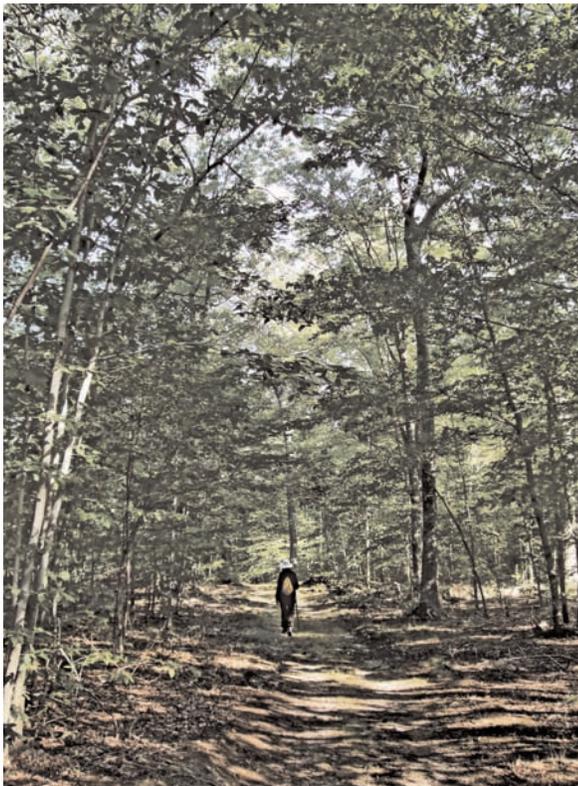


Engaging Wisconsin Woodland Owners in Creating Healthy Forests



“Learn About Your Land” classes, initiated by UW-Extension basin educators, successfully reached elusive woodland owners and engaged them in building forest management skills and understanding their woodland’s potential.



Situation

Sixteen million acres of forested landscape blanket Wisconsin, providing the state with scenic beauty, recreational opportunities, wildlife habitat, timber and an overall better quality of life. More than half of the 16 million forested acres belong to private, non-industrial landowners. Seventy-three percent of these privately owned parcels are relatively small—less than 50 acres.

Because so many acres of forestland are in private hands, woodland owners’ management practices—or lack of them—play a significant role in the health and stewardship of the state’s forests.

Reaching private woodland owners with educational programs on topics such as managing their land for multiple benefits, best practices for harvesting timber, controlling invasive species, planting and thinning trees and creating habitat for woodland wildlife, has proven to be difficult. Typically, programs designed to provide landowners with forest management information have not reached their intended audience.

Response

In 2006, a special effort was launched to reach “unengaged” woodland owners (those with limited or no contact with Department of Natural Resources foresters or other forestry professionals, no formal management plans and no membership in woodland organizations) through the “Learn About Your Land” class series.

University of Wisconsin-Extension basin educators provided leadership in building partnerships with Department of Natural Resources foresters and local nature centers to implement the classes, obtaining a grant from the Wisconsin Environmental Education Board in the process. The \$20,000 grant was used to launch the pilot “Learn About Your Land” classes in September 2006 in the Lakeshore and Sheboygan Basin areas.

The course content was designed to provide woodland owners with a solid foundation of forestry knowledge on which to build their management skills and to better understand the potential of their woodland properties. Instructors were professionals in woodland ecology, forest health and management, timber harvesting and related topics.

Announcements about the classes were sent to the homes of potential participants, who were identified through county property records. Registration was free and simple. Local nature centers—convenient to landowners in the area—provided the setting.

As an additional incentive, foresters and other natural resource professionals were available at the classes to give participants the chance to ask questions and discuss options.

Between September 2006 and November 2007, basin educators worked with Department of Natural Resources and nature center staff to conduct 15 classes at each of three county nature centers (Sheboygan, Calumet and Manitowoc counties.)

Attendance at these sessions totaled 852. In-class evaluations showed that the series had reached its target audience of “unengaged” woodland owners, with over 64 percent of participants saying they had not attended a tree/woodland event in the previous two years. Few attendees belonged to woodland owner organizations.

Evaluations also showed that an overwhelming majority of the woodland owners were highly satisfied with the classes and considered the information they received very useful. A post-class survey found that nearly 97 percent of respondents felt their knowledge and interest in managing their woodlands had increased.

Slightly more than a third contacted a forester after attending a class. Nearly 48 percent said they had put their new knowledge to work in activities such as harvesting, planting or thinning trees, improving wildlife habitat or building or maintaining roads. One participant reported converting seven acres of open land to woodland by planting 2,000 trees.

Outcomes

Organizers of the “Learn About Your Land” pilot project communicated effectively with previously hard-to-reach woodland owners and engaged their interest in forest management planning with the following results.

- UW-Extension educators and Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources staff gained important information about a previously unknown audience. In particular, analysis showed four unique subgroups in the woodland owner audience, each with different characteristics, needs and preferences for receiving information.
- Evaluation findings prompted state forestry leaders to discuss the characteristics of private woodland owners and to consider more effective ways to communicate with them in the future.
- Classes were immediately expanded to other parts of the state beginning in January 2008.
- Between January and March 2008, three two-hour classes were presented at Poynette and Barneveld that focused on trees, establishing a new forest and selectively cutting timber. Total class attendance was 155.
- Between February and May 2008, the UW-Extension and the Department of Natural Resources offered a series of seven classes for woodland owners in Wausau, Stevens Point, Wautoma, Shawano and Waupaca. Topics covered included tree identification, planting, enhancing habitat, food and shelter for woodland wildlife, planning timber harvesting and sales, and selecting trees for cutting. Total attendance was nearly 1,500.

• Feedback and reactions from participants at all sessions were positive. While evaluations of “Learn About Your Land” are still underway, future classes are scheduled for other parts of the state.

• “Learn About Your Land” classes provided a catalyst for the UW-Madison Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology, in partnership with UW-Extension, to develop a woodland owner database using GIS technology. This project is ongoing.

“Learn About Your Land” classes are now available via the Internet, making them even more accessible to woodland owners and forestry professionals.

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“Because of the classes, I had more knowledge and was better able to work with loggers, contracts, lawyers and my family. I was the point person for the timber sale...”

—Woodland owner/class participant

Photo by Jeffrey J. Strobel

