Enhancing the Dialogue between Foresters and Private Forest Landowners

James C. Finley
School of Forest Resources
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802
Email: fj4@psu.edu

Allyson B. Muth
School of Forest Resources
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802

Alex L. Metcalf
School of Forest Resources
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802

Abstract:

Private forest landowners (PFLs) often make decisions about the use and the management of their holdings without a full understanding of the impacts on their objectives, values, or heritage. Providing research-based information to PFLs is a well-documented long-term challenge for the forestry profession. Myriad papers and proceedings have addressed the problems associated with reaching forest owners. Some people have suggested that the problem is not the landowners; rather, it is the professionals. Foresters fail to understand the landowners’ perspectives, needs, interests, and concerns. Developing new approaches to reach PFLs is not easy, but clearly one that we have to address if we are to sustain working private forests that meet our economic, ecological, and social needs. This presentation will explore evolving ideas and approaches for creating dialogue with PFLs and for advancing the implementation of research-based information on private forests.

Key Words: Private forest landowners, Collaborative learning, Collaborative forestry, Natural resource professionals
As an introduction to this presentation about enhancing the dialogue between foresters – “us” – as Natural Resource Professionals (NRPs) and private forest landowners (PFLs), we would like to offer the following perspectives:

1. The challenge that “we” have had with providing PFLs with research-based information is well documented.
2. The PFL problem has been haunting “us” for more than 50 years.
3. PFLs often make decisions without a full understanding of the impacts these decisions will have on their objectives, values, and the heritage they leave for future owners.
4. Some of “us” have suggested that the problem is not with the private forest owner. Rather, it is “ours.” Therefore, we need to understand the private forest owner’s perspectives, needs, interests, and concerns.
5. Finally, “we” need to develop new ways of approaching and establishing relationships with PFLs if we are to sustain working forests that meet society’s economic, ecological, and social needs.
Briefly, we will discuss disconnects between foresters and PFLs. Jones and others (1995) called this the “myth-perceptions” foresters hold about how PFLs think and consider their land.

We need to consider that PFLs are not all the same. As individual as their land is, so are their objectives and perceptions about what they want from their forest and how to attain the outcomes they want.

Natural resource professionals (NRPs) are trained as scientists. As foresters, many of us don’t think about working with people. We came to the forestry profession looking to spend time in the forest and work with forest resources. But foresters and NRPs need to adopt new approaches for promoting and creating dialogue with PFLs if we are to sustain working forests across our changing landscape.

We have some interesting challenges.
What PFLs know differs from what we, NRPs, expect. The basis for this statement lies in the fact that PFLs have life experiences that inform what they know and believe. Many of them have not learned in a formal setting, but rather have established ideas and perspectives about forestry based on life experiences. These ideas may not fit our understanding of forest resources but they are important to PFLs and therefore must be important to us.

The “myth-perceptions” (Jones, et al., 1995) found that many PFLs are not rural or land connected – more and more these folks have urban backgrounds. PFLs, in general, are not anti-environmentalism. Timber is not the primary reason they own their land – they own it for recreation, aesthetics, hunting and enjoyment. Private property rights are not as important to PFLs as assumed. In fact, they are willing to cooperate with government and neighbors to ensure forests are well cared for and used (Finley, 2002).

We would like to think that foresters are the fount of knowledge about forests. But we need to realize that PFLs garner much of their forestry knowledge from relatives, peers, loggers, or popular literature, not necessarily from professional foresters.

Egan (1993) explored how well PFL actions reflected their given definitions of stewardship. He found most could describe stewardship well but often failed to achieve it.

