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A National Perspective on Women Owning Woodlands (WOW) Networks

Abstract

This article provides a national overview of women owning woodlands (WOW) networks and the barriers and successes they encounter. Qualitative interview data with key network leaders were used for increasing understanding of how these networks operate. Network leaders were all connected professionally, and all successful WOW networks involved partnerships between universities and local or regional nonprofits and state agencies. WOW networks face recruitment challenges similar to those faced by woodland owner associations, but Extension efforts and peer-to-peer learning opportunities can lead to comfortable and welcoming environments in which women can learn more about their woodland management options.

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Introduction

In the United States, private families and individuals own 58% of the nation's forested land, and for 22% of private family or individual woodland ownership, a woman is the primary decision maker (Butler et al., 2016). Evidence has suggested that women will play a large role in the future of forests, making final (end of life) land use decisions that could lead to conservation or development (Catanzaro, Markowski-Lindsay, Millman, & Kittredge, 2014). Ownership objectives among women who purchase or inherit woodlands vary, ranging from privacy and aesthetic enjoyment to income from timber extraction (Butler et al., 2016).

Women have a woodland ownership context that may differ from that of men. Gender, as opposed to sex (i.e., male and female), was a term popularized in the 1960s to signify that cultural and social forces may differentiate the lived experiences of men and women (Stoller, 1968). Some of the differences relevant to the study reported here include the association of masculinity with the forestry profession and the unlikelihood of women having participated in practical forestry work, as noted in research conducted in Scandinavian countries (e.g., Lidestav & Ekstrom, 2000). If forestry is a male-dominated field in a professional, personal, and social sense, it stands to reason that women may lack experience and knowledge with woodland ownership and management.

Forestry outreach education has been a vehicle for aiding all landowners, regardless of gender, in obtaining and interpreting information about best practices for managing their land (Johnson, Creighton, & Norland, 2007).

Forestry Extension has been linked with an increase in landowners' obtaining management plans (Munsell & Germain 2004); however, Gootee, Blatner, Baumgartner, Carroll, and Weber (2010) found that landowners might prefer not to receive information about their woodlands from professional sources. Research has suggested that the peer-to-peer learning approach is effective for dissemination of woodland management information (e.g., Kittredge, Rickenbach, Knoot, Snellings, & Erazo, 2013; Kueper, Sagor, Blinn, & Becker, 2013; Ma, Kittredge, & Catanzaro, 2012). Furthermore, the use of digital communication tools in providing information in state Extension programs is increasing (Sagor, Kueper, Blinn, & Becker, 2014).

One such tool is the Women Owning Woodlands (WOW) website (<http://www.womenowningwoodlands.net>), a joint venture of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service and the National Woodland Owners Association. This website provides regional and local networks and program personnel with the ability to advertise events, share information, and provide points of contact to women who own woodlands nationwide. The website depends on volunteers who provide the content. Redmore and Tynon (2010) supported the notion that women-centric knowledge is important for women woodland owners in Oregon. Beyond their study, however, little research has focused specifically on the WOW concept and approach.

In this article, I provide an overview of WOW networks nationally and evaluate the range of activities and networks associated with the national WOW website.

Methods

Using a qualitative case study approach (Patton, 2005) to better understand the many regional and local WOW networks in the United States, I conducted nine semistructured interviews with representatives from regions identified on the national WOW website. Those regions were the Northeast, the Mid-Atlantic, the Southeast, the Northwest, the Intermountain West, and the Midwest (no representative was found for the Southwest). For variety, I selected representatives that included those active in WOW efforts (in addition to the person responsible for starting the national WOW website); those having roles in academic institutions, Extension, and state agencies; and landowners. Hereafter, the interview respondents will be referred to as "network leaders."

Each interview was conducted by telephone, lasted approximately 30–45 min, and covered topics such as individual network inception, perspectives on female landowners, past or current WOW network programming, and funding and logistical contexts (Table 1). Each interview was recorded, and interview transcripts were coded through the use of in vivo and thematic coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Interrater reliability was assessed through a process of checking both in vivo and thematic coding schemes with two additional researchers who were not part of the original investigation. In addition to conducting interviews, I performed a thorough review of the web presence of WOW networks by state, focusing on woodland owner organizations more generally, state agencies, and nonprofit groups.

Table 1.
Interview Questions

Interview question

Can you describe for me when and how your network began?

Can you tell me how you came

Follow-up question(s)

What is your current role?

to be involved in a woodland owners network?

Tell me about your perspective on female family forest owners (FFFOs).

Do you think there are commonalities among FFFOs? Misperceptions? Are FFFOs different from male family forest owners?

How do you and others find FFFOs to join the network?

What do you perceive are the benefits and barriers for FFFOs to join a network?

Do most network participants know a member before joining or hear about the network another way?

What events are held via your network?

