

SEEING THE LANDOWNER THROUGH THE TREES: HOW NON-PARTICIPANT PRIVATE FOREST LANDOWNERS EXPERIENCE THEIR LAND—A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION

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ABSTRACT

Privately owned forestland, excluding industrial land, accounts for the majority of U.S. forestland and is controlled by several million increasingly diverse private forest landowners (PFLs). The majority of private forest landowner (PFL) studies have used quantitative survey techniques to characterize landowners and ownership patterns, ascertain landowners' management objectives, and prioritize forest values. Participants in these studies tend to be active and/or managing PFLs with the definitions of "active" and "management" based on traditional and generally accepted professional forestry standards. When you compare PFL participation rates in education and assistance programs to numbers of individuals owning forestland, the majority of PFLs can be considered "non-participant" private forest landowners (NP PFLs). An important area of research then concerns understanding these majority "non-participant" PFLs and considering ways in which natural resource professionals might increase NP PFLs engagement in sustainable forest management practices. This paper summarizes a phenomenological effort to describe how NP PFLs experience their forestland in order to inform the practice of natural resource professionals working with private forest landowners. Six themes descriptive of NP PFLs' experiences with their forestland are described. These findings are discussed in terms of their implications for forestry research and practice.

INTRODUCTION

The facts and figures supporting the importance of privately owned forest land to the overall forest resource base in the United States are well known. For example, Egan and Jones (1993) have reported that 58% of the nation's forests are controlled by 16 million private forest landowners (PFLs) (see also Best and Wayburn 2001). Regionally, with 90% of 130 million forested acres privately owned, southern U.S. forests are particularly impacted by private ownership issues and concerns (Best and Wayburn 2001). Nationally, there is widespread recognition that the social and biological landscape of private forests are changing rapidly and experiencing increased, diverse, and novel pressures ranging from increased interest from the forest products industry to increased societal value placed on non-commodity forest resources.

Many attempts have been made to quantify and qualify the values and interests of PFLs. However, these attempts have been primarily limited to quantitative methodologies and/or PFL populations familiar with and/or engaged in management activities (Bliss and Martin 1988; Bliss and Martin 1989; Esseks and Kraft 1988; Finley and Jacobson 2001; Kuhns, Brunson, and

Roberts 1998; Mater 2001; Snyder and Broderick 1992). Data from these studies yield almost universal reports that non-commodity forest values such as viewsheds, family connections, recreation, and forest protection are among PFLs' primary interests. The data also reveal that most private forestland is not under active management as traditionally defined, and the vast majority of PFLs are not generally aware of sustainable land management practices and the availability of assistance programs (educational and monetary) pertaining to these practices (Argow 1996; English et al. 1997; Finley and Jacobson 2001).

Of particular concern, is the fact that the majority of PFLs can be considered non-participant private forest landowners. Non-participant PFLs are here defined as those landowners who are under-involved in sustainable forest management activities and under-represented in landowner assistance and education programs. Natural resource professionals (NRPs) have long known these landowners represent the majority of the PFL population. Furthermore, NRPs have long been frustrated in their attempts to reach this population.

Taken together these findings suggest the time, energy, and money natural resource professionals spend reaching out to PFLs are not producing the desired results in terms of PFLs awareness of, and engagement in, sustainable forestland management practices. They also suggest the standard research methods employed for understanding PFLs to date may be inadequate. Bliss and Martin (1989) observe that although more and more sophisticated data analysis methods are used with survey data, questionnaires have not been significantly updated in twenty years.

Several authors have commented on foresters' lack of understanding of today's private forest landowners. Haymond, in Jones, Luloff, and Finley (1995), states that "a major barrier to promoting forest stewardship is foresters' ignorance of our customers." These sentiments are echoed in Best and Wayburn's (2001) summary of the "rudimentary" state of our knowledge concerning PFLs. They find previous studies have been limited to issues such as timber stocking and harvest, and relatively small samples of predominantly active landowners. They conclude by stating that we do not know "who they are, what motivates them, and how to reach them" (Best and Wayburn 2001).

This paper summarizes research to better understand non-participant PFLs and use such understandings to inform the practice of natural resource professionals working with private forest landowners. As a baseline, current forms of natural resource professional and private forest landowner interaction are reviewed, including the relative success of these interactions. Description of a case study, using the phenomenological tradition of inquiry, of seven non-participant PFLs in a rural community in East Tennessee follows. Six emergent themes, or patterns of meaning, describing how these landowners experience their forestland are presented. These findings are then interpreted with respect to understanding PFLs and to their implications for NRP practice.

