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Private Forest Landowners: What They Want in an Educational Program

Adam K. Downing
Virginia Cooperative Extension, adowning@vt.edu

James C. Finley
The Pennsylvania State University, jfinley@psu.edu

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Private Forest Landowners: What They Want in an Educational Program

Abstract
The objectives of the study reported here were to understand what private forest landowners (PFLs), who are more likely to attend educational opportunities, want in an educational program and to profile these forest owners as different program audiences. Time issues are important to PFLs, depending on their occupation. PFLs desire active learning methods, practically oriented and useful, related to forestry and wildlife management. Occupation, among other demographic characteristics, sometimes distinguishes PFLs in terms of what they want in an educational program.

Adam K. Downing
Extension Agent, Forestry and Natural Resources
Virginia Cooperative Extension
Madison, Virginia
Adowning@vt.edu

James C. Finley
Associate Professor of Forest Resources and Extension Forestry Specialist
Penn State School of Forest Resources
State College, Pennsylvania
JFinley@psu.edu

Introduction

As educators, we accept certain challenges that inherently come with a clientele with varying values, beliefs, attitudes, experiences, and knowledge levels. Nonetheless, we remain committed to the challenge of facilitating change--our basic yet most lofty goal. For most private forest landowners (PFLs), ideas of stewardship and management are only "occasionally relevant" (Sampson & DeCoster, 1997). Forested systems are ever changing, but change is often slower and more gradual than, for example, with agricultural crops. This, perhaps, frustrates the engagement of PFLs in using appropriate management practices.

One of the greatest challenges for the Extension educator is identifying programs relevant to the clientele's concerns (Seevers, Graham, Gamon & Conklin, 1997). The survey implemented in the study reported here assessed PFL educational needs and desires. If educators can provide private forest landowners with well-designed tailored programs, they may foster forest resources stewardship. "Programs" include educational events such as workshops, seminars, and demonstrations.

Background

Most (58%) of the forestland in the United States is privately owned. This fact alone lends credence to the importance of private forestland stewardship. Additionally, the bulk of the nation's wood (60% in 1997) comes increasingly from non-industrial private forestland (Haynes, 2001). What's more, PFLs value aesthetics and recreation most highly, and ownership reasons like timber production or land investment are seldom primary (Birch, 1996).

Private forestland ownership is changing. For example, Pennsylvania annually has about 40,000 new PFLs owning an increasingly smaller portion of the finite land-base. The new owners include more retirees, professionals, and white-collar workers (Birch, 1996). Pennsylvania is not unique in

these challenges. PFL ownership nationwide is increasingly diverse and fluid (Sampson & DeCoster, 1997).

Shifting ownership patterns coupled with increased societal demands for forest products and amenity values have implications. It emphasizes the need to deliver relevant information and service to an ever increasing and changing forest owner population. As audience profiles' change, educational methods may likewise need to change to achieve increased clientele acceptance of forest stewardship activities (Seevers, Graham, Gamon & Conklin, 1997).

The logical implication is to design programs targeted to different audience segments. One-on-one assistance easily accommodates this need; but efficiency is low. Additionally, as ownership numbers increase, the prospect of reaching landowners with individual assistance is daunting. The viable alternative is to design educational programs targeted to specific audience groups.

Retail marketing provides a precedent for this approach. Customer surveys are used to more effectively market to diverse populations of consumers. Several studies have suggested landowner grouping or classification schemes (Mills, Hoover, Vasan, McNamara & Nagubadi, 1996; Sampson & DeCoster, 1997; Trokey & Kurtz, 1982; Webster & Stoltenberg, 1959). However, no recent examples specifically linking programs to PFL groups by using their shared needs and preferences were found.

Purpose and Objectives

The study reported here was designed to broadly address a set of questions:

- What do forest landowners want?
- Do they have preferences for meeting length, time of day, and subject matter, for example?
- Which preferences are most important when designing a program?
- Which preferences are important to various audience segments?
- Can we group people in a meaningful way, for example, that would enable educators to design programs to reach young professionals who own less than 100 forested acres?

The specific primary objectives were:

1. To identify educational approaches preferred by private forest landowners inclined to attend education programs about the care and management (i.e., forest stewardship) of their land(s).

2. To identify socio-demographic characteristics that relate to PFL preferences for receiving information about forest stewardship.

Methods

A mail survey was initially developed and reviewed for content and readability then pre-tested and modified before being mailed to 500 private forest landowners. These landowners were randomly selected from a list of 3,435 individuals who were initially contacted with an educational offering but who chose not to participate. The initial program was offered to individuals on "natural resources" related mailing lists in an eleven-county area in Northeast and Central Pennsylvania.

