

# **Practicing Community Forestry in the Northern Forest of the U.S.**

Debra Mason<sup>1</sup> and Shanna Ratner<sup>2</sup>  
January 2003

**(Footnotes)**

<sup>1</sup> Senior Associate, Yellow Wood Associates, Inc., 228 North Main Street, St. Albans, Vermont USA 05478, 802-524-6141, [debra@yellowwood.org](mailto:debra@yellowwood.org), [www.yellowwood.org](http://www.yellowwood.org).

<sup>2</sup> Principal Investigator, National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region, c/o Yellow Wood Associates, Inc., 228 North Main Street, St. Albans, Vermont USA 05478, 802-524-6141, [shanna@yellowwood.org](mailto:shanna@yellowwood.org), [www.ncfcnfr.net](http://www.ncfcnfr.net).

## **Abstract**

This paper describes preliminary learning from a project designed to test new ways of providing services to rural forested communities in the U.S. The National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region promotes community forestry and provides support for participatory research. Our core purpose is to help rural communities conduct and use research to inform decisions about forest resources. After describing the context in which the Center operates, we identify some factors that distinguish the National Community Forestry Center from other forest-related initiatives and examine what it means to be a learning community that changes the way information is defined, gathered, and used.

## **Introduction**

The Northern Forest is the largest area of intact forest remaining in the eastern United States—over 30 million acres stretching from northern New York across Vermont and New Hampshire to northern and eastern Maine. As forestland in other parts of the nation and the world is depleted or declared off-limits to harvesting, fiber from this region becomes valuable in increasingly distant markets. Community forestry is emerging as a vehicle to help Northern Forest communities recognize and capture the value that public and private forestland contributes to their economy, social structure, cultural fabric, and ecological health.

This paper describes preliminary learning from a project designed to test new ways of providing services to rural forested communities in the United States. We describe the sponsoring organization, the project itself, and the region it serves. Then we identify some factors that distinguish the National Community Forestry Center from other forest-related initiatives and examine what it means to be a learning community that changes the way information is defined, gathered, and used.

## **The Story of the National Community Forestry Center**

There are many forest-related organizations in the U.S. Among them, the National Network of Forest Practitioners is unique. The Network emerged about a decade ago, a new link between non-profit organizations, small businesses, government, and individuals based in rural areas reliant upon neighboring forests for their livelihood and well-being. The Network now boasts over 250 members in 40 states and British Columbia. It provides a place for members of incredibly diverse economic, social, cultural, organizational, and ethnic experience to unite behind a common conviction: Environmental protection, social justice, and economic vitality are inseparable goals for rural forested communities struggling to adapt to rapid change. Where else would a government worker from Washington, D.C. have a chance to talk with a mushroom picker from Washington State?

In 1998, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) solicited proposals for centers that would experiment with new ways to offer services to rural communities. The National Network of Forest Practitioners responded with an ambitious proposal rooted in community forestry and participatory research. Over two years later, long after Network members had given up hope for the project, USDA called to congratulate them on their successful proposal, offering four years of generous funding for the National Community Forestry Center.

The National Community Forestry Center is a decentralized network with four regional centers and a national coordinator. The four regional centers are located in the Southwest, the Appalachian Region,

the Pacific Northwest, and the Northern Forest. The Northern Forest Regional Center serves the northeastern states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and northern New York.

The goals of the National Community Forestry Center reflect concerns and interests identified by forest practitioners from throughout the country:

- ◆ Develop mechanisms to integrate local knowledge, experience, and participation in efforts to enhance and protect the natural resource base on which forest economies depend
- ◆ Develop processes that engage researchers and rural communities in identifying research needs that will contribute to the growth of locally-based economic opportunities and forest conservation
- ◆ Increase the capacity of rural communities to use and produce information that will contribute to the development of new and higher value products from forest resources while enhancing and conserving the forests themselves
- ◆ Assure that research institutions and governmental agencies receive information contributed by rural residents
- ◆ Make science more accessible to rural people in forested areas.

### **The Northern Forest Region**

The Northern Forest is home to about one million residents whose culture and communities have been shaped by generations of people working to carve their livelihood from a remote, rural, forested landscape. Ecologically, the region is characterized by northern hardwoods, boreal forest, a multitude of lakes and wetlands, mountains, and headwaters for the Northeast's major rivers. The economy is based, in large part, on forest product manufacturing and forest-based tourism and recreation.

(Northern Forest Wealth Index: Exploring a Deeper Meaning of Wealth 2000)

The primary challenges facing Northern Forest communities today are connected to changes in the structure of the wood products industry and changes in the structure of forestland ownership. The paper industry, long a regional mainstay, is increasingly moving its operations overseas, as are larger wood products manufacturers. Changes in industry structure generate changes in markets for raw wood that, in turn, drive the decisions of forestland owners.

