestlands has become one of the key challenges of forest management, as well as the driving question behind this research. Central to this is the question of whether or not broadening participation in forest management through community empowerment will lead to an amicable solution that preserves the people, woodpeckers, and forest of Liberty County. My emphasis on these questions has developed from my involvement in Liberty County stewardship activities and the broad array of social values and levels of participation in forest management that I've observed. Questions and interest in this research having recently evolved from time in the Philippines, working under the basic premise in community forestry that the active participation of local people in forest management is one of the essential ingredients to achieving sustainable relationships between communities and forest. This bottom up approach works well with participatory research in that it aims at building the capacities of local peoples to participate meaningfully in natural resource management decisions and to enable them to better control their own destinies. Through the interview and observation process, the goal of this research is to initiate a process, which takes on its own momentum as people come together to analyze and discuss as well as clarify different understandings of the conflict, identify different areas of convergent interest, analyze structures and constraints to participation in forest management and galvanize communication between community members.