This sample represented those likely having an interest to learn about natural resources. Rogers' Adoption Diffusion model (1983) provides the logic for this sampling method. The study sample, because of prior self-selection, at least excludes laggards and probably emphasizes early adopters. By targeting innovators and the early adopters, educators can more efficiently affect learning. The response rate was 43% (n=212), but only 180 surveys were useable for statistical analysis. Thirty-two responses were not used for several reasons (i.e., the respondent did not own forest land, the respondent worked in a forestry related field [we were only interested in landowners], or returned unusable incomplete instruments). Non-response bias is considered negligible, again, because of the desired early adopter audience.

Results/Findings

PFLs: A Demographic Snapshot

The respondents more of less paralleled the "typical" private forest landowner in Pennsylvania (Birch and Dennis, 1980) and across the nation (Birch, 1996).

- Acreage owned:
  - 43 % owned < 50 acres
  - 84 % owned < 200 acres

- 87 % male

- Average age = 57 years
- Occupation:
  - Retirees = 33 %
  - Professional workers = 18 %
  - Farmers = 11 %
  - Laborers = 6 %

PFLs reported fairly high levels of education and moderate incomes. Over 50% had completed a two-year degree or more with nearly 20% completing a graduate degree. Over 40% had annual household incomes of $50,000 or greater.

Programming for PFLs

Developing and offering successful educational program often depends on:

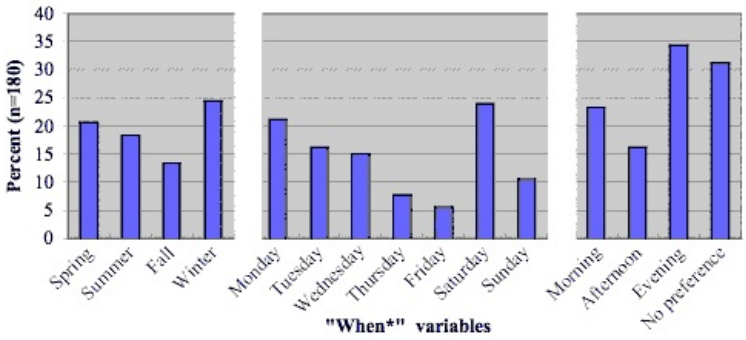
- *When* is the target audience available?
- *What* are appropriate program subjects?
- *How* would participants most prefer to receive information?

When

More than half (52%) of the respondents believed that time of year was "somewhat" or "very important." Overall, winter is the favored season, followed by spring, for attending educational programs (Figure 1). An analysis of variance revealed a difference among occupational groups in terms of how strongly they preferred certain seasons ($F = 3.53$, $p<0.05$). Laborers and technicians were more concerned about the time of year than professional and retired PFLs.

Asked to rank their preference for day of the week, Saturday was the most favored day to have a meeting, with Monday ranked second, while the least favored was Friday (Figure 1). Nearly a third (31% of the respondents) had no time of day preference. Those who did have a preference preferred evening gatherings (34%) (Figure 1). An analysis of variance suggests another difference by occupation groups and preferred meeting times ($F = 3.54$, $p <0.01$). The greatest difference occurred between technicians, who prefer evenings, and retirees, who least prefer evenings.

Figure 1.
PFL Preferences for When* They Want to Attend an Educational Offering

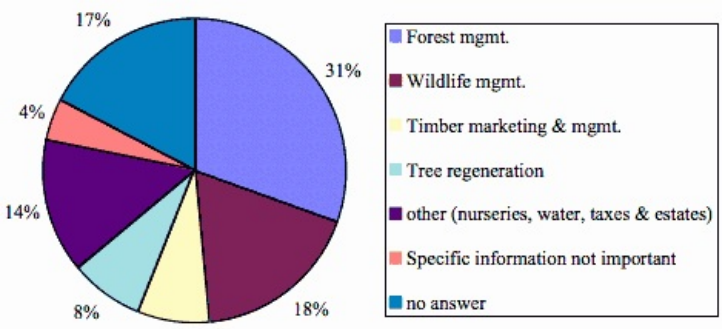


*"When" variables should only be interpreted within their group, independent of other "when" groups.

What

PFLs placing high importance on learning specific natural resources information had achieved a higher level of formal education and were younger. More than 87% of the respondents believed that learning specific information was important. Knowles (1984), writing on andragogy, recognized the importance of learning specific information to adult learners. When asked to identify specific information they wanted, top subjects were forest and wildlife management (Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Information Most Desired by Forest Landowners



Over 50% of the respondents indicated that it is important to *discuss* environmental issues. Forest landowners with higher formal education and preferring more active learning methods viewed the discussion of environmental issues as more important ($p < .01$). Interestingly, gender is a significant consideration ($p < .01$). Although less than 10% of the respondents were female, they were more likely to desire discussion of environmental issues as a program component.

