

Asking Questions and Listening to Stories: Reflections on Three Decades of Forest Ownership Research

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Introduction and background

It is a great honor to be invited to speak with my European colleagues, so many of whom I have interacted with over the past couple of decades! It is just wonderful to review the program and recognize so many names of friends and colleagues, many from IUFRO Small-scale Forestry Working group. This opportunity to speak with you today is personally quite timely, as it marks, to the very month, my retirement from some 35 years of working with, and researching, private forest owners. My assignment as your keynote speaker is to reflect on what I've learned during the course of my career, and perhaps to derive a few lessons for the future of forest ownership research.

This assignment is both flattering and daunting! Flattering because it presumes that I have learned something; and daunting because it suggests that what I've learned might be useful to a European audience. Because very little of my work has been in Europe, I'll be focusing on my approach to learning about forest owners, rather than on research results.

As any good social scientist knows, research results mean little without reference to the historical, social, and environmental context from which they arise. Accordingly, I'll begin by telling a tiny bit of my life story – don't worry, I'll be brief! -- focusing on a few events that have shaped the way I think about research.

I was born, raised, and educated in Madison, Wisconsin; a liberal, cosmopolitan university town in the middle of a rural farm state. I attended the University of Wisconsin, graduating with a degree in cultural anthropology. My father didn't see much of a future for me in anthropology, and so insisted that I also take coursework in education – because at least then I'd be able to get a job teaching! In my final year of college, I met the love of my life, married, and immediately headed to northern Afghanistan for two years of service as an English teacher in the U.S Peace Corps.

There, the education coursework was, I suppose, somewhat helpful, but my anthropological bent was richly rewarded. I spent two years asking questions and listening to stories. As I look back on those years now, I realize that I was in training as an ethnographer, paying attention to as many of the details and nuances of speech as I could understand, not knowing whether or not they may end up being significant.

Leaving the high, arid, treeless landscape of Northern Afghanistan at the completion of our Peace Corps service, I longed for the green farms and forests of Wisconsin, so I returned to graduate school to pursue a Masters degree in forestry. Upon graduation, I took a position with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources as a field forester, and moved into the hinterland to practice forestry among Norwegian, German, Finnish, Polish, and Scots Irish dairy farmers.

As the new young government forester in Vernon County, it would not do to just show up at a farm and preach about modern forest management. If I wanted to gain any credibility in that closed, conservative society, I had to learn to listen, observe, and not say too much. I liked nothing better than standing in the barnyard and listening to the stories of these farmers' immigrant parents, who left their European homelands in search of freedom, economic opportunity, and land in the New World. Each shared lessons learned from their parents and grandparents about how to manage farm and forest resources. The Germans prized "tidy" woodlots, in which every fallen branch was piled neatly to dry for the fireplace. The Finns spoke of the ideal "system of fields and forests" intermixed across the landscape. The forest served as a bank account for the Norwegian settlers. Later waves of immigrants, settling lands passed over

by earlier waves valued their forestlands primarily as pasture. As I became more familiar with the landscape, I thought I could detect discernable differences in the woodlots of these different ethnic groups; differences that perhaps reflected cultural norms, values, and behaviors handed down across generations. My cultural curiosity had been piqued!

After 5 or 6 years of this grassroots education, I decided to pursue my curiosity more purposively by enrolling in a Doctoral program. I resigned my position with the state, and kicked off my new academic venture by attending the 9th World Forestry Congress held in Mexico City in 1985. There, I met prominent Yale University Economist James Yoho, and sought his advice on my research topic. I still remember his exact words: “You’ll be adding your dissertation on nonindustrial private forest owners to a mighty high pile!” This was not the encouragement that I had hoped to hear! But he was right; already the body of literature on private forest owner behavior was huge. I determined that I would not spend the next several years of my life laboring to just adding one more piece of paper to the pile – I wanted to somehow make a significant contribution. But I had absolutely no idea of how!

At that time, essentially all landowner studies in the U.S. were by economists, they were survey – based, they asked the same questions, and they produced essentially the same results, over and over again:

- owners of larger ownerships are more likely to harvest timber than small owners
- more educated owners are more likely to have management plans
- owners are old, and getting older!

And so on and so forth. You all are familiar with these sorts of surveys, and these sorts of results. Such surveys have been tremendously helpful to government agencies, quantifying the dimensions of the private forest resource and identifying key characteristics of forest owners; information that was, and still is essential to sound resource management policy.

