

Natural Resources and Environmental Issues

Volume 7 *University Education in Natural Resources*

Article 37

1998

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Recommended Citation

Boriack, Nancy A.; Jensen, Edward C.; and Edge, W. Daniel (1998) "Assessing the wildlife information needs of forestry professionals, policy makers, and natural resource educators," *Natural Resources and Environmental Issues*: Vol. 7 , Article 37.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usu.edu/nrei/vol7/iss1/37>

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ASSESSING THE WILDLIFE INFORMATION NEEDS OF FORESTRY PROFESSIONALS, POLICY MAKERS, AND NATURAL RESOURCE EDUCATORS

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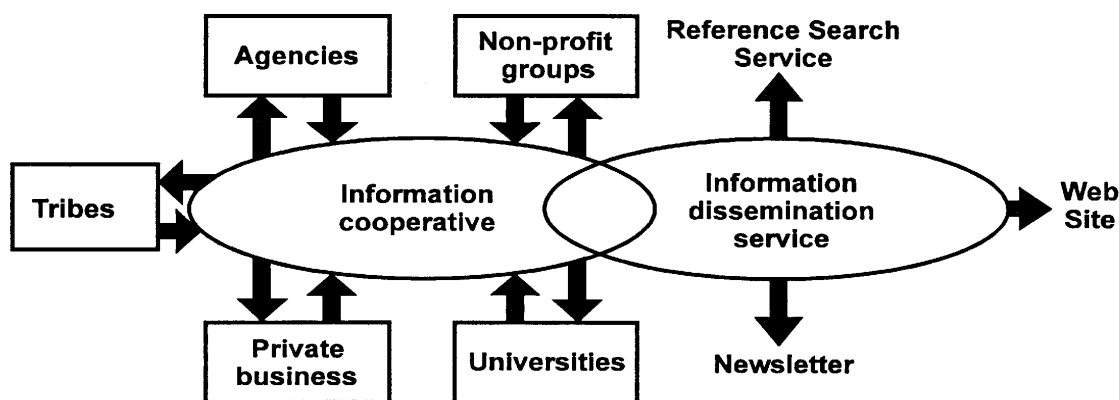
Public concern over stewardship and conservation of biological diversity have caused a reduction in the timber supply from federal lands in the Pacific Northwest. This reduction in the availability of federal timber has resulted in an intensification of management activities on private forest lands. The reduced timber supply has also increased timber prices to the point that many non-industrial private woodland owners, who previously were not interested in selling timber, have entered the market. This intensification of management activities on private forest lands has resulted in increased concerns for fish and wildlife species, especially those that are threatened, endangered, or sensitive. Reliable and readily accessible information about these species is crucial to the resolution of such concerns.

Elevated concerns for fish and wildlife species in forested habitats of the Pacific Northwest have resulted in considerable research and subsequent regulatory activity. However, forest managers, technical staff, policy makers, natural resources educators, and the public often have difficulty accessing information concerning species ecology and habitat requirements, management strategies, socioeconomic impacts, and the implication of policies and regulations. Although information is available from a variety of sources, including journals, research centers, education programs, and experts and specialists, the fragmented nature of these sources restricts accessibility to needed information. Currently, centers and other sources that provide these publics with credible, comprehensive information are often not well known or easily accessible.

In the spring of 1997 the authors conducted a phone survey of 59 natural resources professionals to assess the need for an information center focused on threatened and endangered species in forest managed for timber production. Included in those surveyed were biologists and managers (approximately 50%), elected and non-elected policy makers and administrators (approximately 25%), and education and public information specialists (approximately 25%). The survey addressed three major questions: 1) what are the current information needs of these targeted user groups (and where do they currently seek that information); 2) how successful are they in acquiring the information they need (and what are the major barriers they encounter); and 3) what new information services might they need or want (and what type of information and form should the service take? In the fall of 1997, phone survey respondents were mailed a questionnaire investigating their willingness to pay for three types of services suggested in the phone survey; a web site, a newsletter, and a reference search service.

Results were used to assess the need and lay the groundwork for a new information center on threatened and endangered species in managed forests at Oregon State University. We propose an information center with a two-pronged mission (figure 1): 1) to improve the flow of information on threatened and endangered species between those who generate it and those who use it; and 2) to improve the flow of information on threatened and endangered species among the scientists and organizations who generate new information.

Insufficient coordination between organizations providing information is a primary reason professionals involved with natural resource issues are often unable to find what they need. The proposed cooperative of information generators would facilitate communication and information transfer by: 1) providing a single source where natural resource professionals can be directed to needed information; 2) determining holes in the current knowledge about threatened and endangered species; and 3) reducing unnecessary duplication of research projects and other programs. An effective information cooperative would save Figure 1. The cooperative would facilitate the transfer and sharing of information between groups. The information dissemination service would centralize multiple-group information and make it available via different formats.



all its participants time and money while facilitating effective management and policy development for threatened and endangered species.

The proposed cooperative would consist of formal relationships between itself and its members. Cooperative members (such as agencies and non-profit groups) would make information available to the cooperative. In return, the cooperative would: 1) help its members and others locate and retrieve information generated by member organizations. Natural resource professionals having difficulties finding needed information could contact the cooperative. The cooperative would actively seek needed documents and sources and assist retrieving the information and passing it along to users; 2) facilitate communication between natural resource professionals from participating groups. The cooperative would help its members seeking information by putting them in contact with experts, specialists, and information managers in other groups who have what they need to know, thereby establishing inter-group networks; and 3) update cooperative members about activities and policy changes of other information generators. This could be done via an internal document, a listserv or newsgroup, and/or a web site.

The proposed information dissemination service should centralize and distribute information about policies and regulations, on-going research and demonstration sites, and species ecology, habitat, and population dynamics from multiple groups. Other types of information pertaining to threatened and endangered species could be included as the center gains momentum. Information should initially be disseminated via a newsletter and a web site. The newsletter should summarize new research and projects and bring to attention new sources of information. The web site would connect users to other credible sources for threatened and endangered species information, including other web sites and sources without internet access. As the service stabilizes, the web site could include an internet version of the newsletter. When the center establishes its clientele, a reference search service could be added.

Many groups already disseminate information. The intent of the proposed information service is not to replace or interfere with existing programs. The intent of the center is to provide one place that helps natural resources professionals find needed information more efficiently by directing them to existing sources, such as the services provided and literature generated by other groups.