Functional Communities
A Tool for National Forest Planning

By Pamela Jakes, Thomas Fish, Deborah Carr, and Dale Blahna

The 175 units of the National Forest System are preparing to revise the forest plans that have guided their management decisions for more than a decade. The first round of national forest planning was criticized for not providing decisionmakers with enough social information (USDA-FS 1990a).

One team charged with critiquing the national forest plans reported, "We apparently provided the decision makers with reams of FORPLAN results and resource data but with very little information on the demographics, culture, or lifestyle of constituents..." (USDA-FS 1990b, p. 14).

Another team observed that on national forests where the planning process was successful, "The attention to people's needs (emotional, symbolic, and organizational, as well as economic and community needs) were given consideration along with the resource capabilities and commodity schedules" (USDA-FS 1990a, p. 13).

The concept of functional community—geographic areas in which people share perceptions of and relationships to forests and natural resources—has proved useful in gathering and organizing social information for forest planning. Although the following example is from the Chequamegon and Nicolet National Forests, the concept is applicable across all land management agencies.

Social Assessment
The authors identified functional communities as part of a social assessment for the Chequamegon and Nicolet National Forests in Wisconsin (Jakes et al. in press). In the USDA Forest Service, a social assessment is a "broad level or programmatic data collection and analysis process used to generate information about the social environment" (USDA-FS 1995, p. 2.2). The social assessment is not a decision document...
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One of the first challenges we faced was making the information useful to planners. The assessment needed to organize the nearly half-million people living on or near the Chequamegon-Nicolet into manageable units. It also needed to provide the planning team with as much information as time allowed about concerns regarding future forest management. Finally, the information needed to be linked to the landscape, showing the connection between where people live and their concerns.

We used two approaches to organizing information on northern Wisconsin. First, we looked at categorical groups—groups that have similar statistical or definitional characteristics (Flynn 1985). We used US Census data to describe the group of people who are residents (by age and education), and another group consisting of households (by income and type of housing).

Functional groups, our second approach, go beyond data and show people's behavior and their interactions with each other (Flynn 1985). They are created not by the analyst but by social conditions. For the Chequamegon-Nicolet social assessment, the social conditions of interest were residents' economic, political, community, and cultural ties to the area's natural resources. To define functional communities and see how people relate to and use forests, we relied on interviews.

Methods

We used a process referred to as analytical induction to develop functional communities for the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forests (Brandenburg and Carroll 1995). With analytical induction, researchers do not begin fieldwork with precisely defined hypotheses to be tested, but rather, go to the field in an attempt to make sense out of things they see and cannot predict in advance (Brandenburg et al. 1995). Although when we began our fieldwork we assumed that communities would coalesce around employment, our models were subject to change depending on what we heard and observed. The idea of occupational community is not new and has been found common in the western United States (Salaman 1974; Carroll and Lee 1990).

Given the time limitations, we concentrated on identifying communities in the immediate proximity of the two national forests. We made no attempt to identify communities outside this area or incorporate communities of interest represented by visitors and seasonal residents. We focused on assessing the noneconomic social aspects of communities; no economic analysis was done. A full discussion of our methodology can be found in Jakes et al. (in press).

Selecting key informants. We asked the five district rangers on the Chequamegon-Nicolet to identify “key informants” who would be able to discuss the relationship between the residents and the national forests. From the lists provided by the district rangers, we tried to interview at least four people in each ranger district—generally two Forest Service employees and two non-Forest Service employees. Although we were interested in the diverse views of residents in and around each ranger district, we did not try to find representatives of all interests.

Interviews. We interviewed 46 year-round residents during September and early October 1996. We met at mills, retail stores, campgrounds, and resorts, but most often we met at the local ranger station. We met during the day, over lunch, and after business hours.

Our first task was to have residents identify geographic areas that might be functional communities. We placed a piece of Mylar over a map of Wisconsin and asked them to look at the region with which they were most familiar and circle the areas where people use and relate to the forests and natural resources in similar ways.

