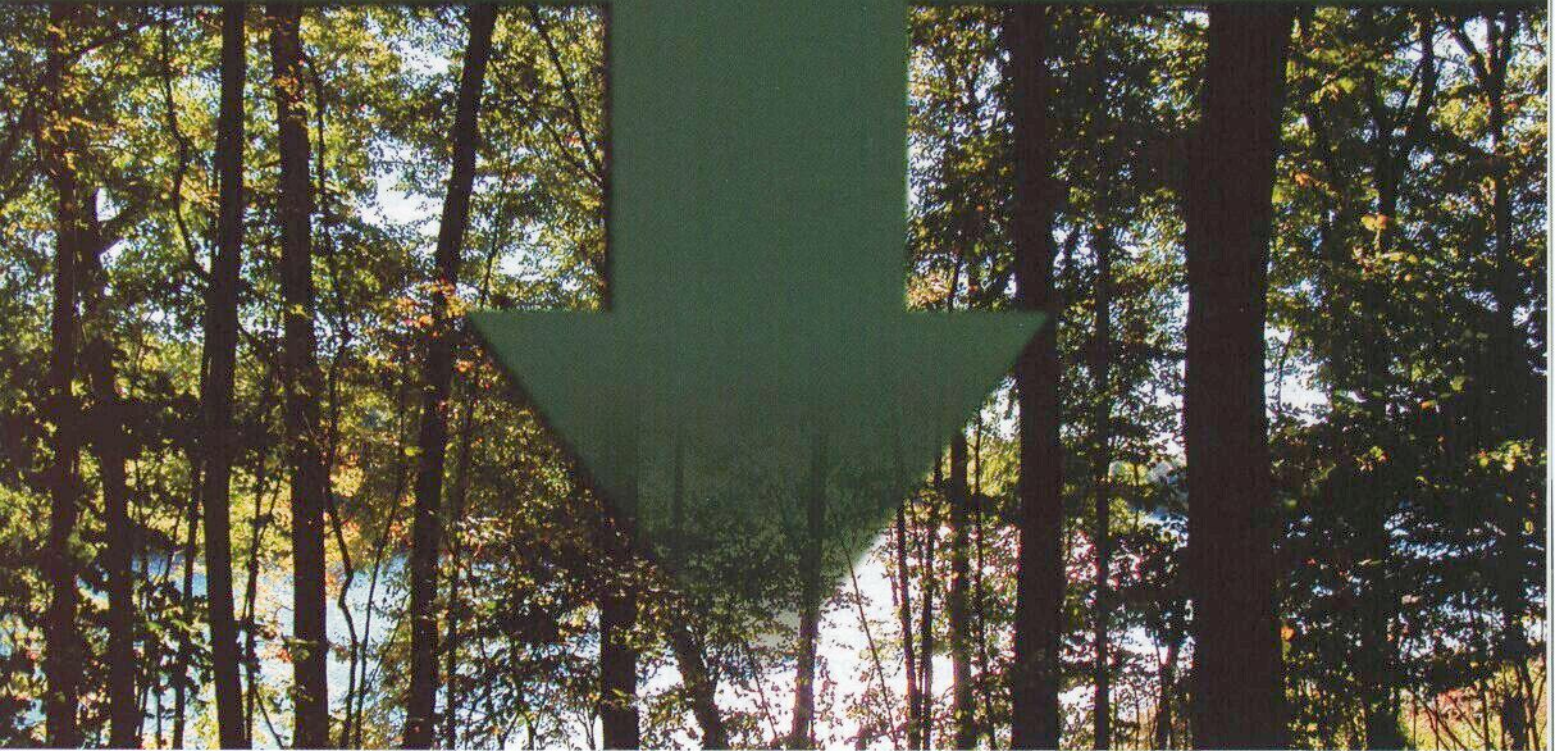


Extension/Outreach Implications for America's Family Forest Owners



David B. Kittredge

ABSTRACT The increasing number of family forest owners presents a challenge to effective outreach. Family woodland in some parts of the country represents the dominant ownership type. Sustained provision of a host of greater social goods and services depends on functional forest landscapes, yet fragmentation and parcelization of family woodlands pose a threat. Segmentation of the family owner audience into different types, and targeting of outreach toward two specific decisionmaking junctures, may improve our ability to reach this important audience.

