

Empowering Woodland Owners through Peer Learning

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Decades of research on family woodland owners confirm a few well-established findings. Many landowners enjoy owning land for multiple benefits but are passive, only seeking information and actively managing their land during periods of economic need or opportunity. Traditional landowner assistance programs rely almost exclusively on one-on-one interaction between natural resource professionals and landowners. Although effective, there are insufficient fiscal and human resources to meaningfully engage the 10 million family forest owners across the United States one-on-one. This leaves many “prime prospect” woodland owners unengaged due to a lack of natural resource professional outreach capacity and incongruity between forestry program communications and owner motivations.

Furthermore, although strongly committed to land stewardship, many family woodland owners choose not to participate in existing landowner assistance programs. For many, this is driven by lack of awareness or interest in such programs and less than effective communication and program design. In many cases, woodland owners manage their land in ways that produce suboptimal private and public outcomes, reducing the health and productivity of the nation’s forest resource.

One way to address these challenges is to use outreach models that focus on empowerment and reducing barriers to communication. For example, woodland owner peer learning based on “master” program volunteer models extends the reach of traditional expert-focused approaches such as face-to-face workshops. Other, less formal, models leverage existing personal networks to get information into landowners’ hands when they need it, and from trusted, familiar sources.

What Is Peer Learning and How Could It Be Used? Peer learning involves voluntary, nonhierarchical learning among those who see themselves as similar and who are not professional educators (Topping 2001). The process presents opportunities for landowner leadership, empowerment, information exchange, and more.

Peer learning is already the foundation of many states’ Extension programs. Master volunteer programs offer in-depth training to a motivated, self-selected group. The trained “master volunteers” then share information from both their personal experience and their training with other landowners. In addition to models focused entirely on woodland owners, other programs bring municipal officials and conservation organization members and leaders into the network, further building and extending wood-

land owner connections. Resource and outreach professionals have important roles as conveners, facilitators, and sources of information. Professionals can create learning spaces where landowners can meet, exchange ideas, and share experiences and information both with other woodland owners and with others in their community.

Why Are Peer Programs Effective? We’ll focus on three factors: empowerment theory, outreach capacity, and identity. Empowerment is a nonhierarchical, enabling process. Empowering approaches view people not as simply passive recipients of information, but creative, knowledgeable people able to use new information to design individual solutions (Tribble et al. 2008). Acknowledging that woodland owners possess knowledge enhances the use of their own competencies. Peer learning approaches can increase outreach capacity by creating a corps of active, knowledgeable, local individuals available to meet with new landowners to share content gleaned from their training as well as their connections to forestry and outreach professionals.

Finally, identity has emerged in recent years as a key factor in the perceived credibility of forestry-related information. Not only do landowners and professionals evaluate the credibility of information differently (Gootee et al. 2010), but values and identity are increasingly viewed as the basis of landowner segmentation for outreach, as they long have been in other public relations and outreach domains. Information delivered by another local landowner can sound very different from the same information delivered by a professional.

Too often, terms like “timber,” “silviculture,” and “forest” fail to align with landowners’ identities and values, reinforcing perceptions that the content is irrelevant to them (Langer 2008). In addition, terms like “advise” and “expert” suggest that professionals have all the answers, “unconsciously position[ing] the landowner as a passive party” (Paretti 2003, p. 142). As Gootee et al. (2010) notes, persistent use of these terms can create conditions in direct opposition to the kind of transformative, empowered adult learning required to help new landowners with little prior land-management experience become active, informed land stewards.

But wait! What if all those “peers” are dispensing bad advice? Critics of this approach sometimes assume that peer volunteers are trying to supplant professionals. Not only is this entirely counter to the intent of existing peer outreach programs, but in practice, the opposite occurs: interactions with other woodland owners through the New York Master Forest Owner Volunteer program resulted in higher than average rates of management planning with a professional forester, participation in landowner assistance programs, joining conservation organizations, and seeking out additional information about forests (Broussard Allred and Goff 2009).

So How Can We Foster Peer Learning that Better Aligns with Landowner Identity and Fosters Empowerment? By increasing local outreach capacity from trusted peers, peer learning models can extend the reach and amplify the impact of existing programs and complement tra-

ditional approaches to reaching woodland owners. Investing in growing and sustaining peer learning models using empowerment principles can increase the credibility of forestry-related information by relying on known and trusted sources, and would address some of the communication challenges faced by educators.

Many questions remain. Among them are optimal strategies for growing and supporting existing peer networks, designing new effective peer learning programs, and measuring outcomes and return on investments associated with peer learning programs. These are key areas for further attention, investigation, and investment.

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