

Changing Landscapes

Land use planning curriculum for natural resource professionals

P rinciples, people, and policies

L and planning and pressures

A pproaches

N atural resource planning tools

P3: The Role of the Natural Resource Professional in Planning



Natural resource professionals can help citizens understand ecological processes.

Overview

This factsheet emphasizes the role of natural resource professionals in planning. It provides easy-to-understand suggestions on how to integrate their expertise into the process, address conflicts, and target messages while using the best available science.

The Need for Participation

Policymakers, elected officials, and nongovernmental organizations are increasingly requesting that natural resource professionals become involved in planning to address rapidly changing issues related to the environment. The primary role of resource professionals in the planning process is usually as a science-based advocate. However, there are other ways to effectively help. They can:

- Help citizens understand ecological processes
- Initiate communication with planners and developers
- Conduct environmental outreach
- Integrate stakeholders into natural resource decisionmaking

To advance the role of science in planning, it is critical that natural resource professionals effectively communicate with nonscientific audiences. While resource professionals generally understand the need for communicating scientific information to the public, they may not know when or how this should be done. They also need to be familiar with ways to include others in planning.

If resource professionals want to motivate, enable, and sustain public action, it is critical that they frame environmental issues in ways that communicate what is at stake for society and why the issues matter. Doing this helps the public better recognize the relevance of problems to their everyday lives and specific values. Framing issues provides common points of reference and meaning, and helps simplify complex interactions.



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Science-based Advocacy

The interrelationship of policy and science can be highly situational and may not be based solely on providing scientific knowledge to improve policy decisions. However, resource professionals acting as science-based advocates can call attention to relevant scientific information. They can ensure, to the extent possible, that policies and implementation are consistent with the best available science.

Resource professionals are familiar with using best management practices for managing ecosystems. Meyer and others (2010) have developed best management practices for advocacy that include:

- Accurately characterizing the best available, policy-relevant science
- Clearly and thoroughly presenting the argument
- Accurately characterizing scientific uncertainty
- Transparently representing the scientific basis for policy recommendations and explicitly acknowledging the values that influence these recommendations
- Avoiding overstatement and acknowledging when providing personal rather than professional opinions or recommendations
- Demonstrating a willingness to revise policy recommendations based upon new information

Although the natural resource professional has traditionally provided specialized knowledge during planning, there is a new trend emerging: integrating the expertise of natural resource professionals with that of other disciplines to create interdisciplinary collaboration and communication. Ecosystem stewardship is an example of an interdisciplinary framework that involves ongoing reassessment and involvement in the policy process as well as continuously interacting with stakeholders.

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Getting Involved

There are a number of ways that natural resource professionals can become involved. They need to be proactive and get involved early. They shouldn't wait to address an issue until it is in front of the Planning and Zoning Commission; at this point, it is usually too late.

Building relationships with policymakers, elected officials, stakeholders, and advocacy organizations provides an opportunity for ongoing communication and interaction unhindered by conflict. Becoming involved in the planning process early helps planners and others place environmental issues and concerns in perspective with other issues and desired planning goals and objectives. Natural resource professionals can work with governmental and citizen organizations, including:

Governmental Organizations

- Community and County Planning Staff
- Metropolitan and Regional Planning Organizations or Councils of Government
- Community Task Forces and Steering Committees
- Lake, Sewer, Watershed, or Levee Districts
- Parks and Recreation Departments

Citizen Organizations

- Audubon Society and other Outdoor-oriented Clubs
- Watershed Associations and Stream Teams
- Garden and Local Horticultural Clubs
- Community Recreation Organizations

Engaging the public has several benefits. It brings people together to solve problems, establishes communication between diverse groups, and helps people find a solution to those problems. When a diverse group of people is part of a decisionmaking process, it builds their sense of ownership in the solution and eases the implementation process.

Engagement can range from working with small local groups and projects to larger regional initiatives. Engaging a community can take a number of forms—working with planning staff to develop a natural resource inventory or, at a minimum, a tree inventory; providing input to lake districts and sewerage districts about the impacts of development on select natural resources; serving as a member on task forces or community boards; or working with citizen groups to protect and manage resources from rain gardens to natural areas.

Getting the Word Out

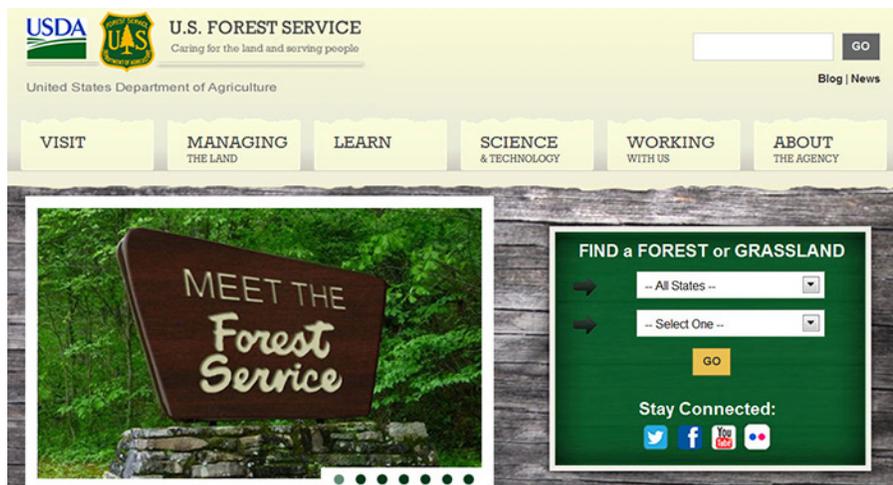
People learn about ecosystems and the environment from a variety of sources—television, the Internet, other media sources, science centers, and museums, among others. Effective communication strategies and education efforts use a combination of technologies and methods. This makes messages relevant, creates interest, provides resources, engages stakeholders, and maintains relationships. Communication efforts should be tailored to an audience's background, interests, and ability to assimilate information. If resource professionals do not have access to media specialists within their organizations to help get the word out, they will need to take the initiative to build relationships with media resources within their communities.