Keywords: family forest; outreach; decisionmaking; segmented audience

The trends in family forest ownership are clearly presented by Butler and Leatherberry (2004), who summarize their activities with the National Woodland Owners Survey. America's family forest owners are growing older, and parcel sizes are decreasing. The absolute number of fam-

ily forest owners is increasing, and they tend to be well educated and more affluent than the average American. Most owners live on or near their forestland and place a high priority on privacy, esthetics, family legacy, and recreation. Many profess little interest in cutting trees, yet almost half of the owners nationwide have had a harvest

on their land since they have owned it, and a fifth have had a harvest in the last 5 years. Paradoxically, fewer than 5% of family forest owners have a written management plan. Are they getting sound advice about the sale of their timber and the management of their land?

In addition to the characteristics of owners, the context in which much of family forestland is located is also evolving. The urban-rural interface is expanding in new ways facilitated by the Internet, which enables telecommuting and e-commerce. "Second homes" in relatively rural areas now are the primary residences of an increasing number of Americans (Levitt 2002). Real estate values escalate as demand for residential development climbs. Increased development creates neighborhoods where forest once dominated the

landscape. New residents bring with them attitudes about traditional land management, and the prevailing public opinion about forestry can easily shift. Family forest owners do not make decisions about their land in a vacuum. They are influenced not only by their own attitudes and circumstances, but by the context in which their land is located. Both Wear et al. (1999) and Barlow et al. (1998) identified that the probability of timber harvesting declines in proximity to more densely populated areas. Though the area still is forested, the likelihood of that land sustaining a harvest decreases. New zoning, restrictions on roads, increased real estate values and lucrative alternatives for the land, and the attitudes of neighbors and communities all combine to influence family forest owner decisionmaking.

Implications for Outreach

Butler and Leatherberry (2004) pose the important question: will the forestry community be ready to meet the challenges presented by a family forest audience that is growing in number and has a diversity of desires for their land? This question applies directly to those involved in Extension and other forms of outreach. The issue is a challenging one because there are more family forest owners than ever before. The audience is a moving target, because new owners enter the population and others leave. Even simply finding out who owners are is a daunting task, because many records are held in local or county offices. The effort is further impeded by reduced agency budgets and growing demands for a host of services. The result is that effective outreach to family forest owners is becoming more difficult due to more of "them" and fewer of "us" to send the message. On top of that, we need to be sure we are sending an effective message that will resonate with this growing audience, yet we cannot leave behind the more traditional forest management messages that have been successful with a subset of owners.

The question is: can traditional messages of good forestry, promoted for decades through programs such as Tree Farm, Forest Stewardship, and various

state current-use property taxation programs, be successful in light of new owners and the often suburbanizing context in which their lands are located? Some tried and true programs promoting forestry have been quite successful. Thousands of family forest ownerships have management plans. On the other hand, many more landowners do not have plans. In addition to promoting traditional approaches to management that foresters know to be good, effective outreach programming for family forest owners needs to appeal to the majority of owners who have not expressed interest in a plan. While it is true that landowners with plans will have a greater likelihood of making informed decisions about the future of their land, many landowners are obviously not convinced that they need a plan to realize the benefits they seek.

