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Scandinavian Forest Economics
No. 44, 2012



Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the
Scandinavian Society of Forest Economics
Hyytiälä, Finland, May 2012

Anne Toppinen, Heimo Karppinen & Kati Kleemola (eds.)

Communities of Practice in non-industrial private forestry

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Increasing uses of forests, such as bioenergy and biodiversity protection, are challenging family forest owners' knowledge acquisition and decision making in Finland and elsewhere. Forest owners are also becoming economically less dependent and spatially estranged from their forest properties. Simultaneously, publicly funded forestry guidance calls for improved efficiency. Advisory practices need new ways to reach forest owners and to encourage them for forestry decisions that are conformable to their forest use goals. A potential model to diversify and renew guidance are Communities of Practice (CoPs). In CoPs forest owners, possibly together with experts, gather around an interesting issue, share their experiences and learn from each other. Learning from peers who are or have been in similar situations could be a relevant supplement to expert-driven guidance. This study aims to find out if CoPs exist in family forestry in Finland. To be able to identify them we search for the basic elements of CoPs: domain, community and practice. Additionally, we study the possibilities to strengthen or even create new CoPs. The data were gathered via seven focus group interviews, reaching 44 interviewees. Four groups consisted of local forestry professionals and one group consisted of national forestry extension developers. In addition, there were two different forest owner groups. Discussions in the groups considered communication between forest owners and professionals as well as the communication between owners. In addition, contexts, benefits and drawbacks of learning from the experiences of 'similar others' were discussed. Discussions were taped and transcribed. Qualitative content analysis will reveal the existing CoP-type features within private forestry in Finland. Particularly, which issues are dealt with and how, what kind of information is exchanged and who are involved? Furthermore, the promising elements and barriers of CoPs, as well as the possible role of forestry professionals in supporting CoPs, will be discussed.

Keywords: experiential knowledge, focus group interviews, guidance, mentors, peer-to-peer learning