What was the total attendance? How much interest was there? Were there other measurable outcomes? Do the same individuals attend multiple events?

What other networks (woodland or otherwise) are connected to you (or your network)?

Are these connections personal or professional?

Do you consider your network currently active?

How so? Why not? How does one join the network? What does that mean?

Describe your network's financial capacity.

What are the difficulties in running your network?

What are your available resources for running your network and/or hosting events? What does success look like for you?

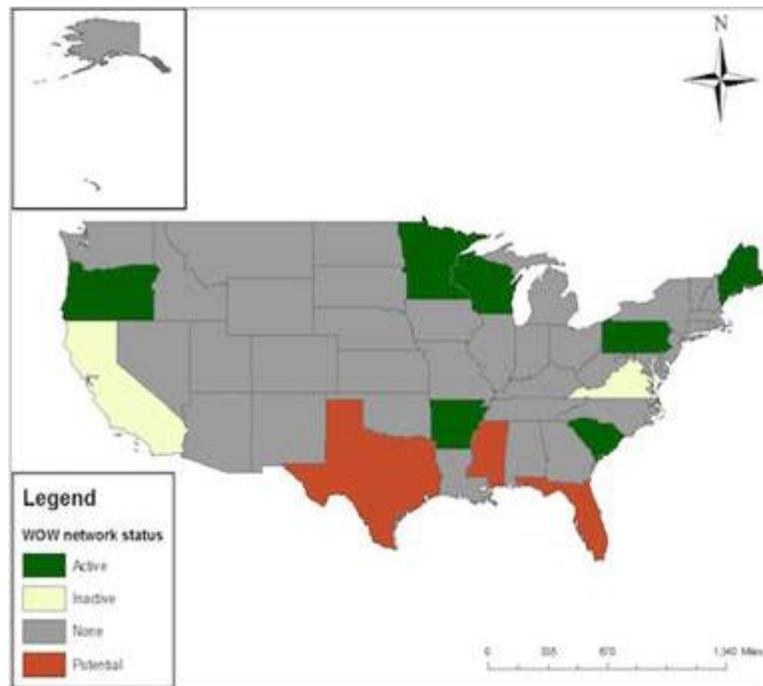
What has led to your major successes?

Results

Although network leaders provide general support for the national WOW website and associated regional and local WOW efforts, only seven states had active networks (Figure 1). Two states had had active networks that were inactive at the time of the study, and three states had potential for future active networks (Figure 1). A state was characterized as having potential for future active networks if there were interested women forest owners or there was interest on the part of university or nongovernmental leaders who would start a network if they had the resources.

Figure 1.

States with Active, Inactive, and Potential Women Owning Woodlands (WOW) Networks



Across the nine network leaders, over 45 different non-WOW organizations were named as being connected to a local or regional WOW network, with an average of four organization connections per network.

The key themes that emerged from the interviews were

- the need for WOW networks,
- barriers and constraints,
- recipes for success,
- professional networks, and
- event and network logistics.

The need for WOW networks was articulated in several ways. Many network leaders had received phone calls or emails from women landowners with questions about their land and land management and, thus, felt a need was not being met by traditional woodland owner programming. In addition, network leaders had noticed that although women attend woodland organization or Extension programming, they often say "I'm with him," referring to a partner or spouse. They noted that women do not seem to feel empowered to ask questions or to take an active role in the management of woodlands they co-own. Furthermore, respondents agreed that women would outlive their male counterparts, a fact that is also supported by general census data (Arias, 2015). Network leaders also suggested that women are motivated conservationists, loathe taking leadership roles, are often self-deprecating about their knowledge, are responsible for financial aspects of land management, and are unwilling to ask questions in male-dominated environments.

The barriers and constraints to successful WOW networks are similar to those of woodland owner Extension programming more generally. Recruitment is difficult, and event attendance is often poor. Several network leaders identified geographic isolation as a barrier to participation, and some emphasized that finding new

landowners who are not already plugged into existing woodland owner networks is challenging. The most commonly cited barriers to success for WOW networks related to financial and monetary concerns. Either women recruits were not willing to pay to attend events, or funding declined after a grant ended or a network leader left his or her position. Events need to be self-sustaining, but often network leaders cannot collect money at the events due to the nature of the agency (e.g., Extension or government). Finally, women often face other constraints, such as child rearing, that leave even less time for participation in WOW network activities.

Recipes for success reported by interviewees often involved actual recipes, among other socially oriented components. One network leader discussed a successful event at which a participant stated, "The meeting was too short, and you didn't give us the recipe for the cheeseballs." Overall, informal events were well received, as women typically wanted a hybrid of social contact and professional information. Often, even notable introverts started talking. Although learning was the primary motivation for both network leaders and participants, social connections were described as equally important for participants and for the long-term success of a WOW network.

