

What you need to know as a beginning forestland owner - Peter J. Smallidge

Department of Natural Resources, Cornell University. Ithaca, NY 14853

Introduction

Whether your forest or woodlot is mixed among agricultural fields, part of a larger tract of forest, or on the edge of a suburban area, you share something similar with other forest owners who are interested in forestry -- you all had to start someplace. However, getting started can be a barrier for many people to fully enjoy their forest.

People own forests and woodlots for many different reasons and have an equal number of benefits they want to receive from their property. Knowing your reasons and desired benefits are your forest management objectives, a critical first step in getting started. Your objectives are the starting point in forestry because you can't know what you should do until you know what you want to do. Many people think of forest land as a place to produce timber, but many more benefits are also possible. Actually, most forest owners have objectives that focus more on wildlife, recreation, and aesthetics than selling timber. If you jointly own your property, with your spouse or business partner, discuss your objectives so everyone has the same vision. If you aren't quite sure what your objectives are, then ask yourself some questions: Why do you own the land? What do you like about your land? What do you dislike? What are your needs in 5, 10 or 20 years? Not all of your forest land will necessarily have the same primary objective. One area may be a sugar bush while another area is devoted to wildlife or recreation. The answers to these questions and discussions with some of the people mentioned below will help you clarify your objectives. Having a clear sense, and ideally a written statement, of your objectives is important because your objectives should be the basis for all future activities on your property.

A good activity once you have started thinking about your objectives is to make a list of the people who are available to help you. These people can be divided into two groups, non-technical and technical. Non-technical assistance is provided through volunteers such as the Master Forest Owners who are trained by Cornell Cooperative Extension. Master Forest Owners, or MFOs, are forest owners like you who have an interest and commitment to helping other forest owners get started. They have a wealth of experience from their property and those of other forest owners they have met, and can help give you some ideas. They are also familiar with the people and publications that can help you make a final decision. Additional non-technical assistance is available through groups such as the New York Forest Owners or the

Catskill Forest Association. These are groups of forest owners who are interested in issues related to owning forest land in New York. Both groups have regular publications and other activities where you can pursue forestry issues important to your woodlot. Your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension can help you find a MFO in your neighborhood and they or the Department of Environmental Conservation can help you find the forest owner associations.

Technical assistance is also readily available throughout New York. For general information of forest and woodlot management contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension. They have publications and bulletins with information on a variety of subjects such as tree identification, wildlife habitat, and forest owner planning. Cornell Cooperative Extension will also know of upcoming forest owner workshops that may be of interest to you. If you are interested in aerial photographs, topographic maps, or soils information you should check with you local Soil and Water Conservation District. Finally, for professional forestry advice you should contact your local New York Department of Environmental Conservation office. The DEC has professional foresters who will visit with you on your property for free to discuss your forest management options. An earlier visit from a MFO may help give you some ideas and questions for the DEC forester. The DEC foresters will have information on cost-share programs and the New York Forest Tax Law. Finally, if you decide to contact a private forester, the DEC forester has a list for your county.

The next thing you will likely want to do, if you haven't already, is to become familiar with your property. Look over the maps and photos you received from your Soil and Water Conservation District. Walk through the woods on some of the old trails and woods roads that may exist. Walk the boundary lines and make sure they are evident so others don't mistake some of your trees for their own. Spend some time talking with those who own the adjacent property. Your neighbors may know something of the history of the area, the history of your forest, and perhaps the previous owner. Ideally you would mutually agree to inform each other of logging activities so there are no surprises.

Once you have started getting more familiar with your property you should work with your DEC forester or a private forester to write a forest management plan. Plan writing is a team effort with your forester, but as the owner you are the final decision maker for what happens on your forest. A written management plan will offer many benefits, including a statement of your objectives, a description of your property, the condition of the forest, the potential benefits you can expect from your forest, streams and soils, unique features, and the types of wildlife habitat that exist. The plan will also let you decide a schedule of activities that are consistent with your objectives. A plan isn't necessarily a complex document, and there may be cost-share money available to offset the cost so check with your DEC forester.

These ideas will hopefully help you get started in the right direction with the management of your forest or woodlot. There are many benefits you can enjoy from your woodlot, and getting started correctly will ensure you can realize all those benefits. If you would like additional information you can go to the ForestConnect website at: www.ForestConnect.info or contact your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension office. Participating in forestry is the fun part, so enjoy the process.

Starting Pointers

- There are many reasons why you might want to manage your forest or woodlot. Deliberate planning will help ensure you reach your personal goals.
- There are numerous people, agencies, and publications available to help you begin the management process. There are several free options. Start with a [Master Forest Owner Volunteer](#) and then likely a visit from a [DEC professional forester](#).
- The first step in planning for forest management is to know what you and your spouse or partner(s) want from your property. Your objectives are the basis for all future activities on your property. No one can tell you what you should do until they know what you want to accomplish.
- You can start to understand your objectives by asking yourself questions about your property. How did you obtain your property? Why do you own it? What do you like and dislike?
- Trying to think about all your objectives and whether they are compatible can seem like an overwhelming task. Computer software called NED (for NorthEastDecision model) is available through the USFS. You can download a copy at their web page (<http://www.nrs.fs.fed.us/tools/ned/>) or call (802) 951 - 6771. The free software is Windows compatible.
- A good starting point is to begin knowing your property. Work with the DEC, NRCS, and Soil and Water Districts to get aerial photographs, topographic maps, and soils maps of your region. Make sure your property lines are marked using blazes, markers, or posted signs.
- Become involved with people in organizations that share your same interests. A Master Forest Owner Volunteer can help and is available through your local office of Cornell Cooperative Extension; also, you can contact the New York Forest Owners Association (call 1-800-836-3566) or Catskill Forest Association (914) 586 - 3054.
- Before you work with a forester or a logger check their credentials and references. A professional forester is someone having a degree from a professional forestry program at a university. Many loggers are demonstrating

their professionalism by participating in the "Trained Logger Certification" program. Both foresters and loggers have many opportunities for continuing education classes. Remember, there are good and bad foresters and loggers.

- A written management plan offers many benefits. Your management plan should start with a clear statement that you help develop with your forester, about your management objectives.
- Spend time in the woods, learning about your property, and with others. Read material about forest management and become active with other forest owners. This is the fun part...make sure you enjoy yourself.