We then asked questions developed to solicit perceptions of how they and their neighbors think about and use the Chequamegon and Nicolet National Forests and other nearby forests (Jakes et al. in press). It was not uncommon for people to fine-tune their maps, changing the boundaries to exclude some areas and include others.

Identifying functional communities When all the interviews were completed, we overlaid the sheets of Mylar and, taking into account the information from the interviews, drew boundaries for 15 Chequamegon-Nicolet functional communities. The boundaries are not sacrosanct but generally delineate areas where people share forest-related interests, relationships, and concerns. A significant part of the population ended up outside the functional communities we identified, but just as functional communities are not meant to be all-inclusive, so the boundaries do not indicate walls between groups of people. The shapes merely map the differences in the way people use and relate to the national forests.

Community profiles. Information from the interviews helped us write community profiles. Profiles include descriptions of the community as a whole, the community's relationship to forest resources and public lands, and the community's relationship to the national forests and perceptions of national forest policies and employees. A list of issues important to the informants completed the profile.

Findings

Rather than identifying communities by occupation, as we expected, the residents of northern Wisconsin identified communities by culture,
tradition, and leisure activities. Our informants believed that both new and long-time residents of our Chequamegon-Nicolet communities lived where they did because of the high quality of life. This quality of life depends on access to the North Woods, including its lakes and streams: being able to spend an evening driving all-terrain vehicles (ATV) or cross-country skiing, being able to hunt or fish just minutes from home, and having access to the experiences and resources of the Chequamegon and Nicolet National Forests. People in northern Wisconsin were defining themselves and their neighbors based on how they lived their lives, not by how they earned a living. The process used to identify functional communities revealed the issues that were important in different areas. For example, one resident of the Park Falls community characterized his home as the “fume capital of northern Wisconsin.” People in this area love their snowmobiles and ATVs, and any forest management decision affecting motorized recreation use would be of paramount interest. On the eastern edge of the region, in the Florence community, a resident labeled that area the “silent sport capital of Wisconsin” because many residents’ lives revolved around white-water recreational opportunities and activities. The residents of the Laona community were concerned about possible mining development and its potential impact on water quality.

Although each community was unique, several themes recurred. All the communities have experienced an influx of people (either seasonal or permanent residents) and were grappling with the accompanying development. Such growth is significant to national forest managers because it brings into the forest more and perhaps different people who will demand more and different benefits. As one resident observed, new residents “don’t understand the history and tradition of the community and how we benefit from good forest management.”

Many people complained about high property taxes and to a certain extent blamed them on the need to make up for income not being generated by public land. However, residents also accepted high taxes as the price of maintaining the high quality of life they valued—a quality of life directly tied to the national forests.

The issue of day-use fees came up often during discussions of taxes. Although fees are being charged on only one district of the Chequamegon-Nicolet, residents object because they believe they have paid for the management and use of national forests through their income and property taxes. They view day-use fees as an attempt to charge them a third time for access or services they’ve already paid for twice.

Despite complaints about the personal cost of having a national forest as a neighbor, there was no support for changing the ownership of these lands. Residents told us they wanted to keep public lands in public hands because the national forests provided access to resources that were quickly disappearing. They see lands that were once open to the public being locked away—for development that residents are unable to participate in because of the rising costs of forest and lakeshore property—and one person expressed anger about “out-of-state developers wanting to make a fast buck.” Another resident observed that “without the national forests we would see twice the development and a hedgepodge of land use.”

Almost everyone recognized that there would be some change in the way that their forests manage ATVs. Currently the Chequamegon’s trails and roads are open to ATVs, but the Nicolet is closed. People on the Chequamegon realize that they will see some restrictions on ATVs, and people on the Nicolet realize that some ATV use will become legal. One Nicolet resident told us that would be all right, “just so it isn’t wide open like on the Chequamegon.”

Many of our key informants expressed confusion and frustration over the forest planning process. They interpreted the harvest quantities and other outputs specified in the first forest plans as promises—promises that were broken when output targets weren’t met. Some residents didn’t understand that outputs had changed with changing conditions and assumptions. In some cases, when residents did understand the planning process, forest managers neglected to inform them of changing conditions, so changes in outputs appeared arbitrary.

