

## **BACKYARD WOODLOT OWNERS: A GROWING ISSUE AND NEW APPROACH**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Today's most underserved forest landowner audience is the majority. Small acreage forest owners account for the vast majority of owners in the United States and especially in the Northeast and Southeast Regions. Landowners with less than 10 acres of forest own 59% of forest properties in the Eastern United States (Butler and Leatherberry 2004). While the overall acreage of this audience is still relatively small (8%), they represent a growing underserved audience that could be a significant political base in support of forestry programs (Eagan and Luloff 2000, Hull et al. 2004).

Traditionally, Natural Resource Professionals have stood on the sidelines watching as Private Forest Landowner (PFL) characteristics have gradually but drastically changed. We have a "new" type of landowner and new resource challenges.

#### The "New" Landowner

Most forestland in the United States is owned by Private Forest Landowners (PFLs). In the 17 southern states, for example, 59% of the 215 million acres of forestland is in PFL ownership (Butler and Leatherberry 2004). Historically, these PFLs have met most of society's fiber needs. However, as our nation's population has become increasingly affluent and older, many people have chosen to follow the American Dream of land ownership. Through this process, the finite supply of land is under increasing pressure, and we find that parcelization is rampant.

In the Southern Region, for example, the average forested tract size in 1978 was 45 acres and by 1994 the average dropped to 38 acres (Birch 1996). The next 10 years dropped another 10 acres from the average. In a 2004 survey by Butler and Leatherberry, the average forest ownership size was 28 acres for PFLs in the Southern Region (2006).

Kendra & Hull (2005) found that new, small acre, forest owners in Virginia were most motivated by lifestyle concerns such as living simply, near nature and escaping the urban stress. Yet, they are not necessarily preservationist desiring to leave the land "pristine." For example, management tools such as herbicides, tree pruning and harvesting are options these landowners

would consider using to improve wildlife habitat, forest health, and scenic views. Kendra and Hull (2005) found that landowners cite many reasons for not managing their land, such as, they never thought about it, time and money limitations, parcel size, and lack of knowledge. Many of these can be addressed through information, demonstration, consulting, and outreach programs.

Clearly, segments of the new forest owner generation offer new challenges and opportunities for resource managers and educators. While these individuals most likely tend to look inside their boundaries, the decisions they make have ecologic, economic, and social impacts across the landscape. In this regard, resource professionals should recognize they have a role with this new clientele. Scaled down traditional forest management approaches may work in some cases, but there is a need to restructure both our ideas and approaches. Hull et al. (2006) suggest that the management of these lands is important for the environmental services they provide and because these owners are politically active. If educators and professional foresters are to remain relevant, they must be proactive in making the changes necessary to serve this growing audience and the resources they control.

### The Issue

Unfortunately, land parcelization in general and forest parcelization specifically are legacies of our heritage. The settlement of our country was largely driven by the individual desire for land, which was readily within the reach of the commoner. Numerous studies and reports document, quantify, and articulate the potential threats of our land resource consumptions (Egan & Luloff 2000, Macie et al. 2002, Sampson and Decoster 2000, Vince 2005, Wear 2002).

Resource professionals have the training to understand the effects and ramifications of landscape fragmentation – the breaking apart of systems as we impose varying land uses. Whether we fragment or parcel the land, the potential to adversely affect forest and ecosystem health, economic structures, and future management are enormous. Resource professionals need to respond by encouraging responsible stewardship to traditional owners and to the new tenants of the land.

### The Void

The importance of private forestland ownership is indisputable. Increasingly, stakeholders from diverse perspectives recognize the role they play in providing ecological services to the public. The traditional economic benefits remain, but often there is increasing recognition of the social and ecological values forests provide. Because of ownership patterns in the East; this places a large emphasis on the private forests. In the past, governmental incentive programs focused on the timber base encouraging forest owners to manage for products. Recent programs expanded the discussion to wildlife, water, and recreation. The Forest Stewardship Program, launched in 1991, is one of the most recent federal initiatives to assist PFLs with management. A principle stewardship goal is to provide PFLs with management plans to guide their decision making. Unfortunately, this valuable program targets forest owners owning more than ten acres leaving smaller acreage owners with no publicly-supported source of technical or cost-share assistance.

Why was the threshold set at 10 acres? Resource professionals argued that smaller ownerships are too difficult to manage – it is inefficient. Can we afford this luxury? Weir and Greis (2004) argue that we have to change our perspective and reach out to the landowner of smaller forests if we are to continue to meet societal needs.

With the current base of assistance programs, small acreage landowners rarely come in contact with resource professionals. This void calls for a variety of new tools, including educational material for small acreage forest owners that, to begin with, enables them to develop their own plan. Cooperative Extension and agency partners are well situated to meet this educational void of small acreage landowners with some of the new tools becoming available.

## METHODS

The objective behind the Woods in Your Backyard project was to reach small acreage landowners (1-10 acres) with research-based information to help them create or enhance natural areas while meeting their personal goals and improving their property's contribution to ecosystem health.

