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Serving members and reaching others: The performance and social networks of a landowner cooperative

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ABSTRACT

Local forest landowner associations and broader peer-to-peer learning efforts have received attention–particularly in the United States of America–as ways to increase landowner engagement in forest planning and management. Unlike traditional technical assistance and outreach, knowledge is primarily shared among landowners as opposed to being derived from natural resource professionals. While potentially promising, few studies have investigated these approaches. Through a study of a landowner cooperative in Wisconsin, I report on a finding that considers both the effectiveness of a landowner cooperative in the Upper Midwest (USA) and the social network members rely on in decision-making. The former relies on an importance–performance analysis (IPA) of the services provided by the cooperative and the latter on an egocentric network analysis of members with an emphasis on strong and weak ties. Data were collected via a mail survey to which 146 members (81%) responded. The IPA indicates that the cooperative is providing services with which members are largely satisfied. The network analysis suggests that members, through strong ties, discuss their land with on average three others—primarily natural resource professionals (including cooperative staff), as opposed to other members, neighbors, and kin. However, by virtue of membership, they share weak ties with other members whom they see as trustworthy. The extent to which a network perspective might be applied to similar situations is discussed, as are conceptual implications and future directions. The main conclusion is that the emergence of local landowner associations and peer-to-peer learning requires research methods that better capture the social nature of these new directions.

1. Introduction

Local forest landowner associations have received increased attention in recent years—particularly in the United States of America (USA) (e.g., NRC, 1998; Blinn et al., 2007). Driving this interest is a seemingly intransigent and large portion of private landowners that lack active engagement in managing their woodlands, little or no connection to the forestry community, or both. For example, national statistics indicate that only a small portion of landowners in the USA has written management plans or some contact with a resource professional (Butler, 2008). The concern with lack of engagement and/or connection is twofold. First, landowners may miss opportunities to advance their personal objectives (e.g., recreation, aesthetics, hunting) or those of the broader public (e.g., timber supply, habitat conservation, parcelization, etc.). Second, they may make hasty or ill-advised decisions (e.g., high-grading) that might adversely affect them, their use of the land, or the ecological health of the land.

Landowner associations that take an active role in assisting members with forest planning and practice implementation are seen as a possible pathway to engage more landowners (NRC, 1998). In part, this perspective may be fueled by the prominence of cooperatives in Europe–particularly Scandinavia (Kittredge, 2003)–and by the emergence of several local landowner associations[1] in the USA (Blinn et al., 2007; Hull and Ashton, 2008). As context, landowner associations in the USA have traditionally focused on member education and informal information exchange, and tend to be organized at a statewide level (Washburn, 1998). Alternatively, the emergent local landowner associations provide services to member landowners (e.g., plan preparation, timber sale administration) that are more similar to those offered by associations in Europe than to those in the USA. It is unlikely that associations in the USA will evolve into anything like their European counterparts any time soon (Rickenbach et al., 2005), but they are an innovation in private forestry—particularly as a way to engage landowners. These associations connect with landowners in different ways, which, in turn allows them to reach more

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[1] While many of these emergent associations are organized as business cooperatives, not all of them have chosen this organizational form (Hull and Ashton, 2008; Jakes, 2006). For this reason, I have chosen the broader term "association," except when specifically referring to a cooperative. For this article, the important delineation is that these organizations focus more at the local level and tend to assist members (and perhaps others) with on-the-ground management.

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and/or different landowners than currently served by existing opportunities and programs offered through state forestry agencies, extension services, and timber supply interest (i.e., saw- and pulp mills) (Blinn et al. 2007; Hull and Ashton, 2008). Given this potential, federal and state resources (i.e., dollars, effort, etc.) as well as those from the not-for-profit sector (e.g., The Nature Conservancy, Community Forestry Resource Center, etc.) are being redirected toward local landowner associations and peer-to-peer educational models more broadly (Wolf and Hufnagl-Eichiner, 2007; Hujala and Tikkanen, 2008; Hull and Ashton, 2008). Related peer-to-peer models include master volunteer programs (e.g., Master Woodland Stewards; Woodland Owner Network, etc.) and community-based forestry initiatives (e.g., woodland/watershed councils) (Catanzaro, 2008).

This redirection–particularly toward local landowner associations–would appear to be premised on four assumptions.

1. Associations are well-functioning organizations that create value and/or benefits for members, and can stand the test of time.
2. Associations will influence members and their forest management activities toward outcomes that are consistent with public policy goals such as sustainable forest management.
3. Impacts will extend beyond the membership to neighbors, friends, and others—either directly through new members or indirectly through social networks.
4. Associations and similar peer-to-peer efforts can be at least as effective as existing policies (e.g., technical assistance, cost-share, etc.).