Different Types of Owners

Research on family forestry owners has long identified interest in nonconsumptive uses of their land and has generated a host of results about the attitudes of the average owner (e.g., Kingsley 1976, Alexander 1986, Egan and Jones 1993, Bliss et al. 1994, Jones et al. 1995, Birch 1996, Rickenbach et al. 1998). An improved assessment would recognize the diversity of owners, attitudes, and contexts in which their land is located. Instead of referring to the general needs of the average owner, a more effective approach to outreach would segment the population and determine the needs and desires of distinct groups. For example, in a survey of 1,200 family forest owners in Massachusetts, Finley and Kittredge (in press) identified three uniquely distinct types of family forest owners: those who identify primarily with a nature preservation ethic; those who are primarily interested in nonconsumptive uses of their land, but are not opposed to harvest; and those who align with neither of these philosophies. Finley et al. (in review) likewise identified four uniquely distinct segments of Massachusetts family forest owners on the basis of their likelihood to consider cooperation at multi-property scales. Some owners are interested in cooperation for conservation purposes

(jointly managing land for wildlife habitat, organizing joint meetings or walking tours, jointly developing easements for multiple properties). Another distinct segment is interested in cooperation for more utilitarian purposes such as joint marketing of timber or collectively leasing hunting rights. A third unique segment is neutral on the subject of cooperation, and a fourth segment is quite adamantly opposed to any form of cooperation. The forestry profession's promotion of forest management has succeeded with one segment of the population, but many other families have not heeded the call. The challenge is to develop new approaches that may appeal to the other segments of the evolving family forest population.

Running in the Background?

It is possible that many owners simply do not connect the need for a plan with their goals for nonconsumptive appreciation of their property. They may not be convinced that they need a 10-year plan (often costing hundreds of dollars), if they simply want to recreate, maintain privacy, and appreciate nature. It is possible that unlike foresters, who think about forests on a daily basis, family woodlands might "run in the background" for many people, similar to the way some software checks for computer viruses. Many people have home or life insurance, but likewise do not think of it on a daily basis—until they need it. Though it is difficult for foresters to believe, because we have based our professional and personal lives on forests, many family forest owners may not devote as much energy and thought to their land. Family land might "run in the background," and owners think of it when they need to—or when they visit. Because of this, they may not see the need for a plan. Given the multitude of competing messages, demands, and responsibilities in contemporary life, it is understandable that many family forest owners do not connect the need for a plan with the achievement of their often vaguely defined goals. Indeed, when the National Woodland Owner Survey asked respondents about future intentions in the next 5 years, the two

NIPF Owner Decision Cycle

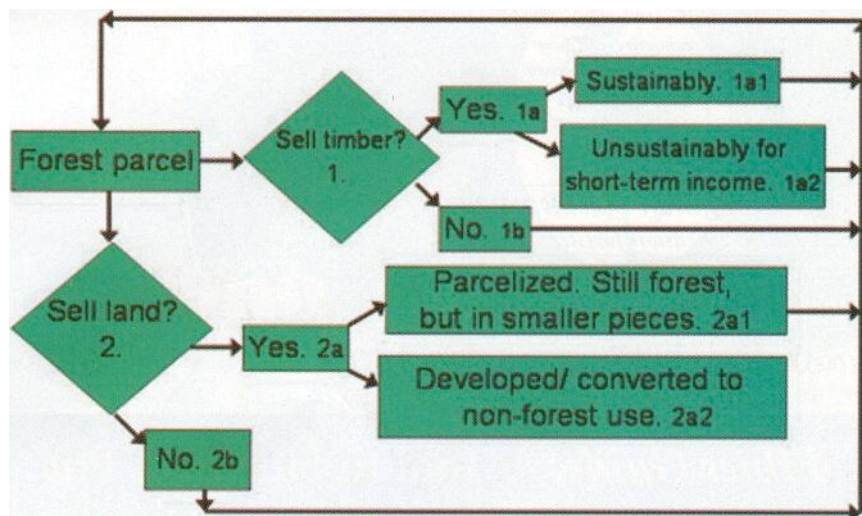


Figure 1. Family forest owner decision cycle.

most frequently cited actions were “no or nominal activity.” “No current plans” was listed as the fourth most cited intention in the next 5 years. Who needs a plan if you don’t intend to do much?

Where to Focus?