Foresters have to become more involved with PFLs to become part of the dialogue about private forestry. We cannot remain outside the dialogue and expect to reach PFLs and the resources they own.
PFLs Aren’t All the Same
(One-size Doesn’t Fit All)

► Assumptions based on large regions
  ■ Need to understand audiences

► Embrace PFL Diversity
  ■ Attitudes
  ■ Goals
  ■ Demographics

► We tend to lose the “specialness” of locals
  ■ Market segment analysis

What we know about PFLs is often drawn from large regional studies. For example, Birch (1996) looked at PFLs in each state and across the nation. There have been myriad more local studies, but often they fail to tell us much beyond the PFLs’ perceived benefits or their willingness to respond to incentives.

As a result of what we don’t know, we have failed to embrace the diversity of the PFLs. Our one-size fits all perspective of PFLs limits our ability to deliver information, impart knowledge, or provide services. We tend to look at the big picture and fail to capture the uniqueness and “specialness” of many PFLs. We suggest looking to the marketing literature to learn how to identify and reach specific segments of the market, target our messages, and gain access.
NRPs Trained Scientists/Foresters: not necessarily educators or communicators

► Work with the resources **not** people
► Expert-Client relationship
► Training and education is a problem

As natural resource professionals, how were we trained? Did we study people or natural systems? We were taught to work with the resources not with the people.

As natural resource professionals, we tend to think of ourselves as the technical experts and tend to think of PFLs as the recipients. We too often see conversations between us and PFLs as one-directional.

Where do NRPs learn to work with PFLs and other stakeholders? Are universities flexible enough to include courses in the Human Dimensions of Natural Resources? How flexible and willing to change is the Society of American Foresters and their accreditation programs? Can we cram any more into traditional natural resources professional training programs? Is there room for more courses in writing, speaking, listening, and teaching? Where are future NRPs going to learn to work with the resource and the people?
The three authors on this paper work for cooperative extension and are constantly searching for new ways to reach out to PFLs. We’ve built an extensive extension volunteer program whose participants engage in peer to peer learning – conversations across the fence with neighbors are proving effective. To reach PFLs and teach complex ideas we conduct tours, demonstrations, and use technology. We create newsletters and publications designed for PFLs specific to Pennsylvania forests. We also work with local woodland owner associations. In Pennsylvania, we now have more than 20 county and multi-county woodland owner associations where PFLs get to know each other, share ideas, and learn from their shared experiences.

Think for a moment about what you have done to reach out and to enhance the dialogue with PFLs. What has worked for you and other? How do you know you’ve been successful?
The authors of this paper are increasingly finding merit in the idea of collaborative forestry that emphasizes collaborative planning among PFLs. Collaborative planning is a process that focuses on creating civility, fostering dialogue, and building on common ground. Collaborative processes bring people together to generate ideas and create solutions.

We need to learn to bring groups of people together. By bringing people together, we form a “local community” that shares a desire to sustain natural resources.
Collaborative planning depends on creating collaborative learning opportunities. Collaborative learning is people creating knowledge, together. To accomplish this, we need to:

a. Establish dialogue which is respectful, intentional, and fosters new understanding

b. Focus on construction – each conversation should be an opportunity to challenge old assumptions and create new ideas

c. Appreciate multiple ways of knowing – life experiences contribute to our understanding just as much as technical expertise


e. Create fellowship – when participants can relate to one another, conflict can be constructive and new ideas are more willingly accepted
Promoting or Creating Collaborative Interactions

► NRPs should re-evaluate things long taken for granted
  ▪ Action research (Reflecting on our practice)
► Accepting PFLs lived experience
► NRPs should share a voice, not dominate
► Provide time for informal interactions
  ▪ Create situations of equality
► Foster participatory interactions

Action research suggests we should create opportunities for constructive self-examination of our practice – challenging our biases and acknowledging our assumptions about PFLs. Basic collaborative learning practices insist that we treat PFLs as equals whose life experiences inform their understanding. NRPs need to become part of the learning process as a shared voice instead of dominating the conversation. We need to promote informal interactions in order to take our professional interactions farther. And finally, we need to ensure our interactions are participatory – making space for PFLs’ voices so that, together, we can make good decisions for the care and use of our resources.
Literature Cited


