Motivating Private Forest Management through Stewardship Stories

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Diverse Federal and State programs in Michigan seek to encourage private landowners, who own over 60% of the state’s forested land, to improve forests through developing forest management plans. However, management needs and interests may vary considerably, ranging from northern Michigan and Upper Peninsula landowners with large acreages and a primary interest in generating income through timber harvests to others who embrace wildlife habitat needs to smaller landowners in highly fragmented and urbanizing/suburbanizing parts of southern Michigan, where there may be more emphasis on forests for non-timber uses, recreation, and aesthetics. Thus, many forest owners may be reluctant to engage in the development of formal forest management plans. In this case study, we present an alternative approach: motivating management through stories of forest stewardship. We will describe a project in which the Michigan Department of Natural Resources, with funding from the U.S. Forest Service, partnered with three Michigan conservation organizations (The Stewardship Network, The Nature Conservancy, and Huron Pines) to engage private landowners in nine landscapes in telling their stories of how and why they manage their forest lands, highlighted on a Story Map for the state. Rather than compiling recommended forest management practices into formal management plans, these stories let real people tell, in their own words, how and why they choose to actively and sustainably manage their land, the challenges they face, and the resources they have found helpful. We will offer highlights of landowner stories from different parts of the state to illustrate how deeply engaged landowners may be the best advocates for adopting sound forest management practices. Although we do not yet have research data about whether formal management plans or informal stewardship stories are more effective at motivating action—whether policies incentivizing the development of formal forest management plans are more or less likely than stories to lead to widespread adoption of successful interventions by diverse landowners—we advocate for a human connection over the usual government program focus on documents, and offer lessons learned from the process.