

social sciences

Hansel and Gretel Walk in the Forest, Landowners Walk in the Woods: A Qualitative Examination of the Language Used by Family Forest Owners

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In 2007, a series of focus groups with family forest owners was conducted as part of a social marketing initiative with the aim of increasing conservation activities on private forestlands. Participants in the study were asked how they perceive and experience their land and how they understand certain terminology used by forestry professionals. Results show that family forest owners possess a stewardship ethic and perceive their land as a means of self-actualization. The results also provide information for forestry groups seeking to craft effective, resonant messaging in their landowner outreach efforts. By adapting to the language and meanings used by family forest owners, forestry professionals can more effectively convince family forest owners of the need to adopt scientifically sound land management practices.

Keywords: family forest owners, focus group interviews, interpretative phenomenological analysis, nonindustrial private forest owners, social marketing

Family forestlands present a major conservation challenge: how to communicate sound land management practices to the millions of people who own a plurality of forestland in the United States. Family forest owners control 35% of the nation's forestland, yet only 4% of them have a written management plan, and only 16% have received professional advice (Butler 2008). The collective management actions of family forest owners and whether or not they convert their land to a nonforest use can have significant impacts on the ecosystems, economy, and aesthetics of the United

States. This is what Straka (2011) refers to as the “small forest ownership problem.”

Forestry professionals presumably tend to communicate well with the landowners with whom they regularly interact. However, their influence is largely limited to the “model landowners” who already manage their land and seek out professional advice. The vast majority of the family forest owner population is largely missed or is unreceptive to forestry information and services (Peterson and Potter-Witter 2006, Butler et al. 2007). How can this segment of the family forest owner population be reached? And

further, how can they be convinced of the need to practice scientifically based forest management on their land and to keep forests as forests?

Recognizing these issues, a group of stakeholders from across the forest conservation community organized the Sustaining Family Forests Initiative (SFFI) in 2003. SFFI uses a social marketing approach (Kotler et al. 2002) to encourage family forest owners to take steps to conserve and sustainably manage their land.¹ The basic approach is to assist natural resource professionals to craft effective and relevant messaging, outreach campaigns, and programs with the assumption that these will lead to more family forest owners increasing their forest conservation activities.

Unlike traditional commercial marketing where a product is being sold, in social marketing an idea is being “sold” to induce a voluntary change in behavior. The first stage of any social marketing campaign involves researching the target audience. Using data from the National Woodland Owner Survey (Butler et al. 2005), SFFI first segmented family forest owners into subgroups of

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owners with similar characteristics. It is important to note though that there is, of course, some diversity within these groups. A cluster analysis based on survey respondents' reasons for owning their land resulted in four ownership subgroups: Woodland Retreat, Working the Land, Supplemental Income, and Ready to Sell (Butler et al. 2007); this last group was later relabeled as Uninvolved. Although audience segmentation is not a novel approach in the family forest literature, SFFI is one of the only groups to do so at a national level (Ferranto et al. 2013).

As part of the SFFI research efforts, focus group interviews with family forest owners were conducted in the summer of 2007 in five, geographically dispersed US states, the results of which have not been published previously. One purpose of the focus group interviews was to gain a better understanding of the language that family forest owners use. This article presents an analysis of those focus group interviews that asks two questions: How do family forest owners perceive their land? and How do they perceive and understand basic terminology used by forestry professionals? A review of the relevant literature is first presented, followed by the data collection and analysis methods that were used by the authors. Findings from the focus group interviews are then presented and discussed.

Literature Review

Communicating with a broader segment of US forest owners has long been a goal of forestry professionals, going back to Gifford Pinchot's and Bernard Fernow's earliest efforts to advocate for the profession. Innovative approaches have long been used to better engage with certain segments of owners, such as farmers (Lubell and Pollard 1939, Horn 1951), but with varying levels of success. Challenges in communicating with family forest owners have been attributed to forestry professionals lacking basic knowledge of this group such as what their motivations and interests are and how to best relate to them (Jones et al. 1995, Best and Wayburn 2001). Information was disseminated predominately by top-down delivery via expert-client relationships (Cortner and Moote 1999), and policymakers assumed family forest owners were motivated by commodity-oriented values (Bliss 2000) much like industrial owners, despite evidence to the contrary (Worrell and Irland 1975). Perhaps this disconnect precipitated

some of the distrust of forestry professionals on the part of family forest owners (Bliss 2000, Hull et al. 2004, Rickenbach et al. 2005).