Given the high-tech nature of today's society, it is critical to use the Internet to inform a broader group of interested people. Most communities have a Web site that provides information about community events and links to important information. Resource professionals can provide content and links to natural resource sites to help communities get information out to people interested in the natural resources of their own community and/or region.

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Natural resource professionals can engage the public by working with small discussion groups.



The Web site for the Forest Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, provides a variety of links to natural-resource based information. (Photo: <http://www.fs.fed.us>)

Case Study – Forests on the Edge – Housing Development on America’s Private Forests

The goal of the *Forests on the Edge* project is twofold: 1) increase public understanding of the processes and thresholds associated with higher housing densities in private forests across watersheds, and 2) create new tools for strategic planning. Conversion of forest land to developed land is inevitable. However, local communities and States can target efforts to prevent or reduce conversion of the most valuable tracts to maintain functionally resilient and productive forest lands. The project is using an interdisciplinary team and geographic information system techniques to identify fourth-level watersheds that are projected to be impacted by development in the next 20 years.

For more information, go to <http://www.fs.fed.us/openspace/fote/index.html>.

Relevant Factsheets

P2 – Policies that Direct Natural Resource Planning – Provides an overview of regulations that affect natural resources.

L3 – How Planning is Put into Practice – Describes the fundamental elements of planning and why communities plan.

L4 – The Power of Collaboration in Community Planning – Provides additional resources to professionals on how they can affect planning.

L5 – Participation with Conflict in Mind – Provides recommendations on using participation and conflict resolution to facilitate proactive dialogue in planning.

A4 – Using Science to Substantiate Natural Resource Planning – Provides scientific information in support of policy recommendations.

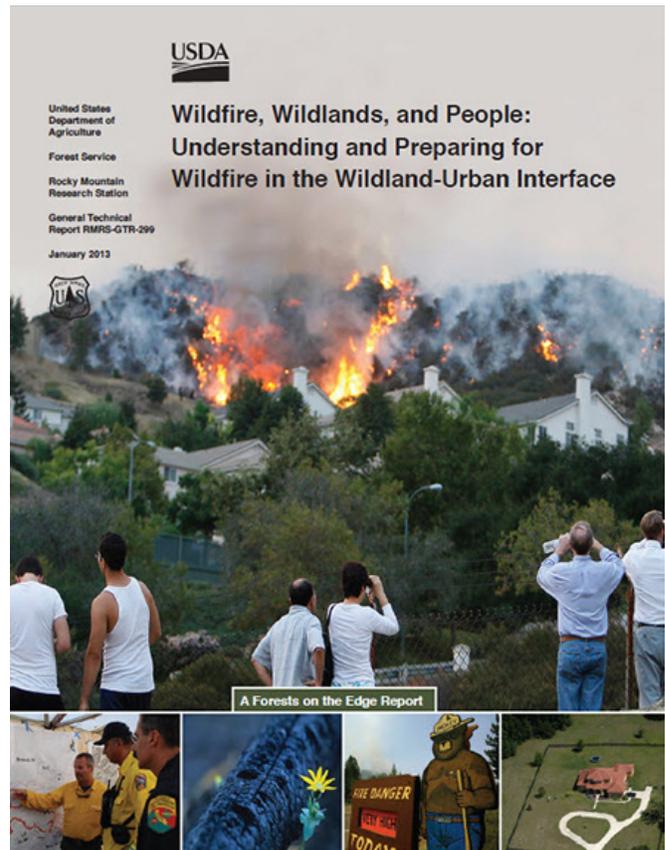
N4 – Nonregulatory Approaches to Natural Resource Conservation – Provides resources on nonregulatory methods, which are often easier to establish in a timelier manner than policies.

Resources

Groffman, Peter M.; Stylinski, Cathlyn; Nisbet, Matthew C.; [and others]. 2010. Restarting the conversation: challenges at the interface between ecology and society. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 8(6): 284–291.

Meyer, Judy L.; Frumhoff, Peter C.; Hamburg, Steven P.; de la Rosa, Carlos. 2010. Above the din but in the fray: environmental scientists as effective advocates. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 8(6): 299–305.

Pace, Michael L.; Hampton, Stephanie E.; Limburg, Karin E.; [and others]. 2010. Communicating with the public: opportunities and rewards for individual ecologists. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment*. 8(6): 292–298.



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