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LITERATURE REVIEW

A major component of literature concerning PFLs is the discussion and analysis of their interaction with natural resource professionals. The dominant form of interaction appears to be some form of expert-client relationship in which information deemed relevant to the private forest landowner is conveyed by a natural resource professional. Two major models of information conveyance within this form can be identified. The predominant one, based on Rogers (1995) *Diffusion of Innovations* model, is knowledge dissemination through agencies and Cooperative Extension specialists. The second is a combination of volunteerism, peer based systems, forest landowner associations and other similar ventures (Finley and Jacobson 2001). The two are often employed in concert with agency and Cooperative Extension staff partnering with private volunteers and citizen forestry associations to promote sound forest stewardship on private lands (Best and Wayburn 2001; Egan and Jones 1993; Snyder and Broderick 1992). The typical information dissemination modes used by these types of institutions are person to person, person to group, printed literature, meetings, and experiential learning through field and demonstration days. Currently, many state, regional, and national efforts are underway to incorporate new information technologies into landowner education including both satellite transmitted short courses as well as web-based resources (Extension Committee 2002; Clatterbuck 2003; Jackson, Hopper, and Clatterbuck 2003).

Although progress is being made, these forms of information dissemination emphasize top-down delivery modes and treat issues and concerns of private forestry as problems to be solved through expert description, research, and prescribed solutions (Cortner and Moote 1999). Such traditional problem solving approaches lend a negative connotation to the situation or experience by approaching it as a "problem", emphasize the traditional professional roles of expert advisor and "owner" of knowledge, and can be described as ones in which "we strive to ascertain cause and with cause in place, gain rationale for action" (Dukes 1996; McNamee and Gergen 1999).

The results of survey research indicate a possible disconnect between PFLs and natural resource professionals in terms of what kinds of information are most relevant and what are the best ways to make that information available and useful. Initial analysis of a set of phenomenological interviews conducted in the study area in the summer of 2001 reveals frustration on the part of many natural resource professionals regarding landowners lack of clarity regarding their objectives (Muth et al. 2001). PFLs involved in a variety of land management activities and/or who had a relationship with a natural resource professional(s), and natural resource professionals with responsibilities in the area, were interviewed about their experiences with forestland. These interviews revealed that many times there is a mismatch between the land management plans drafted, or the recommendations made by NRPs, and landowners' real objectives. Such mis-matches result in management plans and recommendations that are ultimately abandoned in favor of objectives not articulated to the natural resource professional at the time their assistance was sought (Muth et al. 2001).

According to many natural resource professionals one cause is landowners' lack of clarity regarding their objectives. Some natural resource professionals indicated that many landowners simply do not know what they want, or have not thought about their resources and objectives. However, landowners' interviews indicate strong ties to the land, strong feelings regarding view-sheds, forest health, forest protection, forest recreation, family connection, economics, and other issues. Focus group results involving the same individuals, as well as further literature, support these finding as well (e.g. Campbell and Kittredge 1996; Cordell et al. 1998; Pavey 2003).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Research Approach

Simply put, phenomenology is a combined philosophical and methodological approach for studying experience. The philosophical portion is based in existentialism, a tradition focused on the nature of existence and the freedom and responsibility one faces in shaping their existence for themselves (Levey, Greenhall, and staff 1983; Thomas and Pollio 2002). Methodologically, phenomenology involves the collection and analysis of rigorous and richly nuanced first person descriptions of participants' experiences to develop patterns and relationships of meaning regarding the phenomenon of interest. The goals of phenomenology are to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had it, and reduce those experiences to a central meaning, or the "essence" of the experience, which can be used in practice with those experiencing the phenomena. Phenomenological research has been employed across diverse disciplines including sociology, psychology, education, health sciences, nursing, and recreation (Creswell 1994; Johnson and Hall 2002; Polkinghorne 1989; Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Thomas and Pollio 2002; Valle, King, and Halling 1989). The methodological components, as well as the underlying philosophical tenets of phenomenology, make it a particularly good fit for attempting to understand non-participant private forest landowners in new ways, and for informing the practice of natural resource professionals working with such landowners.

