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The Power of Peer Learning Programs in Natural Resources*

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What is the Issue?

There are 614,000 owners of over 11 million acres of private forestland in New York State (NYS) (Butler 2008). While a variety of outreach programs help owners manage their woodlands sustainably, insufficient fiscal and human resources exist to reach all owners. Some woodland owners are either unaware of or do not take advantage of the educational programs, resources, incentives, and professional advice available to them. Without the benefit of these outreach and education resources, owners may conduct forest management practices that have harmful economic or environmental consequences.

Peer learning is one way to extend traditional outreach and education programs. Peer learning involves voluntary, non-hierarchical learning between and among people who belong to similar social groups and who are not professionally trained as teachers. Peer-to-peer learning presents opportunities for participant leadership, empowerment, and information exchange. Some advantages of peer learning are its cost-effectiveness, improved communication, awareness, and empowerment among peers involved, and the complementary relationship to formal educational settings. However, little is known about its impact and the extent to which it adds value to existing programs such as those aimed at private woodland owners.

Peer Learning for NYS Woodland Owners

NYS's peer learning program for woodland owners is the NYS Master Forest Owner (MFO) Volunteer program.¹ MFO Volunteers provide a local and accessible source of information about forestry and can serve as an important link among other woodland owners. The program trains owners in the principles of forest stewardship to better equip them to manage their own woodlands and to motivate other woodland owners to become actively involved in the management of their forestland. A four-day (40 hour) training is required to become a certified MFO Volunteer. Upon graduating, they conduct "woodwalks" with other forest owners, collaborate with agencies and organizations on forestry educational events, and prepare forestry articles for media outlets.

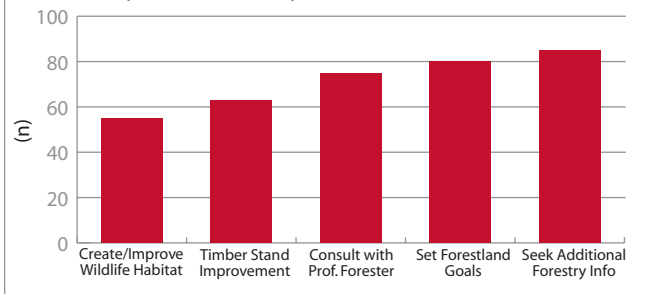
Are Peer Discussions Related to Action?

In May of 2008 a survey was mailed to 584 forestland owners throughout NYS who had participated in on-site visits of the New York MFO/COVERTS Program between 1999 and 2008 (with a response rate of 56 percent). On-site visits consist of "woodwalks" where the MFO Volunteer visits another woodland owner's property or vice versa.² Woodland owners were asked whether they took action based in part on their discussion with the MFO Volunteer.

¹ The New York Master Forest Owner (MFO) Volunteer program was instituted in 1991 with the goal of training woodland owners in the principles of forest stewardship to better equip them to manage their own woodlands and also to motivate other woodland owners to become actively involved in their forestland (www.cornellmfo.info)

² Master Forest Owner (MFO) Volunteers are requested to send the Program Director a report containing the names and addresses of landowners for all on-site visits conducted. Please visit the Human Dimensions of Natural Resources website (www.dnr.cornell.edu/hdru) for 2 reports on peer learning among woodland owners (HDRU Series No. 09-6 and HDRU Series No. 09-7)

Figure 1: Top 5 actions of woodland owners due, in part, to interaction with a NYS Master Forest Owner Volunteer. (based on 270 completed surveys - respondents could identify more than one action)



Source: Broussard Allred, S., Goff, G., Wetzel, L., and M. Luo. 2009. An Evaluation of the NY Master Forest Owner Volunteer Program: Survey of Woodland Owners Visited by a NY Master Forest Owner Volunteer. Cornell University Human Dimensions Research Unit, HDRU Series No. 09-7, June 2009, 39p.

Strong relationships between specific discussion topics and action steps were noted, suggesting the program's efficacy. Woodland owners reported that, as a result of these discussions with the MFO Volunteers, they were most likely to: seek additional information on forestry, set goals for their forestland, meet with a professional forester, conduct a timber stand improvement, and/or improve wildlife habitat (see Figure 1).

In addition to these action steps, almost 16 percent of woodland owners visited by a NYS MFO prepared a management plan for their forest, over triple the national average of 3.7 percent, and nearly 10 times more than the state average of 1.7 percent.³ Thirty-one percent indicated that they benefited economically from actions they took as a result of advice given by a MFO Volunteer.

Conclusions

Peer learning programs, as a complement to traditional outreach and education programs, can produce beneficial outcomes for NYS forestland. In this study, peer interactions positively influenced management planning, goal setting, seeking the advice of a professional forester, and improving their woodlands through management. While peer learning among woodland owners can facilitate learning as well as access to information and behavioral outcomes, many questions remain. Key areas for further attention include strategies for growing and supporting existing peer networks, designing new effective peer learning programs, and developing measures of return on investment. ▲

³ Butler, J. 2008. Family Forest Owners of the United States, 2006. Gen. Tech. Rep. NRS-27. Newtown Square, PA: U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Forest Service, Northern Research Station. 72p.

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