Yet, while they told us many useful generalities about the forest-owning population, they shed very little light on the complex mix of attitudes, beliefs, prejudices and habits that make up individual human beings. And for me, they lacked the richness and depth of those barnyard conversations I had so enjoyed, and from which I had learned so much. And so it was that, one day in a landscape architecture class, I had an “Aha!” moment with the realization that perhaps the reason that so few new insights into landowner behavior were being generated was that individual owners weren’t being studied. We knew a lot about the population of landowners, but not much about individual owners. Because we had applied only one research approach, we had limited ourselves to the insights that approach was capable of producing. Maybe a different approach would yield new insights into landowner behavior. Maybe my anthropology education had not been a waste of time after all!

At the time, the early 1980s, very few anthropologists were working on forestry issues, and they were mostly working in the developing world. I thought, why not apply anthropological methods to researching private forest owners in the U.S.? So I dove deeply into the literature on ethnography, qualitative research methods, grounded theory, case study research, open-ended interviewing, and analytical coding. These became the tools that I would use for my doctoral research on “Motivations of Nonindustrial Private Forest Owners; A Qualitative Approach.” My highly complex and terribly sophisticated research tools consisted, essentially, of asking questions and listening to stories. And the application of those tools did not disappoint. My somewhat skeptical dissertation committee, comprised mostly of forest economists, began to appreciate the value of these tools as they yielded new insights into what leads forest owners to do what they do. I learned that, yes, economic considerations are important predictors of landowner behavior, but they are mediated by a host of other critical considerations, including;

- Personal, family, and ethnic identity
- A strong desire for autonomy, or control over resources,
- Diverse family needs and aspirations
- The desire to leave a legacy

These insights may hardly seem new today, but in the 1980s they were met with considerable skepticism because they broke with the dominant paradigm of economic rationality, which said, essentially, “Tell me an owner’s financial status and the value of his forest assets and I will tell you all you need to know about his management.”

Mix it up

So the first lesson I want to share is that different research methods produce different insights. The old saying, “If your only tool is a hammer, every problem looks like a nail,” applies to social research as well as carpentry. Much, perhaps most ownership research is still survey-based, with all the strengths of that approach. The semi-annual landowner surveys that many countries implement provide essential data on landowner populations. The time series data they produce is invaluable in tracking changes in owner characteristics. Surveys are the appropriate method for answering the “how many?” and “how much?” and “how often?” questions: How many owners are there? How much forestland do they own? How often do they harvest or plant or hike? If you know what you’re looking for, and what you are looking for is an estimate of the distribution of a trait in a population, a survey is the research method of choice.

Surveys are far less effective in addressing the “Why?” and “What?” questions: Why do you hold forestland? Why do you feel that way? What is important to you? And the anthropologist’s classic open-ended question, “What’s going on here?” Surveys are ill-suited to situations in which you aren’t sure exactly what you’re looking for, you don’t know what may be important, or if the issue of interest is not readily quantifiable. In these situations, some sort of qualitative approach is likely to be more effective, utilizing such methods as open-ended interviews, participant observation, or focus groups.

It strikes me that there is a relevant analogy here in the medical profession. Medical professionals have become extremely sophisticated at collecting and analyzing data from blood tests, urine tests, MRIs x-rays, and other tests. We see one specialist for our digestive system, another for our heart, a third for eye, ears, nose and throat. The medical system reduces the human being to a collection of symptoms. How many of you have had the experience of wishing that someone in the health care system would pay a little more attention to the totality of your being?

Similarly, survey research deconstructs individuals into their attributes; age, income, gender, and so on, from which are then reconstructed population distributions and averages. Any human attribute which cannot readily be reduced to a numerical statistic gets either relegated to footnotes or ignored altogether. In a real sense, although the researched population comes into focus, the individual human being disappears.

Now, I don’t wish to do away with survey research any more than I want to do away with the medical specializations that may one day save my life! But I do see a need for examining the entirety of an individual, in the context of his or her social and environmental circumstances, in order to better understand their aspirations, attitudes, and behavior. Every research approach has strengths and weaknesses. The point is not to favor one over the other, but rather to let the research question drive the approach and methods to be utilized. And, where time, resources, and expertise allow, mixed methods approaches can capitalize on the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses of the individual methods employed.