Noting these and other issues between forestry professionals and landowners, Davis and Fly (2004) sought to explore why forest management messages were not reaching the vast majority of the family forest owner population. Through a series of phenomenological interviews with six forest landowners in Tennessee, the authors found that "nonparticipating" owners actually have very strong ties to their land and generally possess a stewardship ethic—a respect for the land and a desire to maintain or improve it and above all, do no harm. Many of the landowners interviewed described deliberate behaviors intended to manage their land, but activities that professionals consider "management" simply did not resonate with the population. The authors suggested that a lack of understanding of forestry terminology created a barrier to dissemination of proper forest management practices.

Egan and Jones (1993) found similar misunderstandings when they resurveyed a population of family forest owners in Pennsylvania. A portion of the respondents misunderstood a question regarding timber harvesting on the original survey. When resurveyed, those who erroneously claimed to have harvested timber explained that they had considered activities such as clearing a house lot or harvesting firewood for personal use as a timber harvest. Assuming that family forest owners conceptualize "timber harvesting" in the same way as forestry professionals can create fundamental misunderstandings between professionals and landowners (Egan and Jones 1995) and inhibit effective outreach appeals. To further compound this issue, family forest owners may conceptualize forest management in broader terms than traditional definitions. As a result, family forest owners

may not be receptive to outreach appeals because they already consider themselves to be managing their land in some way (Davis and Fly 2010).

What we see from the literature is a disconnect between forestry professionals and family forest owners on the mutual understanding of forest management concepts and terminology (Bliss and Martin 1989, Hull et al. 2004, Davis and Fly 2010). Despite possessing a stewardship ethic, the majority of family forest owners have not connected with traditional messaging and outreach efforts (Davis and Fly 2004, 2010, Kittredge 2004, Butler et al. 2014).

Recognizing that family forest owners consist of a diverse group of individuals motivated by an array of noncommodity values (Erickson et al. 2002, Butler 2008, Fischer and Bliss 2008), researchers have increasingly been segmenting the family forest owner population into subgroups over the past decade (Ferranto et al. 2013). The intent of these efforts is to enable the forestry community to better know their target audience. In this way, policies and management practices can be designed to be more easily adopted and outreach efforts can be more effective. These efforts are particularly well-timed, given the "rural restructuring" of communities driven by amenity migration, i.e., the movement of people based on the draw of natural amenities (Gosnell and Abrams 2011), and the subsequent threat of landscape fragmentation and parcellation.

Despite recognition that the forestry community needs to better understand their audience, we have found no studies that specifically examine basic terminology and language used by family forest owners, with the exception of Davis and Fly (2004). Studying the language and meanings of a target audience is a prescriptive first step in social marketing research (Maibach 1993, Kotler et al. 2002) that is necessary to "sell an idea" suc-

Management and Policy Implications

To effectively promote sound forest management practices on private lands, forestry professionals must craft messaging that is relatable and understandable to family forest owners. Understanding what language resonates with a target audience is a prescriptive step in social marketing research, and one that is used by the Sustaining Family Forests Initiative. The results of this study provide insights on how family forest owners make sense of the experience of owning their wooded land, as well as how they perceive some common terminology used by forestry professionals. For example, we found that landowners highly prefer the term "woods" over "forest." When communicating with family forest owners, we posit that the forestry community would be well served by adapting to the language and meanings used by the owners.

cessfully. The purpose of the present study is to help fill this knowledge gap.

Methods

Data Collection

Ten focus group interviews were conducted in the summer of 2007. Focus group interviews were conducted in each of the following states: Massachusetts, Oregon, South Carolina, Texas, and Wisconsin. States were selected to hear from family forest owners across the United States. As a precaution, two groups were held in each location in case one of the sessions failed. Each session lasted approximately 2 hours and was attended by 5–10 family forest owners.

