

Perspectives on forests and trees: a view from Vermont

In this research project, interviews and focus groups were conducted to investigate people's attitudes to, and experiences of, trees and woodlands in the state of Vermont. This small American state is 78% forested and its woods are famous for the colours of their autumn foliage. Respondents focused on forests and personal well-being, personal and community identity, conflict and confusion, and forest management. The research also explored key management issues with representatives of organisations that are interested and involved in forestry in the state. Key issues for these representatives revolved around forest management, land ownership and conservation issues.



*"We depend on trees for tourism;
without them the whole state is dead"*

Male, Lyndonville Discussion Group

Background

The main part of this research project was undertaken during a three-month secondment to the US Forest Service's Northeastern Research Station in July 2002. Background literature searches, arrangements for interviews and analysis of data were carried out both before and after the visit. Information from members of the public was collected in six locations in the state, chosen to represent the urban-rural continuum in Vermont.

Objectives

This research aimed to:

- explore, describe and examine the values that people hold for woodlands and trees in Vermont
- explore and examine forestry and environmental organisations' knowledge and experience of public interactions with forests and key forest and conservation management issues
- provide recommendations for policy development for state and federal government

Methods

- A qualitative methodology was used to explore the ways in which people talked about trees and woodlands in Vermont.
- Eleven interviews were undertaken with representatives from public, private and non-governmental bodies: Vermont Family Forests, US Forest Service, State Department of Forests, Parks and Recreation, Greenleaf Forestry, Forest Watch, Northern Forest Centre, Vermont Land Trust, Vermont Council on Rural Development and the National Community Forestry Centre.
- Individual interviews and small group discussions were undertaken in: Burlington, the biggest city in the state; the towns of Lyndonville and Craftsbury in north-eastern Vermont; Chittenden, a town close to the Green Mountain National Forest; the village of Waterbury; and Starksboro, a small community that was actively involved in developing indicators to determine the health of its local forest. A total of 40 members of the public were involved in these discussions.

Findings

Public perspectives

The forested and agricultural landscape was seen as an important part of people's quality of life both for those born in the state and those who had moved from other areas. Vermont was thought to have character brought about by its distinctive landscape, which was viewed as green and rural. The forests and certain tree species symbolised a particular identity for some of the respondents. Maples were seen as particularly significant for Vermont, especially sugar maple in the autumn. Respondents also discussed conflicts about the amount of designated wilderness and the extent of motorised sports (such as snowmobiling) within the state. Personal memories of using forests were important to people and often included specific memories from childhood.

Institutional perspectives

Discussion centred on the nature and purpose of land ownership, and this was related to a debate on the amount of land that should be publicly or privately

owned. This issue was linked to concern about how much forested land should be harvested or conserved. One approach of particular interest has been the creation of conservation easements. In these easements the state or a land trust buys the development rights to a piece of land for perpetuity. Through this protection, it is hoped that the traditional working landscapes of Vermont can be sustained. However, disagreements remain; one easement was set up in the north-east of the state that required a certain level of timber production and this caused controversy. There was debate about whether the timber production requirement would be enforceable in the future and what would happen if the company managing the land did not log the specified amount of timber outlined in the easement. This debate has not yet been resolved and it remains to be seen how easements may change or be adapted in the future.

Recommendations

In the light of this research it is recommended that managers and policy-makers should consider the following:

○ Public involvement

Respondents' attitudes regarding public land management differed from their attitudes to private land management: they expected to have greater input and involvement into how public lands are managed. Public meetings (which the Forest Service often holds) are not necessarily the best approach to use when engaging the public, as they can lead to conflict when different groups have restricted time to air their views. An effective participatory process needs to allow time for people's values to be articulated and discussed in relation to management issues and broader environmental concerns.

○ Connection to nature

The importance of the forests within the state and their impact on the respondents' quality of life was an important issue, as people felt that it added to their personal identity and well-being. Although many of the respondents used and enjoyed the forests, they worried about other people losing connection to the land through lack of access. Respondents emphasised the importance of creating opportunities for people to access and enjoy woods and green spaces near to where they live. Many also wanted children to have opportunities to access these spaces, thereby creating a childhood for them that reflected respondents' own memories.

Partners

Liz O'Brien, Forest Research; US Forest Service's Northeastern Research Station.

Funding / Support

Scottish Forestry Trust, Forestry Commission, Forest Research

For further information contact: liz.obrien@forestry.gsi.gov.uk

Reports and publications

O'Brien, L. (2003a). *Public and institutional perspectives on forests and trees: a view from Vermont*. Forestry Commission and The Scottish Forestry Trust, Edinburgh. <http://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/fr/INFD-5Z5EE5>

O'Brien, E. (2003b). Public and institutional perspectives on forests and trees: views from Vermont and England. *Scottish Forestry*, 57, 73–80.

O'Brien, L. (2006). A question of value: what do trees mean to people in Vermont? *Landscape Research*, 31, 257–275.