In addition to promoting management planning to the receptive segment of forest owners, a new goal would be to promote informed decisionmaking. It is hopefully true that owners with a management plan will make informed decisions, but the majority of owners remain without a plan, in spite of decades of effort by foresters, agencies, and programs. In its simplest form, family forest owners find themselves in a position to make an important decision about their land in one of two ways: either the decision to harvest or the decision to sell their land (Figure 1). A family’s land can exist for years, providing periodic enjoyment, privacy, and a setting for a residence. At some point, the opportunity arises to sell land or timber, and families are put in a position to make a decision. Families can decide to either harvest or not, and, if so, have it done sustainably (option 1a1 versus 1a2 in Figure 1). They can likewise choose from a number of options concerning the sale of their land (i.e., Figure 1: option 2a1 includes retaining some land in forest, or apply-

ing conservation strategies like easements or the gift or sale of land to an organization that will retain it in forest; option 2a2 removes forest). While questions of forest sustainability are complex, involving biological, ecological, physical, and social dimensions (e.g., Floyd 2002), at its core family forestland will not be sustained if it is converted to other uses or harvested unsustainably. Decision points 1 and 2 in the family forest owner cycle (Figure 1) are places to consider focusing outreach efforts.

So What?

How can outreach efforts help landowners make informed decisions in the future? When they encounter a decision point, will they look before they leap? Or will they merely proceed making perhaps an unsustainable choice, responding to what appears to be an attractive offer or a sudden financial need? Since so few owners have management plans, what other outreach tactics can be used to inspire informed decisions? Peer-to-peer education programs have been successful in some states (e.g., Snyder and Broderick 1992), whereby trained community opinion leaders serve as spokespersons or advocates for forest stewardship. These peer family woodland owners are often in an excellent position to make trusted recommendations to an

uncertain owner poised on the brink of a decision. Indeed, local peer opinion leaders can be more effective than foresters, because they do not carry with them the perceived desire to actively promote an agency or industry position. Outreach programs such as Coverts, Master Woodland Owners, or others that train peer opinion leaders operate in a variety of states (e.g., NY, PA, VT, CT, NH, MD, OH, MA).

We know that family forest owners tend to be relatively affluent and well educated. These are two attributes of Internet users (Belin 2002), and outreach materials for this medium targeted at informed decisionmaking at the two critical junctures (i.e., selling timber or selling land) may be effective. There are opportunities to showcase peer examples of informed decisionmaking and link these cases to other sources of online information. Surveys in Vermont, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire indicate that as many as 75% of family forest owners are online (Belin 2002). Fewer than 20% of surveyed Massachusetts family forestry owners indicate however that they obtain tree and forest information online (White 2001). There is no shortage of forestry-related information online. Is it that families do not know where to look? That they do not have the need to look to satisfy their vague owner objectives? Is the information available online too generic, and perhaps not applicable to their specific needs at a particular decision point? Answers to these questions may improve effective outreach strategies to reach the evolving audience of family forest owners.

The importance of family forestlands cannot be overstated. Families are making decisions about roughly 40% of America’s forestland nationally, and in some states that proportion is much higher. The variety of greater public goods and services that emanate from these landscapes dominated by family ownership make this an important public issue. The future of forests and a sustainable delivery of public goods and services is in the hands of thousands of families who often care greatly about their land but are not in a position to make an informed decision.

Some families have the benefit of guidance from a management plan, but many more have no plan and have either resisted the numerous incentives offered to promote planning (e.g., cost sharing, property tax abatement, Tree Farm) or have simply not been reached at all. Successful outreach to family forest owners may depend on segmenting the audience and designing new approaches to reach those owners who have yet to embrace conventional forest management on their land. Using a variety of educational and promotional strategies to encourage informed decisionmaking at two critical points in time may make a difference.

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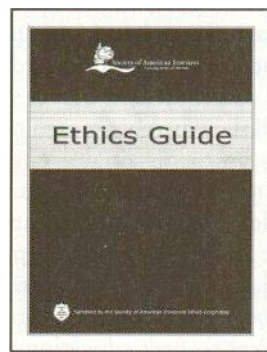
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