A list of potential participants was generated from property tax records; the participants were then contacted via telephone. We drew a purposive sample of participants who were required to be at least 21 years of age, be a principal decisionmaker regarding their land, and own at least 10 acres of land covered by trees. A screener questionnaire was used by recruiters to gather family forest owners of various ages, acreage sizes, genders, and lengths of land tenure. Recruiters also aimed to have each of the four SFFI market segments (Woodland Retreat, Working the Land, Supplemental Income, and Uninvolved) represented in the focus group interviews.

The same professional moderator conducted all focus group interviews. A topic guide was used by the moderator to ensure that the topics of interest were covered in each of the groups. This research effort analyzes and describes the portions of the discussions during which participants were asked to explain what various words and phrases meant to them. Information from the initial part of the focus group interviews when the participants described their land was also used for this research. All the discussions were audio recorded and transcribed, resulting in several hundred pages of text. The transcripts are the principal data source analyzed in this study.

Data Analysis

The focus group interview transcripts were analyzed using an approach called interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Smith et al. 2009). IPA is a derivative of phenomenology, which is a philosophical and methodological approach based on the writings of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, among others. It is an approach

aimed at understanding how individuals experience and make sense of a given phenomenon. In this case, the phenomenon of interest is family forest owners' experience and perception of their land, as well as how they perceive some of the more common terminology used by forestry professionals. IPA differs from other qualitative approaches in that the researcher acknowledges that it is impossible to directly access an individual's "life-world," which therefore necessitates interpretation on the part of the researcher (Eatough and Smith 2006). In an IPA study,

the participants are trying to make sense of their world; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participants trying to make sense of their world. (Smith and Osborn 2003, p. 51)

From an ontological standpoint, IPA is well-suited to the research questions of the present study because it encourages researchers to remain open to the "other" by bracketing their own assumptions about the world to gain fresh understanding and perspective. From a practical standpoint, IPA is conducted in a fashion mechanically similar to other qualitative methods. Transcripts are first read to gain a general feel for the data. During this process, the researcher makes descriptive notes and exploratory comments on the claims and understandings of the participants. Emergent patterns and themes are then identified within each focus group interview and then across focus group interviews. These themes are organized into topic and subtopic categories, which form the basis of a coding scheme. The coding scheme is then applied and refined through subsequent rereadings of the transcripts. The transcripts were coded using Nvivo (QSR International Pty Ltd. 2012), a software package designed for qualitative analysis and coding.

Results

The Land Itself

At the beginning of each session, focus group interview participants were asked to describe their land and what they liked about it. The most salient theme that developed was that the land enabled the participants to self-actualize, i.e., to find and fulfill meaning to their life or a sense of belonging. For them, the land is a source of enjoyment, inspiration, and spiritual communion. It enables them to live the kind of life that they desire. They prize the aesthetics and privacy of their land and all that that affords them.

"For me," explained one Massachusetts resident,

[the most important part of] the land is being on it, it's feeling a part of it, it's being able to live the kind of lifestyle that we want to live there...something about it sustains me.

An Oregon resident stated that "it's the freedom to do what you want to do when you want to do it," whether it's something as banal as a "silly project" or something more substantive like raising a family. "I think it's a lot about self-determination," explained another Massachusetts resident, "I mean we get to control what happens near our house."

Family is an integral part of the self-actualization concept. For some, their land is a legacy that has been in the family since before they were born, and they feel a responsibility to continue that. "But it's just something that we were raised to love the land. And I was always trying to say 'well, I'm going to leave it in better shape than I found it,'" explained a Texas owner. Furthermore, the land provides a space in which to raise children, creating a lifestyle that helps to instill desirable values and ethics. "I wanted to raise my kids not in town but out of town," explained another Texas resident,

So we built back in '56 on that 30 acres of land. So we raised the family. Just did what you want to out there. And we tried to get across, the wife and I, to the kids—you don't have to keep up with the Joneses. And we did pretty good at that. Pretty good.

