

Communications and Outreach: How to Keep the “Community” in Community Forestry

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Everybody talks about the importance of communication, but nobody does it as well as they should.

— Marc von der Gonna, McBride

Communication is vital to the success of your community forest initiative. Although recognizing that good communication with your community is important, it's quite another matter to achieve this goal. Perhaps the most important thing to remember is that communication is an ongoing task—it is never completed.

Community participation is the cornerstone of community forestry. Your organizational structure and board should include various community interests. However, a successful forestry initiative creates additional opportunities for all community members to participate in decision making. Although the need for communication is continuous, sometimes extra effort will be required. This is particularly important during the start-up phase of your community forest. Everyone must be aware of the vision for the community forest. It is equally important that expectations are tempered to avoid later disappointments.

So how can we measure success in communication? It is not sufficient to say that, “We put the information out there, and I’m not sure why the message isn’t getting through.” Communication is successful only when the message you sent reaches its target audience, and the target audience receives and understands the same message that you intended to communicate.

PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT AND PARTICIPATION

Communication is a two-way street. Good communication creates a forum for community involvement and participation. The underlying principles are important to recognize:

- **Transparency** – All operations and decisions must be fully transparent. The community forest is accountable to the community; therefore, the community must have access to, and understand, the policies and the reasons for decisions made by the organization. “Behind closed doors—back room deals” are not acceptable.
- **Meaningful Involvement** – The public must be consulted and (or) involved in the community forest in a meaningful way. The seeking of public input must be real and genuine. When seeking feedback or participation, clearly show the effect it has had or the result to which it led.