

# FOREST COMMUNITIES, COMMUNITY FORESTS



EDITED BY  
Jonathan Kusel  
AND Elisa Adler

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EDITED BY JONATHAN KUSEL AND ELISA ADLER

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# Foreword

## **Finding a Cafeteria of Possibility in an Array of Community Forestry Case Studies**

My chance to review these twelve excellent case studies happens at a most opportune time. Current efforts in the United States to reduce public participation in decisions about public forests returns us to the practices of favoring a few at the expense of communities and the environment. I strongly suspect that many traditional foresters in and out of public agencies support this reduction in public participation as a return to the authority of professional foresters. In Nepal, a nearly two-decades-long push to return many important management plans and decisions about public forests to community groups is now having the forest service there seeking “to take back” these lands. It is interesting that many of these lands sought by the agency were lands decimated under their prior control and were re-greened under village and community management. Over the past two years, I had a John Eadie Fellowship from the Scottish Forestry Trust to examine public participation in forest matters in Scotland, England, and Wales that permitted me to see and experience the great flourishing of community-based forest management happening in city, suburb, and country, most of which was being ignored (except for proclamations that “forestry is for people”) by the traditional forestry training and educational establishment in Britain.

These case studies reflect one trend in forestry as it is actually practiced and one that greatly contrasts with forestry as it is researched and taught in North America and around the world. Indeed, the general closing or loss of traditional forestry programs, such as those at Duke, Oxford, and elsewhere, suggests a profession in decline. In many universities, the profession is simply being absorbed into vague programs, such as bioscience, global environmental policy,



environmental science, or schools of the environment (an emergent tendency at the oldest continuous forestry program in the United States: Yale University). In developing regions of the Southern Hemisphere, similar trends are playing out, and the global challenge is to provide a revitalized forestry that captures broader and more idealistic ecological hopes and public service attitudes. This twenty-first-century approach is not unlike the 1960s and 1970s hopes of Jack Westoby and some of his UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) colleagues. Westoby and his small band of supporters wanted to move forestry from being an enemy of the people to being a supporter for achieving broad human aspirations, particularly those of the poor.

Further, the shift in scientific and public expectations about forestry has been away from the traditional desire for maximizing timber or biomass productivity and toward an emphasis on maximizing the production of biodiversity and sustaining ecosystem health. Let me underline the significance of this worldwide shift in emphasis—it is a move from prime attention on a few tree species of high commercial value to an ecosystem approach that covers the entire forest system and its potential for producing multiple goods, benefits, and services, many of which have no direct market price or value. It is strongly dependent on a significant sense of (and often an actual) community ownership, involvement and participation in policy, and planning and management of their nearby forest ecosystem.

These trends do not mean that those foresters who continue to maximize biomass production are not important. With a growing human population and its habitat being more and more in urbanized areas, the need for woody fiber and the finished products it can provide assures a steady and increasing demand for wood. However, the changing technologies of wood chemistry and adhesives and genetics mean that nearly any woody vegetation, from hemp to hazel, is a potential source of useful biomass. This is likely to mean less need for traditional field silviculturalists, except those who can translate their skills to increasing the production of biodiversity in forested ecosystems. The challenge to academics and researchers is to retain biomass technical improvements and to complement these traditional commercial activities with an emergent set of community-forest ecosystem management practices that emphasize native and multipurpose trees, woodlands, and forest ecosystems that provide a wide and ever expanding array of goods, benefits, and services. The interesting fact is that throughout the world the early exploration of this renewed diversity is already being done by the many rural, suburban, and urban community/neighborhood woodland groups. So the populace, a few pioneering professionals in the field, and a scattering of academics are helping to advance forestry attitudes and practices not seen since the fourteenth century. This set of case studies is another stage in developing a full-fledged, systematic, science-based community forestry profession.