An Oregon resident added that "it taught our children the principles of life."

Participants also vocalized a perception of land scarcity through sentiments like "they're not making any more of it." A South Carolina resident recalled that "you can't buy land again. My mother always told us that. So that's why we bought the [initial] three acres and built the house on it." This notion of scarcity, combined with the desire to provide for one's family, results in a strong motivation for many to keep and maintain their land. And while many hoped that their children and grandchildren would continue to use and enjoy the land, others recognized the financial asset the land represents for them. "I hope, you know, the kids keep it and whatever. But then again, it's in a good location for resale. So they might actually make some money off it, you know, more than we paid for it," explained a woman in Texas.

Forest, Woods, and Woodlots

Participants were asked to explain what the word “forest” meant to them and almost unanimously they spoke in terms of some sort of otherness. That is, “forests” were something altogether foreign, different, or not what they owned. This otherness was often a matter of physical size. “[We] don’t go out into the forest, because it just isn’t big enough to be a forest,” explained one Massachusetts resident. The otherness was also attributed to geographical differences. “They’d be like ‘in the forest? What are you talking about?’ Forest is a northern term,” remarked one South Carolina resident, whereas a northerner in Massachusetts maintained that really “Maine has forests.” For others, the word is associated with institutions and ownership types different from their own. “According to the Oregon State tax department, we have a forest exemption on what I think of as our woods.... Forest to me rings of government,” explained one participant, while a Texas resident was reminded of “a national forest. Protected.”

A Massachusetts resident inspired the title of this manuscript when he explained “a forest, you know, was for Hansel and Gretel. They didn’t go in the woods, they went in the forest.” This statement summarizes a sentiment seen across all the focus group interviews: “forest” represents the foreign, something different, not what they really own. There is something about the term that simply prohibits many family forests owners from identifying with it. “Woods,” on the other hand, evokes sentiments of interaction, familiarity, and comfort. So whereas forests represent the other, woods represent the familiar.

The two words were typically described in contrast to each other.

‘Forest’ isn’t too clear a word that too many people in the South use. I mean...where we are it’s ‘over there in the woods.’ I mean, if I busted out and said ‘out in the forest,’ [group laughs] they wouldn’t know what you’re talking about!

Again, scale is an important dimension here, wherein woods are perceived as being smaller than forest. “Forest, I see lots and lots of trees on big land. And woodland, I see acres,” explained a South Carolina resident. A Texas resident added that “‘woods’ is the generic description for ‘we left the four-wheeler in the woods because we ran out of gas.’ Forest is much bigger than woods.” Geography can also play a role in this construct. “You go up north where you’ve got five, six

hundred acres in one spot. That’s forest. Around here we have woods,” explained a Wisconsin resident.

Woodlots were typically ascribed to have a utilitarian or economic purpose, a site for resources like firewood or timber. “I think a woodlot is a lot like a car lot—just trees waiting to be sold,” explained a participant in Oregon. As with woods, woodlot also implies a degree of owner involvement and interaction. One Wisconsin resident explained that “the woodlot, that’s something you go out and cut firewood in...the woodland and woodlot—especially woodlot—you’re going out there to work in it.” Timber was similarly described in terms of economic or financial values across the study. Timber was often equated with a crop, something intended for use or sale.

Preservation and Conservation

To natural resource professionals, the terms “preservation” and “conservation” have very different meanings and implications. But for the family forest owners in this study, the two words often had overlapping meanings. Both words evoked a notion of “caring” for the land. “Well,” explained an Oregon resident, “they both [imply] take[ing] care [of the land].” For the study participants, “caring for the land” is the responsibility of ensuring that it is there for future generations to enjoy. This concern was typically in relation to one’s family, although many expressed a broader concern for all posterity, regardless of lineage. “I guess the fact that, you know, the beauty of it and just keep it for future generations. And I don’t necessarily mean just my own family,” explained a woman in Texas.

