

Public Abstract

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Title:Assessing the Capacity for Collaborative Ecosystem Stewardship on Private Forestland in the Missouri Ozarks

Missouri's forestland totals nearly 15 million acres and a vast majority of this area, roughly 82 percent, is controlled by more than 300 thousand nonindustrial private forest (NIPF) owners. Consequently, meaningful long-term stewardship of forestland and its associated benefits are largely in the hands of NIPF owners. Complicating the task of sustaining natural resources, especially on a landscape scale, is the ever-changing forest ownership demographic resulting in forestland ownership objectives being in a constant state of flux. What is more, in addressing this complex issue, natural resource professionals often work with limited knowledge and understanding of NIPF owners. Past research aimed at understanding this population has focused on ascertaining management objectives based on prioritizing commodity values placed on commercial and non-commercial forest products. Furthermore, there are reams of studies quantifying conservation motives or management, and in particular the motives and objectives of NIPF owners, but only recently have studies begun to examine non-commodity values and beliefs, such as collaborative ecosystem stewardship, in landscapes dominated by private ownership. Consequently, this exploratory case study sought to contribute to the growing body of collaboration and private land conservation literature by utilizing qualitative research, (1) to examine southeastern Missouri Ozarks NIPF owners' relationship with their land, their neighbors, and their community, as well as their attitudes and beliefs regarding ecosystem stewardship in a landscape dominated by privately owned forestland, and (2) to document the process and potential consequences when forming a local landowner resource group that may engage in collaborative decision-making activities with the ultimate goal to sustain forested resources and their associated ecological benefits. However, an unexplored assumption inherent in prior collaborative natural resource management plans involving the public's participation is that stakeholders have the capacity to engage effectively and efficiently in decision-making processes. Therefore, this research also assesses institutional, community, and individual capacity for collaborative ecosystem stewardship on private forestland in the Missouri Ozarks. The methodological framework applied to this case study is divided in three parts: (1) qualitative research methods such as semi-structured phenomenological interviews, a reflective journal, and field notes, (2) collaboration and capacity building activities such as landowner forums, field days, demonstration workshops, and focus groups, and (3) collaboration and capacity building through technological intervention via testing a forest management decision education tool and using GIS generated maps to discuss land use in the study area. Results show the stewardship of private forestland not only requires a scientific and technical course of action, but must also include the social processes in which the natural system is embedded. Indeed, social fragmentation is occurring across the Missouri Ozarks as more forestland is bought by absentee landowners, which in turn complicates and exacerbates landscape scale fragmentation of forestland and the associated ecological benefits. Thus, the values, needs, beliefs, and goals of NIPF landowners must be central to the understanding of those working in natural resource management if the creation of effective landscape scale opportunities and strategies for private forestland conservation are to be cultivated and successfully implemented.