Over the past twenty years, millions of forested acres have changed hands throughout the region. One result is forest fragmentation—a proliferation of smaller forest lots in the hands of an increasing number of owners. Another result is a host of new ownership arrangements and partnerships between public agencies, private sector purchasers, and non-profits seeking to protect specific woodland values. Hundreds of thousands of forested acres are now subject to easements that ensure protection in perpetuity of forest functions including continued harvesting, recreation access, wildlife habitat, and unique natural features.

Residents of Northern Forest communities are searching for answers: *How will these changes affect our lifestyle and livelihoods? How should we respond?* These questions are not new, nor are they specific to the Northern Forest. But the perception of rapid and pervasive change lends a sense of urgency and possibility to the inquiry. The region no longer seems caught up in the same old cycle of resource abundance, dependence, and decline. We have entered a new world with unfamiliar threats *and* unprecedented opportunities. While this situation, full of risk and possibility, fosters its share of finger-pointing and foot-dragging, there are an increasing number of people willing to explore new options. In this atmosphere, one overhears comments such as, “The old solutions aren’t working; we need to try something different.”

### **Not Another Forestry Organization!**

The National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region opened its (virtual) doors in March of 2000 by contacting hundreds of other organizations and individuals active in forest-related work throughout the region. The Center established a presence by developing a network of partnerships among those who share the vision of healthy communities and healthy forests. Center partners include researchers, technical assistance providers, private businesses, community leaders and volunteers, non-profits, government agencies, and others. One of the Center’s goals is to work with established organizations and individuals to add value to work that is already underway. On the other hand, the National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region offers something totally different than any of its partners:

- 1) The idea of the Center was initially conceived and promoted by rural practitioners and community groups.
- 2) The Center’s work is based upon community forestry—the underlying premise that forested communities must be actively engaged in order to ensure the long-term health of the surrounding forest.
- 3) The Center uses participatory research as a tool for rural people to identify and access information and build their capacity to make wise decisions about their local natural resource base.
- 4) The Center supports and encourages active exploration of new roles and relationships among community leaders, technical assistance providers, and researchers.

The core purpose of the National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region is to help rural people conduct and use research to make informed decisions about forest resources. This means that we refrain from advocacy in favor of facilitating dialogue about what information is needed in order for a community to reach its goals, and how that information can best be gathered for local interpretation and use. This is a radical departure from the type of technical assistance to which rural communities are accustomed. We provide neither answers nor funding. Rather, we provide space where people can admit what they don’t know and explore possibilities. In the process, new conversations occur and new connections are established between people who previously have not had the opportunity or a common language to exchange information and ideas.

## **An Advisory Council that Learns Together**

. . . the concept of a learning community recognizes that the capacity to learn, both individually and collectively, is a function of creating a learning culture that is different from the prevailing culture. (Ratner 1997)

Each regional branch of the National Community Forestry Center is guided by an advisory council. Based upon advice from field sessions conducted while developing the Center concept, we chose to engage individuals who were active in their local communities and represented a range of perspectives and interests in the forest resource.

It has been surprisingly easy to find people willing to assume an active role on our 18-member council. We solicit nominations openly through press releases, listservs, and word-of-mouth. We assume that the more individuals we involve, the more rural constituencies we can reach. We make a sincere effort to find a role for everyone who expresses interest and a commitment to active involvement. In 2 ½ years of operation, 47 individuals have served as either council members or technical advisors to our council.

Why are busy people so willing to serve on our advisory council? Our members tell us that they are attracted by the opportunity to talk about their passion for forest and community in a comfortable atmosphere outside more traditional public involvement processes where they feel compelled to represent a particular viewpoint or expertise. During our retreats and conference calls, members feel the safety and license to express their curiosity, frustration, confusion, ignorance, and fascination with the issues at hand.

We have been very deliberate in developing the advisory council as a learning community. We let nominees know that this may not be a typical advisory board experience—we want to tap their curiosity and creativity, rather than their opinions or their knowledge. We hold two retreats a year for advisory council and technical advisors, and we provide training and practice in skilled inquiry and skilled listening at every retreat. Skilled inquiry is the ability to check our natural impulse to offer advice and ask questions instead, questions that assist others in sharing their thought processes. Skilled listening is the discipline of monitoring the conversation we're having with ourselves during our interactions with others. Skilled listening helps create a window in our constant judging and opining so that we can hear what others are really saying.

We provide opportunities for advisory council members to learn about forest-related topics of their choice, and follow up with both individual and collective action. At the council's request, we invited a specialist to discuss markets for low value wood, underused species, and wood wastes from mills and manufacturing in the region. Based upon their own conversation, the council quickly recognized that stakeholders in the dilemma—landowners, foresters, loggers, mills, and manufacturers—need to communicate with one another, but that they don't speak the same language. This experience sparked the adoption of a specific process for engaging others throughout the region. Staff and council members now offer facilitation services to any group or community wishing to explore the issue. As facilitators, we teach and foster the discipline of dialogue, a technique of shared inquiry that supports people in thinking and learning together (Isaacs 1999). Participants leave the dialogue excited about trying new strategies that emerge from their collective thinking. As a result, many people throughout the region are now talking about "opportunity wood" instead of "low value wood."