What these case studies emphasize and support with their insights is the need for a new kind of forestry that treats human social systems as part of the whole. What is needed is the capture of these community forestry learning curves and their conversion into a more systematic (even scientific) form so that the curve is accelerated and more widely available for training and application to a renewed forestry for the twenty-first century. In short, a modern forestry cannot emerge simply by extending those practices and forms of knowledge that have served commercial forestry. We require a new forestry, and most of this is being empirically and pragmatically tried out at the local level. Except for short-term training programs, such as the Regional Community Forestry Training Center, which is loosely affiliated with the Kasetsart Forestry Faculty, there are no major forestry degree-granting, graduate research-producing institutions staffed with full-time ladder faculty that are fully involved in research and teaching on community forestry. My suggestion is not for the replacement or destruction of the present system of commercial forestry research and training practices but rather for the creation of an entirely new parallel research and training system that gives legitimacy and substance and that advances sustained learning for community forestry practices that have been emerging over the past forty years.

In short, I see a much broader impact of these studies than the editors and authors of this volume intended. Along with the work of Mark Poffenberger and his colleagues; Marilyn Hoskins and her colleagues at the FAO, Rome; a couple of decades of work by South and Southeast Asia FAO forestry programs; the Community Forestry reports from Kasetsart; and so forth, we have a body of sustained and continuing work. It is time to bring this substantial corpus of work out of the realm of “gray” or “fugitive” sources and make it the core literature of a truly new and revitalized professional forestry discipline. This means a body of theory that cumulates and directs findings, a standard set of methods, and the usual canons of scientific proof that identify the universals and separates them from what is locally unique. Let us admit that the case studies here probably give too much emphasis to places with large hunks of federal or other publicly owned land. So the struggle can often be put into the context of small communities attempting to gain the attention of large bureaucracies in order to have their voice heard. Yet this is not typical of most of the world. Take the northeastern United States. Maine, often thought to be a wild forestland, has only 4 percent of its land in public ownership. In contrast, my native state of Oregon has a federal ownership of over half its land, equaling a total land area that is larger than all the land in Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire. So there may be problems in the lands west of the Mississippi, but they do not start with internationally owned, absentee corporations that see the value in the land for uses other than timber production. So the folks in New Mexico (see chapter 4) think they have big problems when “away” wilderness folk “lock” up their land. They should try

dealing with a South African corporation whose board of directors is far away and nearly unreachable in a legal sense or, later, with Plum Creek from Montana, who shares the vision that Maine looks a lot better as developable real estate than as multiple-use timberland.

So there are conditions of uniqueness in each of our cases. Yet despite the uniqueness of each case, I find certain recurring tendencies and lessons that could raise our understanding above the special distinctions, and I see a similarity and a set of systematic guidelines for future practices that incorporate or resolve these similar and recurring patterns and processes in community management. Some central tendencies to consider and to research in rural and urban community forestry development—or some lessons outside the comfort zone—follow.

1. Emphasize functions being sought rather than focusing only on the tree, the woodland, or the forest. If you become caught in the object rather than the process of achieving desired goals, community managers will drift into their own form of “trained incapacity” as do commercial forestry organizations. That is, you will always be looking for something to do with your trees rather than looking for the best means to solve your problem—people leaving, abuse of cultural heritage, low service and income bases, unemployment, or hinterland isolation. The tree and woodland may be a means to solving the problem, but it should not be the sole factor when one can look outside the forest and maybe find a whole range of more workable solutions. See, for example, chapters 2 and 3.
2. Do not buy in to the idea that systems are moving toward some socioecological climax or steady state. With changing systems, human or biophysical, there is a need for flexibility, adaptability, diversity, and resiliency in development strategies. Our reality is one of dynamic response to constant internal and external perturbations. There is not a nice, smooth curve and a gentle landing that holds forever.
3. Do not focus only on your particular bit of forestland. Fit that land into a watershed, catchment basin, transportation corridor, and so on. In short, think of the property as an element within an ecosystem. This will compel better anticipation of changes affecting the property. Further, it will give a larger focus and relieve the trained incapacity to develop strategies only in terms of what can be done with trees and woodlands. All the case studies offer some variant on this idea, as do the community forests studied in Britain and Asia.
4. A community forest group may be a not-for-profit organization, but it should not be seen in this light. All commercial opportunities must be considered. An excellent model for this are the national parks of the People’s Republic of China, where in even the most sacred national parks (for example, Sun Yat Sen Mausoleum in Nanjing) no possible vehicle for income gain goes untried.

