

Motivating Woodland Owners to Take Action

A focus group study of Woodland Retreat Owners and Working the Land Owners in Colorado, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania

SFFI serves as a generator and integrator of information about woodland owners, in order to help a broad range of organizations be more strategic and effective in their outreach to this important constituency. SFFI has identified four segments of woodland owners based on their reasons for owning woods. In order to better understand two of these audience segments—Woodland Retreat Owners and Working the Land Owners—we conducted a focus group study about how they interact with their woods, what actions they currently perform, and what might motivate them to perform more desirable actions. The key takeaways from the focus groups can provide guidance for messages and programs designed to reach and persuade these audiences.

Key Takeaways

- 1. Most woodland owners want to be good stewards of their land. However, they have different conceptions of what that means.**

Woodland owners believe that good stewardship is about respecting wooded land and protecting it so it can be passed to future generations. However, they have different ideas about how to do this. Two common patterns of ideas are the “tread lightly” approach and “intensive use/intensive care” approach. Those who apply the first (primarily Woodland Retreat owners) believe that most natural processes are healthy for woods, and human use and impact are the main threats to woodlands. For them, good stewardship is about minimizing human impacts in their woods to let the natural woodland ecology flourish. In contrast, Working the Land owners often take an intensive management approach that emphasizes reducing the impact of harmful natural processes through human intervention. They see woods as a resource to be used and tended, much like farmland or pastureland.

- 2. For many landowners, woods are a part of a larger land holding which includes a home, pasture, farm, wetlands or other features. Their decisions about their woodland are made in the context of their overall land holding.**

Most of the landowners that participated in this study discussed their woods in the context of their farm, pasture land, ranch or home. In terms of caring for the land, most Woodland Retreat owners tend to prioritize their yards, the wooded areas immediately surrounding their homes, and areas easily accessed by roads or trails. Some have never been in the rest of their woods. The biggest implication of this is that woodland owners may not be aware of problems or opportunities in the remaining areas. Moreover, they may not have the time or energy to address problems that don't impact their use and enjoyment of the woods.

3. Most landowners see their land as a financial asset and a source of financial security. However, there are important differences in how Woodland Retreat owners and Working the Land owners perceive and use this financial asset.

The main difference between Woodland Retreat and Working the Land owners with regard to financial considerations is that the latter see their land as a “working asset” (i.e. they are actively seeking an ongoing return on their financial investment in the land), while the former see their land more as a “nest egg” (i.e. an investment that is not actively managed but can be pressed into use if needed). Financial aspects of woodland ownership are top-of-mind for Working the Land owners who seek to generate income from their land even as they enjoy the amenities it provides. Their financial goals for their land guide their decisions about what land to buy, and how much they invest in improving or protecting that asset. Woodland Retreat owners don’t mention financial gain as a reason for owning woods, but they do talk about property taxes, land value, and the steps they have taken to increase the value of their land. They tend to invest in improvements that will enhance the usability and recreational amenities provided by their woods.

4. Woodland ownership goes hand in hand with a certain lifestyle and identity. Working the Land and Woodland Retreat owners invest in land because they espouse certain values and want that lifestyle.

All the landowners who participated in this study shared a love of green (undeveloped) space, appreciation for natural beauty, and affinity for a close-to-nature lifestyle. Many of them had grown up in rural environments and enjoyed hunting, fishing, hiking and other outdoor activities as children. Woods and nature are a deep part of their identity and embody certain aspirational values. Even those woodland owners that don’t spend a lot of time in their woods think of themselves as outdoorsy and nature-loving people. This is an important trait that Woodland Retreat and Working the Land owners share.

5. Legacy—both in terms of inheriting land and passing it on—is very important for woodland owners.

Most woodland owners want to pass both their land and the cultural values associated with land ownership to their children. This sentiment was especially strong among owners who had inherited some or all of their land—some had even taken steps to ensure that the land would stay in the family for the foreseeable future. However, the most important thing for most woodland owners is to pass their love of their land and their stewardship ethic to their children.

6. Landowners’ level of interaction and use of woods varies based on type of land and type of landowner. However, most landowners use their woods for some type of recreation and many collect firewood. Many have harvested trees for a variety of reasons.

Working the Land owners have a more intimate knowledge of all features of their land, and they are seeking ways to maximize the use of these assets. Most of them hunt and fish in their woods and collect firewood for personal use or sale. They may spend time and energy on woodland maintenance, planning for timber sales, leasing for grazing or hunting, or tapping government

programs that offer financial benefits for woodland owners. Woodland Retreat owners value the woods more for their look and feel. Some own the woods primarily for the privacy, beauty, or wildlife habitat and don't spend much time in the woods. Others use their woods for low impact recreation or firewood collection. Compared to Working the Land owners, Woodland Retreat owners typically do fewer types of activity in their woods, and they tend to be lower-impact activities. Both types of owners enjoy nature and appreciate the amenity values of their woods.

7. Working the Land owners manage their woods more actively, intensively and systematically than Woodland Retreat owners.

One driving factor of this difference is that Working the Land owners have more knowledge, more confidence and better guidance than Woodland Retreat owners; thus, they are in a better position to take action. Working the Land owners tend to be better connected with forestry and agricultural agencies and services and have a more specific and realistic understanding of the threats and opportunities in their woodland. They are also more likely to have the time, knowledge, tools, and confidence to take on woodland management activities themselves. Woodland Retreat owners are less likely to access these specialized networks and channels of communication. They often lack the resources to take on threat mitigation projects themselves and, as a result, most Woodland Retreat owners focus on battling the most visible and obvious threats (such as weeds), often in an ad hoc way.

8. Woodland Retreat owners need timely guidance and ongoing support to take appropriate management actions.

Although most Woodland Retreat owners wish to be good stewards of the land, there are many barriers to their taking action, including a lack of knowledge and a lack of familiarity and comfort with professional forestry. Often, there is a mismatch between landowner expectations of prompt assistance with an immediate problem and foresters' focus on long-term management. Even when Woodland Retreat owners want to take foresters' advice, they often need help articulating their goals for the property, prioritizing activities according to the most pressing threats, finding trusted vendors to perform woodland maintenance, and finding financial assistance to perform expensive woodland management projects. Woodland Retreat owners need ongoing support and guidance from a trusted resource to give them confidence and certainty in their management decisions.

9. Current landowner assistance programs do not adequately meet the needs of woodland owners or their woods.

Current landowner assistance programs are not successful at encouraging active management of family forests because they do not appeal broadly to all woodland owners. Although these programs reduce the burden of management activities for woodland owners, they do not offer enough incentive to persuade enough people to take that action. Use of cost-share programs is also low because they often support timber-related activities that are not relevant to the goals of many Woodland Retreat owners. Woodland owners see tax abatement programs as more useful and relevant. Many of the landowners that participated in this study were enrolled in such programs and most appreciated the tax break.