Where perceptions of these words diverged, though, was in degrees of use and interaction. “I don’t think they’re the same,” said a participant in South Carolina, “they can be related but I take preservation as a...more permanent act.” Preservation evoked ideas about restrictions and nonuse, with implications that the landowner cannot use or interact with the land. Conservation, on the other hand, implied interaction and involvement with the land. For the participants, conservation means to actively manage and improve the land, while simultaneously reaping benefits such as recreation, timber, firewood, or a home place. In a way, conservation (or more accurately, what they *believe* conservation entails) allows the landowner to self-actualize and affirm his or her sense of self. A Massachusetts resident

summed up sentiments heard throughout the study when he remarked

‘Preservation’ sounds like ‘pristine’ to me, which means doing absolutely nothing but letting it do its own thing. Whereas ‘conservation’ seems like taking an active role in taking care of it.

So when pushed, owners understood the differences between the terms, but the differences were not as immediately apparent or as stark as they are for forestry professionals.

Stewardship and Sustainable Management

For many, the term “stewardship” represents a means of achieving the goals associated with conservation or preservation. It is a broad concept that encapsulates an ethic of “taking care” of the property, an innate respect for the land, or a personal connection or spiritual element. “It embodies the responsibility that everybody has toward the land. Everybody should be a good steward,” explained a Massachusetts resident. Family forest owners perceive themselves as conservators, caretakers, or custodians of their land. A very compelling theme that developed throughout the study is that the land belongs to posterity and not the individual. “We’ve already said we don’t even own the land,” explained an Oregon resident, “we just manage it for a while or are caretakers for it.”

Perceptions of “sustainable management” were mixed. The term is somewhat connected to stewardship in the sense that it is a means to benefit the land presently and for the future. Whereas stewardship is associated with a spiritual or personal ethic, sustainable management is perceived to have a more technical dimension specifically aimed to improve the health or condition of trees. However, the term is somewhat tainted by the word “sustainable,” which is largely viewed with skepticism as being an ambiguous buzzword. It can even have negative implications for some owners by presenting a false sense of accomplishment. “It seems,” as one participant in Oregon pointed out, “a word to use to make everybody feel good so they can use everything up.”

Foresters and Loggers

Individuals’ perceptions of these terms are largely dependent on their personal experiences or particular geography. Some participants trusted loggers more than foresters and others the opposite. This issue

mostly revolved around the suspected financial motives of the professional in question. As one Massachusetts resident succinctly stated, “there are good loggers and bad loggers. There are foresters who are just out to make a buck, too.” Many participants also confused the two professions or were just unsure of the differences.

There is simply too much variability in the data to make any definitive statements on how family forest owners perceive loggers and foresters. The only consensus is the lack of consensus. However, this is important information in the development of messaging for an outreach campaign. Many owners are unsure of exactly what foresters and loggers do and what they can do for them, the owners, and this needs to be understood when campaigns that are promoting foresters, loggers, or other natural resource professionals are developed.

Discussion

It should not be too surprising that there are differences between the words and definitions used among forestry professionals and family forest owners. Many of these terms have different meanings among forestry professionals. For example, “conservation” meant something different to Pinchot (Pinchot 1937) from what it meant to Leopold (Leopold 1933), and it probably has at least slightly different connotations among many of today’s readers of the *Journal of Forestry*. Indeed, it is clear from previous studies (Bliss and Martin 1989, Hull et al. 2004, Davis and Fly 2010) that there is a gap between how forestry professionals and family forest owners understand concepts related to forests and forest management. The current study helps bridge this gap and contributes to the scientific literature by specifically focusing on terminology and applying a rigorous analytical approach to a data set that is based on conversations with more landowners from more parts of the country than research published previously.

Regional Differences and Other Considerations

In a study like this, some differences will, of course, occur across regions. Discussions in Oregon were more tinged with talk of government institutions and regulations, which is not surprising, given the history of that area. Wisconsin owners talked much more of farms and the state’s current use tax programs. Although residents in all locations expressed this sentiment, those in

South Carolina expressed a strong responsibility to hold onto their land for posterity’s sake. This was described as a point of “southern pride.” Texas residents’ descriptions of the land more involved pasture and cattle.