Phenomenological data is collected via one on one interviews. The researcher maintains a respectful stance towards participants, positioning him or herself as a learner, and presumes no superior expertise regarding the phenomenon, or experience, of interest. Interview questions have a descriptive and facilitative purpose rather than one of assessing a pre-existing opinion, attitude, or level of knowledge (Pollio, Henley and Thompson 1997). "What" questions are used to facilitate description rather than "why" questions which stimulate participants to analyze, and even judge, their experiences (CAPR 2003; Thomas and Pollio 2002). The interview is unstructured and conversational with a single initial question to prompt description of the experience. Further questions follow on the comments of the participant (CAPR 2003; Polkinghorne 1989). Interview success depends on the willingness of the participant to share their experiences, and the skill of the interviewer in drawing out full descriptions of these experiences, and catching and following up on critical elements as they are revealed from within the story stream.

Participant selection is purposeful. This reflects the focus on the nature of the experience rather than the characteristics of those who experience it. Study participants need only have experienced the phenomenon of interest and be willing to talk about it (Polkinghorne 1989; Thomas and Pollio 2002). Significant effort should be made to capture as wide an array as possible of specific experiences relative to the topic being explored. Appropriate sample sizes are considered six to twelve individuals, and the reported range is 3 – 325 individuals (Polkinghorne 1989; Morse and Ray 1994 in Thomas and Pollio 2002).

The analysis methods followed here reflect those used by the Center for Applied Phenomenological Research (CAPR) at the University of Tennessee (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Thomas and Pollio 2002). Analysis takes place within a phenomenological research group. Representative study transcripts are read aloud. Specific sections that stand out as significant to the experience are noted and their meaning assessed. All interpretations must be supported by the participant's words, and must be validated by at least two members of the research group. Eventually, commonalities in experiential significance are identified across transcripts resulting in themes representative of

the experience for the study as a whole. Text supporting these themes is sought from the transcripts to validate and verify the thematic analysis (Thomas and Pollio 2002).

The use of the research group, and the hermeneutic process described below, are two of the most important analytic tools phenomenologists use to help reduce interpreter bias. Throughout analysis, researchers continually relate parts of the text back to the whole and vice versa. A process referred to as the hermeneutic circle. This reflects the fact that an accurate understanding can not be reached via an isolated piece of text, nor can the whole be understood without noting the supporting details (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997; Thomas and Pollio 2002; Valle, King, and Halling 1989).

Research Methods

Seven non-participant private forest landowners in the Emory – Obed watershed of East Tennessee were interviewed about their experiences with their forestland using the phenomenological method of inquiry. The watershed exemplifies many of the current bio-physical and social factors impacting private forest land and landowners. Study participants were identified via a telephone screening survey regarding their land management activities and their participation levels in landowner educational opportunities and groups. Calls were placed to all PFLs in a 36 square mile block owning greater than 10 acres of “woodland” according to property tax records. Non-participant private forest landowners were identified as those who indicated they, 1) had never sought advice or assistance concerning their forestland, participated in a landowner educational event, planted trees, used chemicals, pesticides, or fertilizers, planted food plots of vegetation to encourage wildlife, had a timber sale, or removed unwanted vegetation or animals from their forestland, and 2) did not have a management plan, plan to sell timber, or conduct activities to maintain the natural beauty of their forestland.

Five of the final study participants are male, and two are female. Five (4 male; 1 female) are resident landowners, and two (1 male; 1 female) are absentee landowners. For the purposes of this study, a resident landowner is a landowner who lives within one hour’s drive of their forestland property. Two of the men (both residents) are retired from their original careers but remain active either keeping up their homes and property, or with small jobs. Three (two resident, one absentee) of the men are still working fulltime. Both women are widows, and not currently working. One is a retired school teacher, and the other’s employment history is unknown. The results of the interview analysis for these seven non-participant private forest landowners constitute the findings reported here.

FINDINGS

Six major themes describe the ways in which non-participant PFLs experience their forestland: 1) Connection, 2) Continuity, 3) Power and Awe, 4) Peacefulness and Frustration, 5) Value, 6) Freedom and Constraint/Control. More than one theme is often embedded within study participants’ statements, however, one theme is generally more figural than another with the others providing the supporting ground against which the dominant theme stands out. In fact, it is only through this figure – ground relationship that any one theme, above another, can be highlighted for description and analysis. Although each theme is necessarily and separately described below, they are intricately related such that it is the relationship amongst themes, rather than the themes themselves, that fully describes and summarizes how these non-participant PFLs experience their land.

