

DO FENCES *REALLY* MAKE GOOD NEIGHBORS? A COLLABORATIVE ECOSYSTEM STEWARDSHIP APPROACH TO PRIVATE LANDS CONSERVATION

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ABSTRACT

How ecosystems are configured in the landscape has enormous consequences concerning sustainable natural resources. Connectivity, the spatial distribution of similar biotic systems or habitat types, affects not only the way in which natural and anthropogenic disturbances affect natural resources but also how individual species and their genes are distributed over time. Further, the ever-increasing number of private forest landowners, each having different reasons for owning their land, often results in severely fragmented natural resources at the landscape scale. A continuation of this trend renders private forests, as well as other natural resources and waterways, increasingly vulnerable to environmental degradation. Accordingly, in recent years the natural resource management paradigm focus has begun to shift from one centered primarily on managing publicly owned lands, to one which also recognizes the importance of implementing sustainable stewardship practices on privately owned lands.

The process and potential consequences from forming local private landowner resource groups that may engage in collaborative decision-making activities is being examined. Ultimately, the process will result in sustainable natural resources management on private forest lands in the Missouri Ozarks. Using plat maps and parcel boundaries digitized in GIS, private landowners with at least 8 ha (20 acres) in two nine-square mile study areas were identified. Landowners were contacted through a face-to-face interview, structured to fulfill several purposes. The first, and perhaps the most critical, is to form a rapport with the individual landowner. A second purpose is to determine each landowner's characteristics, in particular, their sense of place and the meaning they attach to it, as well as current attitudes, beliefs, and knowledge of ecosystem management. Thirdly, the interview process will reveal if the individual landowner is interested in participating in a local collaborative stewardship group and under what conditions this might occur. Following the initial interview, landowners will be requested to participate in a planning exercise where their land management decisions will be examined using a computer-based resource management decision support tool that will provide quantitative and qualitative information regarding the economic, visual and environmental impacts of their management decisions. Then, those landowners indicating a willingness to participate in a collaborative land management group will be invited to share their views at a series of group forums. The substantive focus of these meetings will be to foster collaborative ecosystem stewardship decisions on private lands using a GIS framework that displays aggregated management decisions as well as their long-term landscape consequences.

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