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Information Access and Preferences Among Private Forest Landowners in New York State[†]

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What is the Issue?

In order to encourage sustainable management of private forest lands, outreach programs need to establish effective communication with forest owners, but this can be a challenge. Research has shown that many forest owners are disengaged from educational assistance.¹ Forest owners operating without adequate knowledge or assistance may degrade water systems, reduce the sustainable productivity of forests, and impair the ecological functioning of forest ecosystems. Forest owners in New York State and in the northern region of the U.S. are becoming increasingly distinct from the traditional image of forest owners² with respect to their strategies of gathering information to make decisions.³ Learning how forest owners access and utilize information about forestry can help reduce mismanagement and minimize the negative consequences such as lost revenue and reduced environmental services. This knowledge can also enhance outreach programs.

Data and Methods

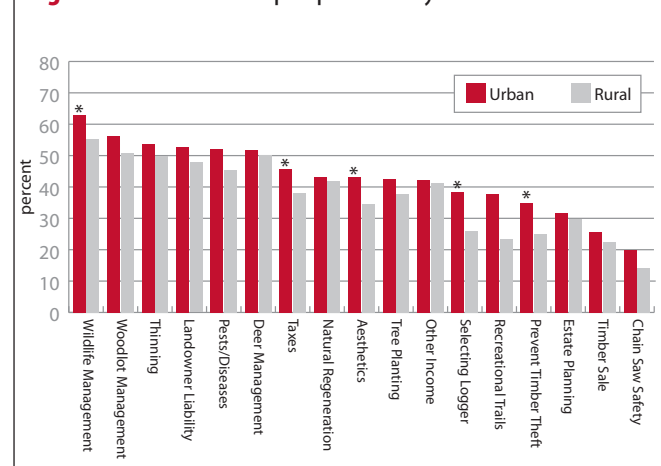
To explore the views and decisions of private forest owners in NYS, a questionnaire was mailed to 2,200 forest owners.⁴ A rural sample consisted of 1,100 forest owners who resided in the same county as their property and whose property was in a county with less than 150 persons per square mile (“rural private forest owners” or “rural owners”). An urban sample consisted of 1,100 owners who resided in different counties than their property and who lived in a county with over 500 persons per square mile (“urban private forest owners” or “urban owners”). The samples were drawn from the 2006 Assessment Rolls of the NYS Office of Real Property Services and included parcels of 25 acres or more and property classified as likely wooded and not in public or industrial ownership. Many forest landowners own both wooded and non-wooded land, but to be eligible for this survey, landowners had to own at least 25 acres of wooded land.

What are Forest Landowner Information Needs?

Landowners were asked what forestry topics they would like to know more about (Figure 1). The most popular topics among all landowners were wildlife management, woodlot management, thinning, landowner liability, and deer management. Compared to their rural counterparts, urban residing forest landowners were significantly more likely to desire information about improving wildlife management, timber income and tax liability, enhancing the aesthetic qualities of woodland, selecting a qualified profes-

sional forester and trained loggers, and how to prevent or report timber theft. Rural forest owners expressed lower levels of preference for all topics than did urban residing forest owners. It is unclear whether this means that urban residing owners have a greater interest in forestry topics than do rural owners or if rural owners already have a greater level of knowledge in these areas and do not see themselves needing additional information.

Figure 1: Information topics preferred by forest owners.



*statistically significant difference at the $p < .05$ level.

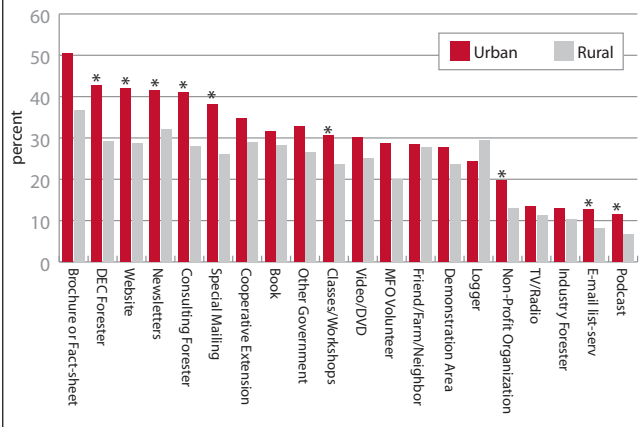
Source: see Connelly et al., 2007¹.

What Information Sources are Owners Likely to Use in the Future?

To determine information sources forest landowners are likely to seek out in the future, respondents were asked to rate a broad range of sources (Figure 2). Popular sources of forestry information that all NYS forest owners are likely to use were brochures and fact-sheets, NYS Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Foresters, Internet and websites, periodic newsletters, consulting foresters, special mailings, and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) personnel. Urban residing forest owners were significantly more likely than their rural counterparts to indicate that they would go to workshops, utilize non-profit organizations and e-mail list serves, and listen to podcasts for forestry information in the future. Results also show that urban forest owners were significantly more likely to use a DEC Forester, a website, newsletters, a consulting forester, and special mailings as sources of forestry information in the future.