Connection

Private forestland facilitates connections. Furthermore, a sense of connection forms the core and starting point of non-participant PFLs experience of their forestland. For NP PFLs their land is a physical embodiment of psychological ties, much as a memento, or a special object, embodies a person, place, or time. In this case, it is the land itself that has the ability to bring people, memories, times, activities, etc. to the fore. Land provides a psychological nexus through which these are made figural to the landowner, and the land is made figural for the landowner through these connections.

Continuity

Non-participant private forest landowners find both personal and natural continuity in their land. Several landowners discussed passing on their land to their children and/or grandchildren, as well as valuing the ability to trace their land back to generations before them. For NP PFLs the land is a physical conduit through which they pass on their experiences, and the meaning of those experiences. For example, Lloyd talked not just about passing on his land, but about repeating an adventure with his own grandson that he had had there with his father. In relaying the story, he recalls its presence throughout his own life as well. Ruth has also been able to pass on not only her literal experience of the land, in terms of digging up plants, but she has been able to pass on her love of that activity to a granddaughter living far away as well.

In relaying experiences of natural continuity in their land, landowners tend to focus on experiences of death, chaos, or disorder. Nevertheless, they all recognize the meaning of death in nature is new life. They find that their land heals itself (Hope), or that “it’ll grow up” in the future as John described. They also note, again as John described, that life and death are not just cyclical, but integrated, sometimes existing simultaneously as “there’s always something living in those dirt piles.”

Power and Awe

Being a landowner provides study participants the opportunity to experience the power of nature in both positive and negative ways. Positive aspects include being awed by the abundance, splendor, and magnitude of nature as experienced via their land. Negative aspects include being humbled by the force and strength of nature as experienced via damaging storms and the slow death of “big” trees.

Peacefulness and Frustration

Non-participant private forest landowners describe both peaceful and frustrating experiences with their forestland. On the frustrating side, being a landowner means having to deal with the “headaches” of responsibility, negotiation, and decision making as Hope describes. At other times, the land throws annoying obstacles in your way, pushes against your hard work clearing paths and building fences, and can lay waste to your well made plans. Being a landowner also involves maintaining, and even defending, boundaries. Nevertheless, while dealing with the land can be frustrating for non-participant PFLs, it also brings great peace, comfort, and pleasure. To be on the land is to experience relaxation, and a “sense of stillness” as Lloyd describes. The land itself is described as peaceful, or as being able to bring peace to the landowner. As Leland says, “it’s the best thing to bein’ in heaven.”

Value

To be a non-participant landowner means to experience your land as of value, to get something out of it. That something is diverse, but the value laden and intense nature of it is common.

Expressions of value ranged from the more utilitarian regarding ways in which landowners use the land, to statements that their sense of enjoyment from the land was worth far more than any monetary worth. Examples of the “value” these non-participants got from the land include using the land for farming, for retirement income, for investment, for recreation, for gathering with friends and family, for the enjoyment of being outside, for the enjoyment of putting around and keeping the place up, for relaxation, for refreshment etc.

Freedom and Control/Constraint

Freedom, constraint, and control are entwined for NP PFLs. To be a non-participant private forest landowner means to be free to do, or not do, as you please, and/or to decide, or not decide, as you please. Ironically, to decide freely is to be in control. Furthermore, it is only within the constraint of socially prescribed boundaries (property borders) that NP PFLs can experience such freedom. Within these borders they describe strong desires to control what happens, including the desire to keep nature from getting out of control. Maintaining one’s line in the sand, such as a fence, road, or other border, between freedom (inside your property) and the absence of freedom (outside your property) occupies much time and thought for non-participant private forest landowners.

Additional Findings

In addition to the thematic findings above, the phenomenological approach also revealed discrepancies in how NP PFLs and NRPs speak and conceive of land management. Six out of seven study participants responded in the screening survey that they did not, “in their own opinion”, manage their forestland. The terms “manage” and “management” were only used once in an interview by one landowner as she referred to the business aspects of owning forestland. However, all the study participants spoke of activities that could be considered management related such as cutting down trees, wanting to “improve” the “quality” of their forestland, and maintaining roads, paths, ditches, drainage patterns, fence lines, etc. When the concept of management came up with one landowner after the formal interview had ended, she puzzled over what it meant and whether she did it, only to conclude that she does “what needs to be done.”