There were, however, more similarities than differences among the participants across regions. As such, we believe the results presented here provide a useful starting point for most of the continental United States. We do encourage groups or public agencies undertaking their own social marketing or outreach campaigns to set aside the time and resources for qualitative inquiries. This will enable practitioners and researchers to better identify local concerns, as well as gain deeper insights into how family forest owners perceive themes and ideas being presented in the specific outreach campaign.

Future research projects might also develop messaging tailored specifically to each of the four SFFI population segments (Woodland Retreat, Working the Land, Supplemental Income, and Uninvolved). In this study, family forest owners from each segment were present in most of the focus group interviews, making it difficult to attribute particular values to specific segments. The findings presented here are useful for understanding family forest owners in general, but a finer, more nuanced degree of understanding can certainly be reached, particularly one that accounts for demographic or geographic idiosyncrasies. IPA can be a useful analytical method for future research efforts because it focuses on understanding how other people experience and make sense of the world around them. An IPA approach lends itself well to social marketing research. A quantitative approach might also be used to confirm or codify the findings presented here as well.

How to Use This Information

Perhaps the most compelling finding of this study is that the family forest owners we interviewed do not actually like the word “forest.”² They relate more to “woods” or “woodland.” As far as practical implications go, this is the proverbial low-hanging fruit. This seems a very simple concept to incorporate into communication strategies; however, the literature shows that there has been a long-term disconnect between professionals and landowners in terms of the language used and the meanings they imply. The professional and academic community is steeped in using the word “forest” (e.g., the

USDA Forest Service), and the word itself is one that pervades landowner outreach. If something as simple as what to call the trees on someone’s property has yet to be internalized, then a mutual understanding between professionals and landowners of higher-level management concepts seems difficult.

As our findings demonstrate, family forest owners have deeply personal connections to their land and an innate stewardship ethic. However, as Davis and Fly (2010) concluded, there are significant differences between the perceptions of owners and natural resource professionals. The forestry community must find ways to connect these feelings to the importance of undertaking more scientifically sound land management activities. Presuming that effective, resonant messaging can help achieve this goal, then the forestry community has three options: educate all of the millions of family forest owners in the United States to recognize and understand the terminology used by professionals; have forestry professionals adopt the language and terminology used by family forest owners; or combine the former two options, so that members of the forestry community continue to use professional terminology when talking with other professionals, while at the same time use a different set of language and concepts when interacting with family forest owners. Given the insurmountable nature of the first two options, the third is the most practical and logical choice. SFFI also espouses this tactic in the workshops it conducts with forestry professionals on landowner outreach. The present study provides findings and methods that can aid in this effort.

Outreach campaigns and their subsequent messaging have to be relatable and understandable to the target audience to effect action. The results of this study provide some basic information on how family forest owners perceive their land and some basic forestry terminology. This information can be used by professional groups and public agencies to help shape the language used in their own social marketing efforts, even if it is something as simple as saying “woods” instead of “forest.” If the majority of the target audience thinks they do not own a forest, something as simple as word choice can prove invaluable. Future research efforts might focus on the efficacy of professional outreach efforts that integrate this type of information.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that forest owners perceive their land as a means for self-actualization. This concept is expressed through dimensions of privacy, aesthetics, family legacies, raising children, spirituality, and the ability able to pursue desired projects and activities. Family forest owners exhibit an innate stewardship ethic, a responsibility to “care” for the land such that future generations can enjoy it in perpetuity. Messaging that captures these feelings may help motivate family forest owners to adopt more scientifically based land management techniques. Even simple word choices (such as between “forest” and “woods”) may have a substantial impact on the efficacy of social marketing campaigns.

If the forestry community seeks to promote sound management activities on private land, then greater emphasis must be placed on understanding how landowners perceive and make sense of their relation to the land. Simply put, it is easier for the professionals to adapt to landowners than it is for landowners to adapt to the professionals. This study presents some findings to aid the forestry community in this respect.

Endnotes

1. For more information on SFFI, see www.sustainingfamilyforests.org.
2. The term “family forest owner” actually tested very poorly in our focus group interviews.

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