In my work, I’ve found variations of the case study approach to be especially rewarding. My students and I have applied the approach to issues of forestland tenure, community forestry, agroforestry, and private lands policy all over the world. Case study research has long been a staple in the fields of law, medicine, business and education. More recently, case study research and other types of trans-disciplinary collaboration are being utilized to tackle the really complex issues of natural resource management and policy. The skepticism I regularly encountered from forestry colleagues in the 1980s and ‘90s toward the case study approach has diminished significantly over the past decade or so. Indeed, major research funding agencies now require that investigators employ some sort of multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary, or trans-disciplinary effort. Unfortunately, the logistics and expense of managing a project involving multiple

disciplines, experts, and institutions can be overwhelming. My personal opinion is that we have yet to figure out how to achieve true inter-disciplinarity in either research or education. Our institutions are certainly not structured to promote it.

I have tried to deal with this challenge by cultivating a broad curiosity among my students, and what I call an “undisciplined” approach to thinking about issues. Through developing a case study, they must explore the social, historical, and ecological context within which the phenomenon under study exists. This builds appreciation for the significance of multiple disciplines, types of data, and methods of data collection and analysis. In effect, it cultivates trans-disciplinary thinking within the researcher.

Try a little theory

It took me a long time to learn the second lesson I want to share with you. I have always considered my research to be much more applied than basic. I was motivated by the desire to understand forest owner behavior in order to devise better forest policy and programs. No one ever accused me of being too theoretical! In fact, I was pretty ignorant of social theory, and instinctively gravitated toward a grounded theory methodological approach to research, in which one builds original theory from the ground up with each new research project. I still find this approach tremendously rewarding, but I’ve come to recognize how much our field has to gain from the rich theoretical frameworks of anthropology, sociology, and social psychology, to name only a few relevant fields. Much ownership research, like much of my own work, is a-theoretical. This limits our ability to generalize from our results, and limits the contributions we can make beyond our small community of interest.

Two theoretical frameworks have been especially influential to my own thinking about forest ownership. The first is land tenure, the dynamic system of rules and traditions that govern ownership, access, and rights to land and its resources. Land tenure provides a language for analyzing interactions between society and natural resources, and for comparing them cross-culturally. Studying the extraordinarily rich variation in land tenure systems around the world can prevent one from assuming that the land tenure relations of one’s own culture are somehow “natural”, inevitable, or unchanging. Knowing that rights and responsibilities in land represent a continually evolving social agreement is key to understanding policy conflicts in the natural resource arena.

A second theoretical framework, political ecology, builds upon the land tenure framework by focusing on how economic and political power is distributed within society. It views a society’s land tenure system as a means for distributing wealth and power. The political ecologist asks, “How does the distribution of power in this society influence the ecosystem in which it resides? Who has power in this situation? Who might gain from a particular policy? Who might lose?” It is relevant to mention here that forestry researchers have power by virtue of their training and position, and this power influences both how they perceive landowners and how they are perceived by landowners. Being cognizant of one’s own position in the power spectrum of a social system is prerequisite to understanding its political ecology.

These two theoretical perspectives, land tenure and political ecology, have proven to be critical in our research on public opinion, landowner behavior, community collaboration and conflict. My suggestion is not that these are the only theories applicable to forest ownership research, but rather that much of our research could be strengthened by a more rigorous application of appropriate social theory.

Remember: They’re people

Much forest ownership research seeks to simplify the tremendous diversity among forest owners by creating typologies of owner types. Finding patterns in complex data sets is, after all, a central objective of most social science research. Often, in ownership research, its primary purpose is to understand owner behavior so that it can be modified to suit some agency purpose. This isn’t

necessarily a bad thing – indeed we all want our work to be useful. However, starting from the perspective that “we want to understand you so that we can manipulate you” can be pretty limiting to gaining a deep understanding of owners. Over the years I’ve become quite skeptical of forest owner typologies. In my view, their utility is often overshadowed by their tendency to oversimplify, to force complicated human beings into boxes that fit the convenience of the researcher, but do not adequately represent the complexity of individuals. More often than not, they mask complexity, rather than illuminate it.

More pernicious than over-simplified typologies is the attitude which dominated nonindustrial private forest ownership research in the last century, and is still, unfortunately, not uncommon today. This is the view that forest owners are a problem to be solved. Surely, leaving forest management decisions to millions of individual small woodlot owners can only lead to suboptimal results! Imagine the chaos! Fixing the “Small Woodland Owner Problem,” as it was called, required a combination of incentives and regulations to coax and coerce the great, ignorant masses into adopting professional forestry practices. Much research on forest owners is conducted by individuals within forestry agencies or the forestry departments of universities, who, to some extent, share the values of the forestry profession. Inevitably, consciously or unconsciously, those values shape what and how questions are asked and how the results are interpreted. I first realized this pitfall while conducting field research for my dissertation in the mid-1980s. I had selected winners of the Tree Farmer of the Year award, a forest industry landowner recognition program, to interview as exemplars of “good” forest management. Then, for comparison, I asked professional foresters to identify forest owners who were “bad” forest managers. As I interviewed these sorry, hapless folk, I realized that their identification as bad managers taught me more about the foresters than about the forest owners. The management choices of these owners were entirely reasonable, given their context; they just happened to be different from what the forester prescribed.