### Approach

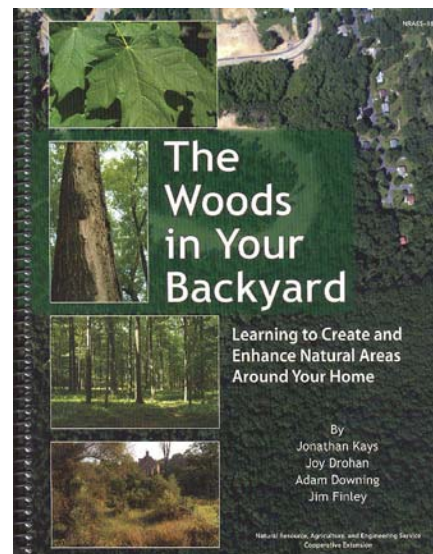
The first step was to define an approach to reach small acreage woodlot owners. Knowing that there are increasingly more of them, and relatively, if not actually fewer of us, we adopted a train-the-trainer model. The Master Gardener and the newer Master Naturalist programs are excellent examples of extension programs using this approach..

The train-the-trainer model simply attracts interested citizens to participate in training programs with the agreement that they will share information with others in a peer learning approach. In practice these individuals have access to networks and opportunities that could never be accessed by trained professionals, resulting in the dissemination of information by credible citizens in the community that is valued and implemented.

### Tool

After choosing an approach, the authors began crafting the “tool” for training volunteers. However, we soon realized that the product envisioned would also serve as a stand alone product for independent use, or self-assessment. **“The Woods in Your Backyard: Learning to Create and Enhance Natural Areas Around your Home”** is the end result. Development proceeded using the following principles:

- Utilize a case study approach
- Focus on better management of existing natural areas & conversion of lawn into forest
- Focus on non-timber values



- Require no forestry tools or previous knowledge and utilize user-friendly jargon
- Provide support materials for volunteers who do delivery & mentoring
- Include a separate workbook for personal assessment of the users property
- Design the publication to be used to guide group education and outreach efforts with new extension audiences
- Assume the user has Internet access to find needed resources and make those resources available at a specific website

## RESULTS

*The Woods In Your Backyard* (Kays et al. 2006) uses a case-study approach to guide users through a process of creating their own plan while learning basic forest stewardship concepts. Table 1 presents to the headings for the four major parts of the publication and incorporated workbook in part five.

Table 1. Publication contents

Part	Theme	Lessons
1	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify interests and mapping</li> <li>• Family involvement</li> <li>• Constraints to management</li> </ul>
2	Property Inventory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Landscape view</li> <li>• Management unit identification</li> <li>• Tree &amp; Plant identification</li> </ul>
3	Ecological Processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Succession</li> <li>• Principals of Forestry</li> <li>• Water resources</li> <li>• Wildlife ecology</li> </ul>
4	Putting Knowledge to Practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recreation &amp; aesthetics potential</li> <li>• Choosing projects</li> <li>• Land management techniques</li> <li>• Timetable of activities</li> <li>• Recording progress</li> </ul>
5	Workbook	Twenty activities completed while working through the first four sections and in tandem with a case study

Users who work their way through the material will have, in the end, a self-designed plan, with research-based input, to help them accomplish their goals in a sustainable and ecologically sound manner. Impact results from trainings in Virginia reveal implemented practices on the land as a result of the planning exercise and training that includes converting excess lawn to natural areas, controlling invasive plants and improving wildlife habitat.

While targeted to the Mid-Atlantic region, the manual has application to most areas of the country. Extension and other natural resource professionals can use the core manual and adapt the resource list, PowerPoint presentations, and other CD resources to suite their respective area.

## **DISCUSSION**

Research into adult learning and the use of information by adults suggests that self actualation – wanting to learn and to solve their own problems is important and leads to higher levels of implementation (Knowles 1984 and Allman. 1983). Extending these concepts central to adult learning, also know as andragogy, we believe it is useful to engage landowners in developing their own plans, which should lead to higher implementation levels. We set out to create a tool for owners of smaller tracts that they would find useful in a guided planning process. We believe that we have a need to reach out to the “new” landowner to provide educational materials that they can use to guide their stewardship of land. We also believe that we lack the capacity to lead this process using traditional materials and approaches. Therefore, we offer that “The Woods in Your Backyard” is an approach that people will find useful and provide us the means for guiding decisions that will affect economic, ecological, and social returns from the forests in a changing landscape.

“The Woods in Your Backyard” is a tool for reaching a currently underserved audience with both management information and mechanisms for designing their own plan and putting it into action.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

While “The Woods in Your Backyard” is a step forward reaching out to small acreage landowners, it is only one step. We do need to train service providers. The audience’s socio-economic traits suggest they would be willing to pay for professional assistance to achieve their management objectives (Hull et al. 2004). Trained service providers might have credentials and experience in a variety of areas such as raw material extraction (logging), resource management (forestry & wildlife), and home landscape care (arboriculture and/or horticulture). There is a clear need for individuals with a mix of skills who can work in the context of myriad ownerships and objectives. We need individuals with the traditional natural resource management skills, but in the situation where we see value for “The Woods in Your Backyard,” they require a set of new skills. They have to have the ability to build trust (Hull et al. 2004) with this new clientele.

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