

Social Aspects of the Eastern Black Walnut

Andrea Clarke
USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

Burdened with fluctuating economies and expanding urban development of our rural landscapes, we need to focus on places and efforts that support rather than fragment our lives; places and efforts that balance the hard, standardized, and cost-efficient with the natural, personal, and healthful. (Gallagher, 1993) The unique dual path of the wild and commercial eastern black walnut industry is already providing opportunities for balance in our increasingly complex lives.

This chapter is provided to encourage the reader to sit back and examine the beneficial aspects of the eastern black walnut in terms of long-term economic stability for communities and/or regions, infrastructure to support the industry, and the inherent desire for people to have a balanced relationship with the environment.

LONG-TERM ECONOMIC STABILITY FOR COMMUNITIES

With national trends moving in the direction of less agricultural farmland and more urban growth, the potential impact upon major eastern black walnut producing areas such as southwestern Missouri could be significant. The types of people moving into these rural areas are in many cases not familiar with the rich culture of the region, nor are they aware of the potential of crops such as eastern black walnuts. “Putting land into eastern black walnuts is a good way to invest in future generations, as well as a natural and good thing to do with newly acquired property.” (Dilsaver, 1998)

According to a 1995 Gallup Poll study (Wolfe & Chambers, 1995) commissioned by Southwest Missouri Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D), over 4 out of 5 (82%) landowners viewed “beauty or nature appreciation” as being a somewhat or very important reason to own their wooded land. Also, “keeping the land in your family” was an important consideration. People inherently like to have trees on their property. More than 1/3 (37%) of landowners surveyed intended to plant trees on their land, and almost 2/3 (65%) of landowners stated that if provided with trees, they would plant them.

Planting eastern black walnuts on suitable property would provide aesthetic beauty, as well as a valuable long-term investment in the future. Approximately one out of ten (11%) surveyed landowners said they would be willing to pay for forest management services. New, higher yielding strains of eastern black walnut are being patented and planted throughout the eastern black walnut growing region of the U.S. as well as other continents. As the interest in eastern black walnut grows, so will the industry as a whole.

INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT THE INDUSTRY

The eastern black walnut industry will follow two paths. One will be the continued usage of the wild crop, so we will need to continue to focus attention and appreciation for the multiple inherent values provided by a “free” natural renewable resource.

The second will be a commercial extraction, but people must be reminded to value and appreciate the importance of balance, harmony, economy, renewability, and sustainability of this unique tree crop. Although not “wild” or “natural” in the traditional sense, a planted field of medium size eastern black walnut trees spaced 20 feet by 40 feet apart can be a peaceful and beautiful place to visit. Psychologists have shown that even short visits to city parks contribute to improved moods (Hull, 1992). Relaxation and stress reduction occur when people are viewing natural landscapes (Ulrich, 1981).

Companies like Hammons Products in Stockton, Missouri invest a portion of their yearly revenue into research and development to come up with new and better ways of growing and processing eastern black walnut. Ways that also take into account the social aspects of this unique tree crop. Hammons currently has three plant materials patents on three different trees selected for their very high nut yielding capacity. It is these types of efforts that will enable the eastern black walnut industry to grow and thrive in the future.

INHERENT DESIRE FOR PEOPLE TO HAVE A BALANCED RELATIONSHIP WITH THE ENVIRONMENT

Each unique type of landscape is often also the location of a unique cultural meaning for humans that share that landscape. “A sense of place is part and parcel of the effort to find meaning in the land and to create personal and cultural identities. Places in the landscape are infused with meaning and are more than the sum of their biophysical attributes or their associated plants, animals and landforms. The meanings associated with certain places obviously are derived from experiences in them, and these experiences are quite variable. They can come from growing up in a particular region, such as the flat openness of the Midwest, from listening to grandparents and relatives describe their lives on the family farm, or from adventure experiences traveling the wild rivers of the West. These personal experiences are tied to other people and their lives, to ways of life and play, and to a culture that has been greatly shaped by the natural environment.” (List & Brown in Driver et al, 1996, p. 461-462)

The influence of black walnuts in southwestern Missouri is a classic example of culture shaping around nature. A culture all its own has grown up around a basically wild crop. Generations of families each Fall have put tiny and adult sized hands to work gathering the pungent, fleshy nuts on their farms. Nuts from trees are sometimes considered a nuisance, but more often a field full of fallen wild black walnuts is considered a great source of charity funds or spare holiday gift money. Gathered nuts are processed at hulling stations provided by black walnut processing plants such as Hammons Products Company in Stockton, Missouri. The hulling machines pry and rub the thick fleshy husk off the nuts, and then they are bagged and weighed. A typical pick-up load of 600 pounds of nuts can yield a nice sum of money. Three generations together at a hulling station realizing the benefits of their efforts from collecting black walnuts on the family farm is a common sight.

To ignore this sense of place and culture is to ignore the people, ideas, and the meanings that are attached to these places. These meanings and ideas are as important as the biophysical attributes of specific landscapes and ecosystems. It is important that landowners consider the psychological and spiritual consequences of their land management decisions in addition to the economic, scientific, and environmental consequences. The eastern black walnut provides the opportunity for

landowners to establish a balanced relationship with the environment as well as a solid long-term investment in future generations, both economically and spiritually.

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