Forest landowners want to learn information they can apply to their personal situation, again mirroring Knowles' (1984) findings. On a Likert scale of one to four, the mean score for this question was 3.44, (Table 1) between "somewhat" and "very" important. Networking with resource professionals was also important, more important than networking with other forest landowners (Table 1).

Table 1.
Relative Importance* of Educational Program Designs for Making Attendance Worthwhile for Forest Landowners

	n = 180	
Importance of	**Mean score**	**Std. deviation**
Learning knowledge application	3.44	0.64
Networking with resource professionals	2.98	0.82
Networking with other forest landowners	2.57	0.80
Program being recreational and fun	2.35	0.82
*A score of 4 was assigned for "very," 3 for "somewhat," 2 for "not very," and 1 for "not at all."		

How

Asked if it mattered who sponsored a program, nearly half indicated that it was not important. Similarly, 45% were not concerned with recognizing the speaker's name. PFLs for whom this was a concern tended to own more forested acreage and belong to a conservation- or a natural resources-oriented organization ($p < .01$).

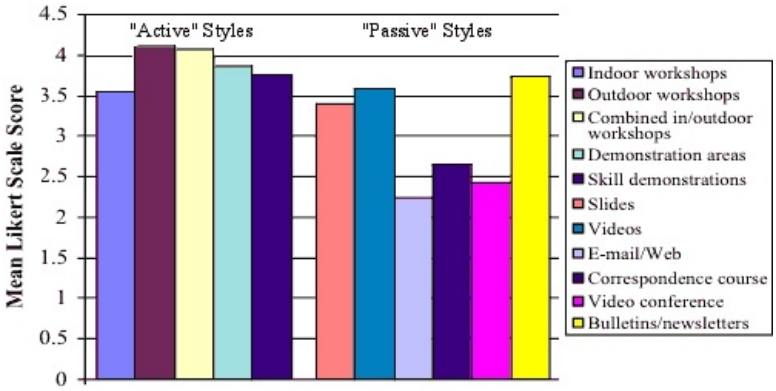
Respondents reported a willingness to travel. Fifty-five percent indicated they would willingly travel 45 minutes or more to attend a program. The distance one was willing to travel related positively to formal level of education ($p < .05$).

Given that a program occurred during their favored time of year, respondents prefer a half-day program. An entire weekend was the least preferred (4%).

As expected, respondents varied in their preferred learning styles. Respondents were asked how well each of 12 different program methods "work for them" (Figure 3). Four of the top five most preferred methods were more active delivery styles. Workshops, demonstration areas, and skill demonstrations were considered "active" delivery. The remaining methods (slide, videos, newsletters, etc.) were considered "passive" delivery styles. A paired t-test showed that the means of these two groups were significantly different ($p < .01$).

Figure 3.

PFL Preference for Educational Delivery Methods (5-Point Likert Scale)



Discussion

Timing issues are important. Our findings suggest that PFLs differ, according to their occupation, in their preference for when programs are offered. Time commitment issues are also important to consider. PFLs are willing to drive considerable distances to attend a relevant program, and many are willing to commit half a day.

PFLs want to learn practical information about the management of their natural resources, and they prefer to learn these skills and information through active methods like workshops, demonstration areas, and field trips. PFLs also value the opportunity to network with others, especially natural resource professionals. When planning education events, educators should make a point of including program elements that encourage active involvement and allow for informal networking.

The landowners queried in this study (early adopters) do have preferred methods for receiving information about the care of their forest(s). Educational preferences often relate to easily measurable socio-demographic characteristics.

Conclusions

Seasoned Extension educators will find few, if any, surprises presented in the study reported here. Evening and weekend meetings are part of our normal workweek. We have long used hands-on teaching methods (such as workshops and demonstration areas) for teaching audiences typically comprised of "hands-on" people who work for a living.

Perhaps more interesting is the idea of looking more closely at our audience (consumer). Who are they, and what educational information (product) do they seek? Not only should we consider the content and preferred timing, but also delivery methods and various informal program components. The study revealed occupation as a key variable to consider when choosing a date and time for a program. Other variables such as education, gender, and age may warrant consideration for planning other components of an educational event.

Consideration of findings from this study will move Extension education beyond counting attendance. It will help Extension educators design and deliver meaningful programs to targeted clientele who have specific preferences in educational program design and delivery. Extension educators are more likely to achieve higher levels of impact if they plan for active involvement and have considered clientele preferences and needs.

Implications for Further Study

The study reported here provides a cursory investigation into levels of preferences. As PFL ownership patterns are changing, educators need to know how to adapt to and target audiences. A study that would group private forest landowners in "demographic clusters" and align them with specific program elements would be extremely valuable to Extension personnel as well as other natural resources educators. The study reported here purposively selected Rogers (1983) innovators and early adopters, but it would be useful to look across the entire adoption range.

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