¹All footnotes and citations are provided in a separate document posted on our website along with this publication.

Figure 2: Source of information urban and rural residing forest owners likely to seek out in future when in need of forestry information

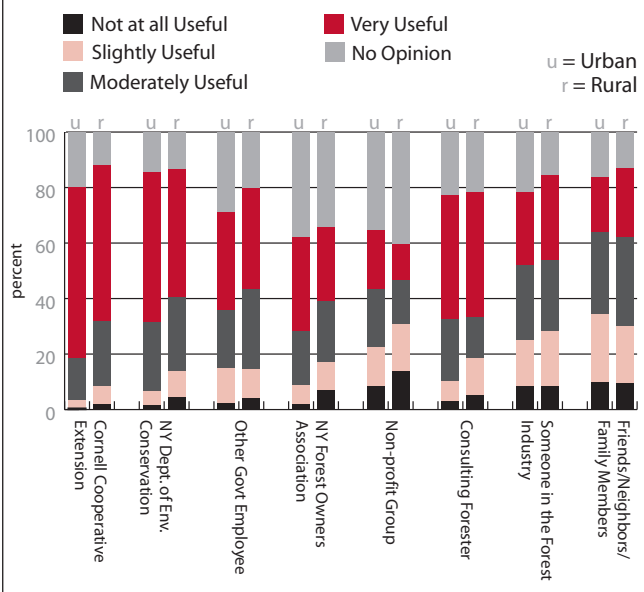


*statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level. Source: see Connelly et al., 2007¹.

Which Information Sources do Owners Perceive to be Most Useful?

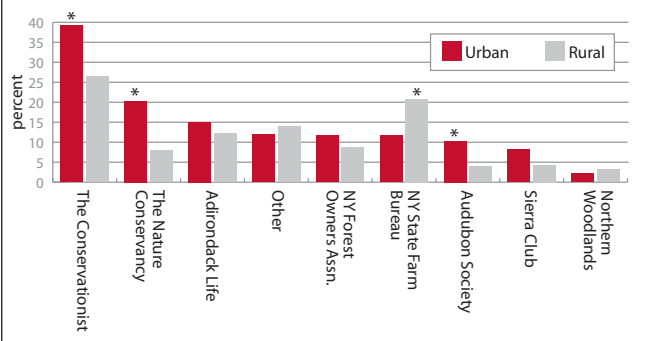
Respondents were asked to rate the usefulness of woodland management information from eight potential sources (Figure 3). Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) and DEC were viewed as the most useful sources of forestry information, with a majority of both urban and rural owners rating CCE as very useful and 47% of rural owners and 54% of urban owners viewing the DEC as very useful. Somewhat lower ratings were given to consulting foresters (45% of both rural and urban owners), other government employees (37% of rural owners and 36% of urban owners), the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA) (27% of rural owners and

Figure 3: Perceived level of usefulness of various sources of information about woodland management



Source: see Connelly et al., 2007¹.

Figure 4: Utilization of organizations and publications that provide information on woodland management



*statistically significant difference at the p<.05 level. Source: see Connelly et al., 2007¹.

34% of urban owners), and friends, family, and neighbors (25% of rural owners and 20% of urban owners).

What Publications and Organizations are Utilized?

From which publications and organizations do forest owners actually receive information about woodland management? Respondents were asked about a select group of organizations and publications in NYS (Figure 4). The Conservationist, published by DEC, was accessed by 39% of urban residing owners and 27% of rural owners, making it the most regularly accessed of the group. The Nature Conservancy and Adirondack Life were the 2nd (20%) and 3rd (15%) most accessed organizations/publications for urban forest owners, while the NYS Farm Bureau and Northern Woodlands held those positions for rural owners (21% and 14%, respectively).

Policy Implications

Communicating with private forest owners has become a growing challenge due to turnover in land ownership, the increasing number of forest owners, and the competing demands on landowner time and information-seeking behavior. While many forest owners actively seek out information on forestry, a large proportion of both rural (~63%) and urban owners (~49%) do not seek out any information.

Outreach programs for private forest owners should consider the diversity of sources of information about forestry. While the traditional sources (Cooperative Extension, DEC, government, industry, consulting foresters) remain important for both types of owners, it is important to note that many owners obtain forestry information from sources beyond these—especially forest owners who live in urban areas.

Typically, outreach programs that focus on wildlife (Figure 1) will have the most currency with woodland owners, particularly with urban residing forest owners. In addition to rural forest owners, urban owners are a key constituency for those involved in forest outreach. ▲

¹ This Research & Policy Brief serves as a companion piece to the March 2008 issue (#15) which examines management activities of private forest owners in NYS. Please see the full report, *An Assessment of Family Forest Owners in New York State*, 2007. by N.A. Connelly, T.L. Brown, and P.J. Smallidge. HDRU Publication, 07-6. Department of Natural Resources, College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY. This report can be accessed at www.dnr.cornell.edu/hdru.

