

## How to Organize and Facilitate a Successful Woods Forum

*Presentation by Paul Catanzaro given at the 2012 Regional Conservation Partnership Gathering on November 13, 2012 in Concord, NH*

*Notes taken by Steve Falivene*

Paul came back for the afternoon breakout presenting by himself. He posed the notion that, from his experience, the most successful woods forums he's been involved in were successful because he was prepared and flexible and, probably more importantly, because he was willing to open it up to the audience. Presenting for 15 -20 minutes to start then opening up the floor to questions and comments and addressing those and expanding the forum's content from there (that's where the being prepared comes in). He found forum effectiveness stems from addressing directly what the audience wants to glean from participating in the forum.

In general he would say the audience needs to become interested in understanding the value of working with a professional forester. They are best served in understanding the processes of *developing* a management plan and then of *implementing* management plans, and also forum attendees need to be interested in taking away the *recommendations* of those processes.

Paul said landowners are almost universally interested in enjoying the beauty and scenery of their woodlots- that these are incorporated into what they want as their *home*. This also includes the importance of the *privacy* the woods offer and ensure. Landowners are also very conscientious about protecting nature and biological diversity as well. He mentioned that forum goers are interested in educational walks on their property, one on one visits with foresters and others that can mentor their land ownership, current-use programs to emulate- especially when green (sustainable stewardship) certification is involved.

Paul mentioned that even years ago Aldo Leopold made the contention that landowners are missing the mark as stewards. He backed that up with current statistics (source unknown) that a mere 4% of forest landowners even have a management plan and 4-6% of forest landowners have their lands enrolled in sustainable management programs. He said that clearly forest landowner outreach is currently failing miserably. Part of the problem is that foresters have different goals than landowner goals. He believes foresters are mistakenly continuing to put all their eggs in management plans when most landowners don't have a plan let alone the plans foresters have as their goal. He believes professional foresters need a "better trajectory" for engaging landowners. We are muddled in too much disconnect between sustainable forestry goals and landowners' goals and their actual use of their land. Usually landowners would say that by and large, over the course of

time their land is meeting their needs until the landowners come up against certain “triggers” that force their hand in a decision cycle that is in fact VERY infrequent. The triggers Paul noted were: an offer to sell the land, a death in the family, divorce, job changes, financial concerns, etc. and too often the landowners then find they are at the point of needing to make a land use/land transfer decision quickly if not immediately that is at best based on inadequate time, information, and support to make the choice to be made.

The metaphor Paul illustrated this point with was that “land runs in the background” like insurance or computer virus protection. While owning land, zero management does allow forest land to grow and be beautiful and suffice as scenery, but there is a “benign neglect” going on in terms of the tremendous services woods provide in nature.

Paul contends that what is crucial for landowners (and ultimately for conserving the forests) is to be there with the information and support well before triggers happen so that when landowner decisions are actually made we can ensure they are based on the best info and support to be utilized for that critical moment.

He then went on to answer the question: *How do we inform the decision making?* Paul pointed out that in reality landowners in the face of one or more triggers turn to friends and neighbors that the landowner feels “understand me” in the situation. Friends and neighbors are trusted. They are seen as having shared values- they are seen as unbiased because they are not looking to get anything out of it- not looking to profit from the landowners’ decision- friends and neighbors may have first-hand experience to rely on and very often most importantly they are in close proximity and so familiar with local considerations. Often little more than proximity affords the availability to lend an ear and provide advice that is immediately available in those very infrequent critical times when decisions about their woods are “happening.” Further addressing *How do we inform the decision making?*, Paul extolled the virtues of PEER LEARNING which he defined as spreading information through formal and informal networking. Peer learning involves at least 2-way communication- everyone can be the teacher and the learner- the communication travels in either/both directions. Peer learning is considered community/participant driven and happening over time or on an on-going fashion, connecting landowners where they benefit from it taking place- kind of like it happens in Mayberry USA, at the barber shop, general store, post office or in the local bar. Landowners know they need information but they also want the friend to talk to about it.

Paul then defined a WOODS FORUM as that place where a space is created to enable a facilitated program where landowners ask questions and share their knowledge and experiences. It is self-directed (peer learning in structure). Paul also emphasized a Forum should be the place that offers the opportunity to meet local professional foresters and

agents of land trust who can help and best inform the decision making. It should be a space that builds local networking between conservationally-aware people and peers. A Woods Forum should attract the 96% of landowners who don't have a sustainable forest management program. *Who should attend Woods Forums?* All types of landowners, local service/local consulting foresters, and local land trust agents.

At this point in the presentation Paul presented a Wood Forum format:

15-20 minute presentation of forest landowning background. He suggested it can be most effective to present a couple of case studies of landowners who have made decisions about timber harvesting, sustainable management, and conservation choices.

60 minutes Q and A and "what's on *your* mind?" Collective wisdom sharing.

10 minutes of closing slides or digital media that offer primarily resources (people/organizations/websites/phone numbers, etc.) for landowners to take advantage of well before being triggered.

The Woods Forum breakout then was an exercise in any questions- anything the audience wanted to share...

One thing discussed was how to identify wood forum audience members- how to identify landowner decision makers (standard event BNPs- rely on local land trusts, H2Oshed associations, and foresters). Marketing was addressed (postcard, mass mailings, mass emailing, local newspapers, ad or real estate paper articles, peer to peer outreach, etc.).

Paul finished up saying that Facilitating Wood Forums is critical. They are efficient use of conservation professionals' time because audience members leave with value-added information. He suggested providing many and all facts. To encourage landowners to talk-share info experience, lessons learned, contacts. Ask open ended questions. Manage the presenters and the professionals. Engage and involve the audience- employ learning circles (like in Scandinavia) or quilting bees type of peer learning and utilize keystone cooperators (experts) or anything else that may be conducive..