Our learning community is growing beyond the 47 individuals directly involved with the Center's advisory council. Members have learned to converse with each other in new ways, and to have satisfying conversations with those whom they previously might not have engaged. As others observe what is possible when we approach the world as a learner, the new conversations have ripple effects that extend far beyond the council itself. For example, the owner of a mid-sized sawmill experiencing intense competition for high quality sawlogs is now speaking directly to a maker of custom furniture about providing components cut to order from small-diameter logs. This is an unusual conversation in our region.

### **Changing the Way Information is Defined, Gathered, and Used**

*What information do rural communities need in order to make informed choices about the forest resource? Where and how do they get it?*

Our experience in rural development suggests that those who actively engage in identifying and developing information are more likely to use it to make decisions and act with confidence. Our overall strategy is to engage citizens in every aspect of the research process. We conduct research on topics identified as a priority by our partners and advisory council, issue publications, respond to inquiries for information about forest topics, provide assistance to communities wishing to gather information about a forest topic, and offer training in participatory research for both researchers and community volunteers.

We use the term *participatory research* to signify a commitment to involve ordinary people in the process of discovery, and use the results of that process to make positive change in their lives. Our workshops are designed to help community volunteers and professional researchers consider participation in every stage of the research process—identifying an issue or opportunity, defining a research question, choosing and implementing a methodology, interpreting the results, and using the research product. They are encouraged to differentiate between topics or research questions that are more appropriately addressed through traditional research processes, and those that lend themselves to a more participatory approach.

We have found the participatory model applicable for a wide variety of different research topics and methods. Forest workers in northern New Hampshire are using key informant interviews with sawmill owners, foresters, and loggers to generate information about how recent changes in forest ownership might affect their livelihoods. The Richford (VT) Wood Initiative has combined a variety of methods including literature review, best practices research, surveys, and interviews to explore opportunities for generating local business and job opportunities using the forest resource. In these examples, rural people learn new skills and build relationships that support both forest and community health.

The Center works intensively with two or three communities a year on participatory research projects. The Center is not a grant-maker, nor is it providing technical assistance in the traditional fashion. The Center invites community volunteers to enter into a learning partnership: Center staff provide facilitation services and information upon request, and the community agrees to engage in participatory research while documenting and sharing their experience and results with others. Communities receive technical assistance from Center staff in developing a research plan and funds to hire a local coordinator to shepherd the project to completion. The Center tracks community

efforts and uses the experience to create a product—a publication, tool, or process—that can be used by other communities.

The community of Starksboro, Vermont conducted research to develop indicators to monitor changes in forest health over time. The indicators will help local residents and decision-makers recognize change in the physical health of the town's forest resource, as well as changes in the role the forest plays in local economic stability, education, recreation, and overall quality of life. A participant in the Starksboro research process captured the spirit of curiosity and experimentation that often characterizes participatory research: "Calculating the status of our indicators leads to new questions: How effective are they? What do they tell us? It's a learning process that raises our consciousness, and leads to new discussions about forests in the community."

Following the Starksboro research, we worked with community members to design a workshop based upon their experience so that others could experiment with developing indicators and consider their use in local forest planning. The workshop is now offered free of charge throughout the region.

### **Why Does It Matter?**

Our experience suggests that people who become involved in research create and adopt new roles for themselves and others. They engage in new relationships and generate new conversations. They develop new information, and new patterns of information flow. We think that this helps them not only to handle change, but to more effectively capture the opportunities change reveals as it moves through their communities.

We are still writing the beginning chapters in the story of the National Community Forestry Center, Northern Forest Region. Yet in less than three years we have seen changes in response to our presence and our work:

- ◆ People who attend our workshops express a new understanding and appreciation of participatory research. Educators use our materials in their courses, from middle school to graduate school.
- ◆ We have been invited to represent the community perspective in reviewing research proposals for our region and for the entire U.S.
- ◆ Our advisory council members keep coming back for more, and recruiting new members is getting easier.
- ◆ Partners increasingly ask us to help them foster community-based research and explore new tools and methods to assist rural people in making decisions about natural resources.

These and other encouraging experiences indicate that our approach to community forestry in the Northern Forest matters. We invite you to learn more about us by visiting our website ([www.ncfcnfr.net](http://www.ncfcnfr.net)) and our exhibit at the 2003 World Forestry Congress. Please share your own experiences with us so that we may all continue to learn together.

**References**

Isaacs, William. 1999. *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together*. Currency-Doubleday, New York, NY, 428 p.

Northern Forest Wealth Index: Exploring a Deeper Meaning of Wealth. 2000. Northern Forest Center, Concord, NH, 56 p.

Ratner, Shanna. 1997. Emerging Issues in Learning Communities. Yellow Wood Associates, Inc., St. Albans, VT, 30 p.