Another issue was public involvement in forest planning. Many residents expressed interest in participating more fully, and one observed that “the key to successful management is going to be including community residents in the planning process.”

Finally, key informants recognized the importance of maintaining the health and productivity of forest ecosystems but did not see ecosystem health as an end in itself. The health and vitality of their northern Wisconsin communities depend on maintaining and improving ecosystem health. They want to see the social impacts of forest management decisions analyzed and discussed, but they are concerned about the balance between local and national priorities. We were asked, “Why do national concerns always override local issues or concerns?”

Discussion

The qualitative information collected through interviews and used to develop community profiles can be an important component of agencies’ public involvement. Information from interviews can add texture and depth to the discussion of programs and issues during “Friends of the Forest” meetings and other outreach efforts. Information from key informants helps round out the list of issues managers develop as part of the forest planning process and enables them to anticipate responses to changes in forest management. Finally, interviews are two-way streets, with opportunities not only for the interviewer to listen and learn, but also for the subject to ask about national forest management and use.

The importance of that last point—that interviews initiate dialogue between Forest Service man-
agers and residents—should not be overlooked. No one technique can resolve all the complexity and conflict involved in public forest management, but approaches that bring people together to talk with one another and learn from each other begin the process of building trusting relationships—a critical part of successful public participation (Barber 1981).

Improving the process. To better identify functional communities, researchers should spend time finding people to interview. A district ranger or other local land manager can provide a good initial list, but as we interviewed residents, we realized that there were others who could have helped us draw the community profiles. If we had had more time, we would have expanded our list of key informants using a snowballing technique (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981).

Identification of functional communities should precede forest plan revision. Information from community profiles would provide valuable input for the notice of intent, which identifies issues to be addressed in plan revision, and background for developing meeting process and content. Functional communities could also indicate sites for meetings.

The process we used to identify functional communities was totally ineffective in reaching the American Indians of northern Wisconsin, probably because our concept did not fit a Native world view. When we asked the few American Indians we were able to interview to define their communities, they identified areas that ran from Thunder Bay to Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, and down into southern Wisconsin, Minnesota, and even South Dakota. Their relationship to the land is determined by traditional hunting, fishing, and gathering, and the areas in which they practice these activities is "home"—whatever the distance. Incorporating American Indian perspectives into functional communities will take additional research.

Finally, followup efforts should assess the applicability of functional communities to forest planning to determine what parts of the community profiles are most useful and how functional communities are used. Chequamegon-Nicolet forest managers can use our report to help identify preliminary planning issues, potential stakeholders, communities of interest, and social and political hot spots. The social assessment also provides valuable baseline data for environmental impact statements. Improvements in identifying communities and developing community profiles will come when we have a better understanding of how managers use these assessments, and when managers have a better idea what might be possible in an analysis of functional communities.

Further applications. Besides its use in preparing notices of intent and public involvement processes, the concept of functional communities is applicable to other planning activities, particularly the development of Forest Service social impact analyses. These analyses are defined as "a component of the environmental analysis process in which social science information and methodology are used to evaluate or project how present programs or proposed actions may affect humans" (USDA-FS 1995, p. 2.2).

A social impact analysis begins with selecting the impacts or impact categories to be analyzed. Residents could develop impact categories that reflect the issues and concerns of their functional communities, and social impacts could be evaluated separately for each community; the analysis done for the Tongass National Forest plan revision is an example (USDA-FS 1996). Functional community focus groups could also help forest managers evaluate potential impacts and anticipate the response of each community to the plan alternatives.

The evidence from our social assessment effort indicates that identifying functional communities in and around national forests is the first step in building a constructive relationship between public land managers and their local communities—a step that can ultimately contribute to sustainable forestry and communities.

Literature Cited


Pamela Jakes (e-mail: pjakens@fed.us) is project leader, North Central Forest Experiment Station, St. Paul, MN 55108; Thomas Fish is research assistant, University of Minnesota, St. Paul; Deborah Carr is research social scientist, North Central Forest Experiment Station, East Lansing, Michigan; and Dale Blahna is associate professor, Utah State University, Logan.