5. Our analytic approaches could be improved if we start by trying to recognize the greater degree of unity in problems and opportunities for mutual learning by seeing some sort of continuum of density of habitation or clustering of work opportunities. Intellectuals like nice taxonomies with their confident bins in which to tidy up an untidy world. We hear a great deal of talk about rural community development as if it were a species apart from urban community development. Yet one suspects that there is a great deal more romanticism than empiricism in these distinctions.
6. Real rural or urban community development requires connecting primary production to its processing and its consumers. Growing, harvesting, and processing should be part of a total development effort. The value-added industries, along with some tourism-serving and other service activities, can give a more balanced jobs basket so that when one element is down, others are there to fill in. Chapters 6, 9, 10, 11, and 14 address this issue in diverse ways.
7. To talk of an effective and efficient participation in natural resource decisions does not mean to follow some arbitrary scale of involvement that may satisfy some intellectual sense of order. It means the ability to say no or yes or to tell policy or management persons to do these other actions rather than the ones that are proposed and to have the legal authority, either individually or in concert with others, to enforce these choices. This usually means something akin to ownership rights and responsibilities or voting rights and responsibilities. These are vested, enforceable rights backed by the power of the state. Though other forms of participation granted by some corporation or agency are nice, they are still gifts, not rights and responsibilities. Indeed, I suspect that these other forms of participation function more like "infomercials." Rather than honest, open, and legitimate purveyors of real information with real choices and consequences, they are nothing more than advertising or public relations efforts.
8. Most volunteer and other community efforts reflect the drive and energy of a few persons. Often the interest of the "wider" public is well reflected; they just do not show up to meetings until something really bothers them. There needs to be attempts to keep all stakeholders informed, but do not despair if everyone is not as active as the core. In addition, recognize that this core is composed of ordinary human beings who, in the course of life, become tired or burned out or simply move away. There is a need for designing a way to institutionalize their "charisma" and their leadership so that there is real continuity of the effort. Ultimately, all community groups need some professional infrastructure if the good works are to be sustained. See chapters 5, 6, and 8 for support and discussion of this issue.
9. As Jack Westoby notes, forestry is more a political science than a pure biological science (all the cases in this volume give evidence of such a tendency).

Of course, it works with biophysical realities and objects. However, decisions as to the when, where, who, what, how often, and why of our forestry actions are essentially political decisions. Some social classes or interest groups gain from those decisions, and others will lose. To save a grove of older trees or a habitat favored by certain bird species by prohibiting motorized access may be a good biological decision but is often a class and/or generational form of discrimination and hence political. Our decisions are never simply about biology but most often about human behavior. A less frequent retreat into “science” and a more open recognition of the reality of scientific forestry as composed more of political science than biophysical science gives a greater humility. It also gives greater openness to wider participation and greater attention to seeking diversity on a wider range of activities and calls for the creation of real mechanisms that give legitimacy to the voiceless. Over generations and times and issues, there will remain the need for discussion, argument, adjustment, compromise, and even agreement—but the discussion goes on about what the purposes of our forest are. And that very reason that has us talking together about the importance of our forest is one of the more valuable purposes of our forest.

So our twelve cases raise a good many more questions and possibilities than may have been intended. Truly, the future of a vital and effective forestry for the future—and one that seeks to answer the big questions raised by Westoby and others—is in our hands.

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## Note

I would like to thank David Rook and the Board of Directors of the Scottish Forestry Trust for the support of the John Eadie Fellowship and the many enthusiastic community foresters in Britain who helped me to more clearly understand the great shift that is happening in forestry around the world and even in my own backyard.