



Community-Based Forest Management Training



BETWEEN 2004 AND 2009, ALABAMA A&M UNIVERSITY provided community-based forest management training to over 300 limited resource and minority landowners in 16 workshops and conferences in six southern states: Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, Tennessee, North Carolina, and South Carolina. The landowner management training (LMT) sessions, funded by the U.S. Forest Service, used a community-based model of outreach to limited resource and minority landowners, which have been underserved by traditional extension and outreach services, using social networks to reach landowners with targeted information regarding land and forest management. The ultimate objective of the program was to help underserved landowners maintain their forestland and sustain natural resources, but the sessions also served the purpose of expanding and strengthening networks of organizations and communities working in applied forest management training.

Forestry and outreach efforts have struggled to reach the vast majority of landowners in general, but the problem is especially acute when it comes to minority landowners (primarily African Americans in the South). In many cases, the lack of reliable forest management information has worsened problems of poverty and land loss in rural areas of the South. The disconnect between African American landowners and traditional extension services is exemplified by the lack of participation by African American landowners in forestry cost-share programs. In a survey of several counties in Alabama, researchers found that only

36% of African American landowners were aware of cost-share programs and only 20% participated. In contrast, 70% of white landowners were aware of the programs and 46% participated.

Research has shown that for advice on management decisions African American landowners rely much more heavily on social networks of family members and friends than on professional consulting foresters or extension personnel. The LMT workshops tap into existing social networks by focusing on social groups, institutions, and relationships in the outreach effort rather than on individuals, a distinctly different approach from most traditional outreach and extension efforts, which have tended to engage landowners at the individual level. The organizers of the LMT workshops worked with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to recruit participants. In many cases, the NGOs were organizations that served as nodes or centers of forest management information in the local social network related to forest management. Rory Fraser, an associate professor at Alabama A&M and one of the organizers of the workshops, says that organizations such as the Federation of Southern Cooperatives and the National Network of Forest Practitioners were particularly helpful in identifying local organizations to partner with for the workshops. For example, in Selma, Alabama, the workshop organizers partnered with a local NGO called WiLO (Women in Land Ownership), a group that seeks to educate its members to become effective land managers. The organization was able to draw landowners (women and men) from across western Alabama and many had never participated previously in formal extension programs. According to Fraser, local “buy in” was essential for the success of the projects. “The local organizations determined what was going to be covered in the workshops and where it was going to be done,” says Fraser. “Creating a sense of ownership in the workshop was one of our biggest goals, and that is what has led to continuing activities in many of these communities.” Fraser also says that the LMT workshops were held in places within the community in which participants already had social ties, such as churches and community centers. This helped to build trust and allowed people to be more comfortable. “Some doors are only opened by building trust,” says Fraser.

Photo courtesy of: John Schelhas



The landownership management training workshops often include property tours.

Creating and expanding ties among existing networks was also a goal of the program. County extension agents and representatives from state and federal land management agencies were invited to participate, and the formal and informal discussions helped to strengthen rapport between the agency personnel and the minority landowner attendees, creating connections between communities and agencies that did not exist beforehand.

The training sessions were tailored to specific landowner needs and included property tours, exchanges among landowners, formal presentations, and discussions with natural resource personnel. Before each workshop, organizers met with local community leaders and landowners to determine landowners' interests and needs. The content of the workshop was developed accordingly. Four general topics were identified for coverage in the workshops:

Property disputes among heirs and estate planning:

Property disputes among heirs are recognized as a major contributor to land loss and fragmentation in minority communities. The need for more information on estate planning was a commonly expressed concern at each of the LMT workshops. Organizers provided an attorney who specializes in estate planning to provide information on the problem and options to minimize risk.

Forest resource management: While many of the workshop participants had pine and mixed hardwood timberland on their properties, few had ever developed management plans for the resources they possess. Attendees expressed interest in receiving information on recreation, prescribed burning, hunting leases, and wildlife improvement. Resource personnel such as state forestry commission agents, extension specialists, and university faculty were invited to provide training on different aspects of forest resource management.

Cost-share programs: As mentioned earlier, African American and other minority landowners have low levels of participation in the federal cost-share programs available to landowners. Programs such as the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP), the Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQUIP), and the Wildlife Habitat Improvement Program (WHIP) were covered at the workshops.

Source: Schelhas, John, Yaoqi Zhang, Robert Zabawa, and Bin Zheng. In prep. Exploring family forest landowner diversity: Place, race, and gender in Alabama.

Alternative land management strategies: Many landowners expressed interest in a number of alternative management practices such as recreational pond management, agroforestry/silvopasture, and goat meat production. Unmanaged forests or marginally productive pasture acreage is often ideal for goats. Silvopasture systems were presented as a potential method for saw-timber production that also has the positive environmental effects of reducing soil erosion and improving water quality and soil productivity. Alternative management strategies were particularly appealing to the participants who wanted to retain a flow of income from the land while they were growing timber.

In a post-program assessment, landowners said that they had benefited most from spending time on other peoples' properties and seeing what other people like themselves were doing on their lands. They were also able to talk to local experts about their properties and what they could and could not do on the land. Many received assistance in writing management plans for their properties with input from people who could help in designing an appropriate set of goals and the strategies needed to achieve them. One landowner expressed it this way, "These have been the most informative and useful meetings that I have attended in a long time, and I have been to a lot of meetings."

Organizers worked to involve and build on existing social networks among landowners, land management agencies, and extension programs. By partnering with local service providers and institutions, organizers were able to enhance and deepen the learning experiences of individual, family, and community forestland owners. In the next phase of the project, the organizers are going to identify community leaders who can be trained to work within their local networks, and the organizers hope to create network ties across states and across the region.

Organizers said that some of the most important lessons drawn from the experience are that outreach is most effective when the meetings take place "on the landowner's turf." Also, for most landowners, the emphasis is on the land, not the forest. So, forest management should be addressed in the overall context of land use. Finally, building interest, trust, and knowledge takes repetition and time.

This case study is part of the Changing Roles: WUI Professional Development Program and can be accessed on-line at: <http://www.interfacesouth.org/products/changing-roles/changing-roles-notebook/case-studies>.

For more information about Changing Roles visit: www.interfacesouth.org/changingroles.