Success was measured in other ways as well. In one success story, for example, a landowner returned home following an event and wrote a book on the story of her land. The recipe for success in this case involved prompting the initial motivation to gather with others, providing information requested by participants, and facilitating future gatherings either digitally via an electronic mailing list or in person via continued sponsored events. Additionally, interviewees had had several experiences with mother-daughter pairs attending events and commenting that they felt WOW networks provided opportunities for connecting with family over the stewardship of their woodlands.

Professional networks seemed to drive much of the continued existence of WOW networks. All network leaders were professionals in forestry or natural resources. Every network leader knew the other leaders through meetings, conferences, workshops, or other professional circumstances. At these events, they shared information about key success factors such as partnering with other local organizations, including land trusts, research centers, and state-level woodland owner organizations. All network leaders noted that although information for women landowners could (or should) be disseminated on a national scale (e.g., through womenowningwoodlands.net), making a difference happens locally. Making this difference is a matter of going beyond providing information to promoting active and engaged learning and helping women build relationships with other woodland owners and professionals. Recruiting women for events and networks also relies on personal networks.

The theme of *event and network logistics* involved several subthemes. First, advertising for WOW events took place in newsletters and other existing outreach vehicles, such as American Tree Farm communication materials. Often, local and regional events were spread by word of mouth. Some dedicated network leaders sent flyers to every church in the county or attended homemaker clubs. At the time of the study, the national WOW website was helping with resources and events but not actually connecting people to one another.

Second, the events themselves ranged from weekend-long retreats with overnights (formal learning events) to short presentations on topics such as legacy planning, conservation easements, tree identification, and woodland management basics. Nearly every event involved a meal and began with icebreakers and games that gave women a space to exchange stories. Events were typically seasonal; active networks held four events per year on average.

Financial resources came from in-kind time provided by Extension professionals and small seed grants from agencies such as the USDA Forest Service, Natural Resource Conservation Service, and USDA National Institute of Food and Agriculture. All national WOW website contributors are volunteers, and Extension seemed to be the home for most personnel and efforts in support of regional and local WOW networks. However, many interviewees observed that this diffuse network of small regional leaders may not work unless institutional support is available to back those involved in the leadership roles.

Finally, the ideal scope for WOW networks seemed to be whatever a network's participants identified as their community. State boundaries can be relevant but are often not as important as road or mountain barriers. The majority of network leaders commented that women prefer a drive time of less than an hour, although this geographic scope is less efficient for the network leader unless it is a smaller state or county.

Discussion

WOW networks exist throughout the United States but are hampered by slow recruitment and unreliable funding sources. Existing networks and programs typically leverage the personal and professional connections of network leaders, and the most successful networks collaborate closely with a regional or local nonprofit or state agency partner to provide staff, infrastructure, and continuity. These partners can assist with advertising, recruiting, and maintaining records of network participants in ways similar to those used with other woodland owner organizations across the country. Interview participants were a mix of Extension and other outreach professionals and female landowners. They were fairly representative of WOW network leaders nationally as they came from a range of geographic locations and affiliations. However, the results are applicable only to WOW networks and not to woodland owner organizations more broadly.

Redmore and Tynon (2010) found that women who participated in the WOW program in Oregon were also involved in other natural resource-based organizations, suggesting that network participants are active and engaged in their woodlands. However, more in-depth qualitative research is needed to better understand the differences between women who join a WOW network and those who do not. Another area of interest for future research is the potential overlap between women farmers/ranchers and women woodland owners. Several network leaders posited that women farmers do not always identify as woodland owners but may have substantial portions of land covered by trees. Furthermore, evidence exists to suggest that strategies are needed for women farmers (Barbercheck et al., 2009; Rivera & Corning, 1990). It is possible that an Extension model that combines agricultural and forestry programming could reach a broader audience and leverage existing capacity for hosting events.

Peer-to-peer learning models may provide foundations for comfortable and welcoming environments in which women can learn about woodland management. Extension staff can pair professionals with women woodland owners and curate forestry knowledge while peer-to-peer networks provide the social and cultural environment for sharing experiences and extend the capacity of Extension programs (Kueper, Sagor, & Becker, 2013). The national WOW website is an excellent portal and resource for women landowners, but its success is largely dependent on the regional and local efforts that connect women on a meaningful scale. The WOW website could offer customizable space for local efforts, providing local relevance while capturing the efficiency and consistency of a national web platform.

Women woodland owners are a growing and important forest ownership group, and it will be increasingly important for Extension staff to reach them. The interview data reported here suggest that tapping into existing

social networks and gatherings (e.g., religious groups or extramural clubs) could be an effective way to reach women woodland owners. To attract new participants, it may be useful to advertise the social nature of events, to convey that events are largely women-dominated, and to rely on already interested women to spread the message. Finally, the events themselves should provide comfortable, informal environments in which everyone can ask questions and varying knowledge and skill levels are accepted.

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