SUMMARY

Private forest landowners have been studied in many ways; primarily in terms of their land ownership characteristics and management motivations. Findings from these studies reveal that most private forestland is not under active management, and that most PFLs are not aware of the education, information, and assistance programs that have been designed for them. Recognizing the importance of PFLs as the social and biological landscape of forestland changes, foresters have turned greater attention to understanding these owners of the majority of U.S. forestland. Non-participant PFLs are of particular concern because they represent the majority of private forest landowners, have historically been least understood by natural resource professionals, and have been the least represented in previous studies and findings.

This phenomenological study of how non-participant private forest landowners experience their forestland reveals the primacy of connection. For these non-participant private forest landowners their land provides, sustains, stabilizes, and solidifies meaningful connections with others, with nature, and with place. As such, NP PFLs locate themselves in the world in relation to their experiences on or with their land, especially if they have grown up there, or raised a family there. The land is a nexus for their memories and serves as a physical representation of the ties to their ancestors and

future generations. In addition, experiencing their land provides the opportunity to take part in the cycles of life, both natural and human, and to witness the power and awe of nature. A great sense of peace comes to study participants via their land. And despite the many frustrations they experience as landowners, they all find many things to value about and within their experiences of their land. Through, and within the confines of, their land, NP PFLs are able to feel free and in control despite the unpredictable qualities of nature. Furthermore, non-participant PFLs do not consider themselves to be managers. The primary ways in which they make meaning from their experiences are unrelated to management, and they do not use the terminology of resource professionals when speaking of these experiences. The findings do clearly indicate that NP PFLs do have what resource professionals refer to as reasons for owning forestland. However, these reasons, Connection, Continuity, Freedom, etc. differ from those traditionally offered to PFLs as choices in standard survey studies or ascribed to them through these studies.

IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FOR THE PRACTICE OF NRPS

This study offers two primary implications for the practice of natural resource professionals in their work with private forest landowners. The first concerns the benefits of phenomenology to the study of non-participant private forest landowners (NP PFLs). The second concerns the ways in which natural resource professionals communicate and make connections with non-participant PFLs.

As a research method, phenomenology offers several benefits to the study of NP PFLs. First, given its focus on collecting clear and complete descriptions of someone else’s experience of an aspect of their existence, it is well suited for any situation in which a “professional consultant seeks to discover the wishes and needs of a client” (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson 1997). Second, it allows us to study aspects of NP PFLs’ experiences that cannot be measured, such as the meaning of their forest land to them, by questionnaires, attendance rates, and enrollment in government programs. Third, as questionnaires can only measure what they ask, they may fail to adequately address those aspects of the experience of forestland that are most salient to NP PFLs such as, the particular beauty of the land, or peacefulness, quietness, and privacy. These most salient aspects may be the very aspects upon which NRPs can motivate NP PFLs and leverage their expertise towards improved forest stewardship. Phenomenology also provides a different format for sharing experience, a very human and relational format. For a population that may have been systematically missed by other approaches, or turned off by them, this is a key point. And lastly, phenomenology is the only research method that sheds light on the meaning of experiences to individuals (Thomas and Pollio 2002).

The results of this study show that NP PFLs have strong ties to their land. However, it is clear that our professional jargon and sense of urgency regarding sustainable forest land management on private lands do not personally resonate with these landowners. Fortunately, studies such as this one reveal the very aspects of non-participant PFLs’ experiences which are most salient and meaningful to them as well as the specific language they use to describe those experiences. In order to motivate more PFLs to become involved in sustainable forest management practices, we as NRPs may need to expand our definitions of forest/land management, clarify our terms, and/or work more towards connecting and integrating information rather than simply disseminating it. This is especially important when working with a population which has historically not made meaningful connections with NRPs or their work.

In the ongoing dialogue between NRPs and PFLs, especially regarding non-participant private forest landowners, the burden to make forestland management seem relevant and important lies with us. We must take the initiative to connect and integrate what we have to offer with their lived experiences. One way to do this may be to capitalize on these most meaningful aspects of forest landowners' experiences by relating them to the forest management practices that will help sustain these experiences. For example, many landowners care deeply about passing on their entwined forestland and forestland experiences. As NRPs we know that certain forest management practices can promote these goals. Increasing non-participant forest landowner participation in sustainable forest management practices may turn out to be a matter of translating and relating sustainable forestland management to the language and meaning of sustainable forestland experiences.

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