This article's intent is twofold. First, I report the findings of an evaluation of a local landowner cooperative that addresses assumptions #1 and #3. Second, I explore the implication of the findings toward understanding local landowner associations and the broader peer-to-peer learning arena.

1.1. Conceptual framework

The study described here is novel in that it seeks to both assess the effectiveness of an association in meeting member needs (i.e., assumption #1) and in determining the social ties that inform members' decision-making (i.e., assumption #3). Effectiveness is a fairly typical evaluation question (Patton, 2002), but, as measured here, suggests the use of social network analysis (SNA), which is specifically suited to the task of analyzing social ties. In the strictest sense, such studies are largely absent from previous landowner studies, but have a rich conceptual development in the social sciences (see e.g., Scott, 2000) and an emergent one in natural resources (Prell et al., 2009; Crona and Bodin, 2006). SNA is a suite of data collection and analysis techniques (Wasserman and Faust, 1994) that has been instrumental in advancing various social theories through an understanding of how relationships matter. The network perspective's contribution lies in its emphasis on the relationships among people as opposed to their individual characteristics (e.g., age attitudes, etc.). In general, the network perspective holds that one's network position is a robust indicator of behavior.

As an exploratory study, I do not focus on a particular theoretical or conceptual perspective to define the role of social networks in understanding local landowner associations. Instead, I apply one conceptual element of network studies, *strength of ties*, which has been highly influential on network concepts and associated theories (e.g., social capital and social learning) that might apply to associations and the broader peer-to-peer learning arena. Tie strength is a measure of the intensity of a particular relationship between two individuals (Wasserman and Faust, 1994). The power of this measure, though, lies in the simple dichotomy between relatively strong and relatively weak ties. The importance of strong ties is fairly obvious as we trust and rely on those closest to us for financial, informational, and moral support. Yet, weak ties can be equally important. Granovetter (1973), in his seminal paper "The Strength of Weak Ties," found that weak ties were important in acquiring new information that might be beneficial. For example, one is more likely to learn about a new job opportunity through acquaintances or friends of friends rather than close friends or colleagues. A basic premise of this argument is that strong ties tend to be between people who are similar (i.e., homophily; McPherson et al., 2001) and, thus, generally have similar informational resources. Hence, there is nothing "new" to share among strongly tied individuals, whereas weak ties allow individuals to access different social networks with "new" pools of information.

While focused on the ties between individuals, the concept of weak and strong ties has application to whole networks and social systems more broadly. For the former, one can imagine networks comprised of differing mixes of strong and weak ties, which in their measure yield both trust (i.e., bonding) and the ability to access/spread new ideas and resources (i.e., bridging) (Newman and Dale, 2005). As part of broader social inquiry and to varying degrees with other network metric (e.g., centrality, reachability, etc.), strong and weak ties have served important explanatory roles, most notably in social capital (see Portes, 1998), and within natural resource management specifically through adaptive management (e.g., Hahn et al., 2006). Through a focus on a single, but conceptually important metric, this article offers insights and potential future directions for a network perspective on private landowners and efforts to effect changes in their behaviors.

1.2. Study questions

Based on the intent and conceptual framework, this study centers on two research questions that reflect two of the assumptions outlined above.

1. *Is the cooperative a well-functioning organization in terms of effectively meeting members' needs?* This question relates directly to assumption #1: Forestry cooperatives have a poor track record in the USA. Therefore, it is important to identify useful metrics by which to assist associations and those who seek to support them assess and improve their potential viability. I focus on members' needs, as those are most central (but by no means sufficient) to a cooperative's success (Zeuli and Cropp, 2004; Rickenbach et al., 2005).
2. *From whom do members seek information when making land management decisions?* Starting an association redraws social boundaries and creates the opportunity for new interactions; a key premise of assumption #3. By understanding the networks among members and their conceptual implications, this study can assist landowners, resource professionals, and decision-makers better define the impact and potential of associations and peer-to-peer learning in ways that more traditional, non-relational metrics (e.g., number of members, etc.) cannot.

Assumptions #2 and #4 remain important and should be considered in future work, but were beyond the scope of this study.

2. Methods

2.1. Study context

Toward answering these two questions, I studied the Kickapoo Woods Cooperative (KWC), located on the Upper Midwest of the USA. It was incorporated in 1999 and had 180 members at the time of this study. It offered eight member services (Table 1); some which were free and others for which members paid[2]. The selection of the KWC was based on convenience and a mutual interest in learning about the membership, but the KWC might well be viewed as a success. It has been in constant (if not profitable) operation for over

[2] The cooperative still offers these services.