Work that Brooks Stanfield, Thomas Spies and I conducted in Oregon’s Coast Range illustrates how, in contrast to the forestry profession’s view, ownership diversity may be a good thing. First we selected a number of watersheds to study to include watersheds dominated by public, private nonindustrial, industrial, and mixed ownerships. Then we mapped tree species, connectivity, patch size, and other proxies of forest diversity. As predicted, the watersheds with the greatest diversity of ownership also displayed the greatest forest diversity. Of particular note was that only the watersheds dominated by nonindustrial private forestlands supported significant stands of oak and other hardwoods – species that were discriminated against on industry lands and underrepresented on public lands.

What lessons do I derive from these observations? First, be cautious when categorizing forest owners; Where did your categories arise? What values do they reflect? Whose interest do they serve? Second, beware of viewing owners as problems to be solved – problems to which some agency, company, or program has the solution. Rather, consider forest owners themselves as resources, and their diverse management objectives a strength rather than a weakness.

Upset somebody

The final lesson I want to share with you I first learned from a natural resource sociology professor of mine at the University of Wisconsin, Dr. Thomas Heberlein. He advised his students that, “If your research is not upsetting somebody, it’s probably not very important.” The point is not to go looking for ways to aggravate people, but to recognize that on all significant issues there are bound to be winners and losers – people who have something at stake and therefore care about outcomes. Dr. Heberlein’s advice was simply to invest our efforts in issues that somebody cares about, or should care about. In our field of forest ownership research, questions related to power have not been very common. Asking such questions, and then reporting on the results of such questions, runs the risk of offending someone (typically, someone in power). If our research is funded by public agencies or private corporations we might avoid asking questions that could embarrass them. We end up producing “safe” research that ultimately has little impact.

I have followed Tom's advice and focused on issues people care about, and the forestry profession has been angry at me for most of my career! They didn't like it when our survey research found that the environmental attitudes of forest owners in the U.S. Mid-South were, on many points, indistinguishable from those of the general public. They had long assumed that Southern forest owners were much less environmentally concerned than owners in other regions. Forest industry didn't like it when our work on property tax abatements to the pulp and paper industry in Alabama showed little positive impact on local employment, and a large negative impact on rural schools. And, judging from letters to the editor of the Journal of Forestry, readers concluded that my review article on public perceptions of clearcutting was single-handedly responsible for the decline of the forestry profession!

Fortunately, for most of my career I have worked under deans who value academic freedom, and have had the courage to defend it. This has allowed me to ask difficult questions about controversial topics, analyze the data to the best of my abilities, and publish the results without interference. Of course, tackling controversial topics is risky, but it is unlikely to be boring! And it just might make a positive contribution.

Closing

Well, enough of my preaching – it's time to bring this sermon to an end. To summarize, here are the four suggestions I'd like you to consider as you undertake forest ownership research. Again I will paraphrase Dr. Heberlein, "If you agree with me, my lessons are trivial, and if you disagree with me, my lessons are wrong!" In either case, I've advocated to:

1. Whenever possible, triangulate from multiple methods, perspectives, and disciplines. Mix it up!
2. Make use of existing social theory where applicable;
3. Remember that forest owners are complex humans that defy simple categorization, and are not mere problems to be solved, and,
4. Invest your energy in questions that someone cares about, or should care about.

In closing I would like to share a more personal reflection. Essentially all of the research I've engaged in over my entire career has been conducted in collaboration with graduate students, who I have viewed as equal partners in the work. While I have relished the thrill of discovery, and have enjoyed sharing the fruits of research through publishing, it is the personal relationships I've made along the way that have made my career meaningful and enjoyable. Last month many of my students came together in Corvallis for a Bliss Student Reunion. Working with these highly motivated, extremely bright, marvelous individuals has been a real privilege and the greatest joy of my career. If I could give only one piece of advice to you it would be to surround yourself with young people who are smarter than you are, and then invest your time and energy in cultivating their potential. For this you will be richly rewarded.

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