

Out of Sight, Out of Mind?

*A Study of Absentee Woodland Owners in Pennsylvania,
Colorado, and North Carolina*

KEY TAKEAWAYS

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Individuals and families own nearly one third of the forestland in the United States, and absentees make up a substantial portion of these ownerships. The most recent National Woodland Owner Survey—which defines absentee owners as individuals or families living at least one mile from their woodlands—suggests that they comprise 38% of family forest ownerships and 44% of all family forestland in the United States¹. Despite their prevalence among family forest owners, little is known about how their orientations toward the land may differ from those of resident landowners.

The goal of SFFI is to gain and disseminate information about family forest owners throughout the United States in order to help organizations be more strategic and effective in their outreach. Focus groups across the country have contributed to an increased understanding of the behaviors and needs of different types of landowners². The purpose of this study is to complement these efforts by examining the motivations, interests, and behaviors of absentee woodland owners. The key takeaways from the study can provide guidance for messages and programs designed to reach and persuade these audiences.

Landowners were classified as absentee woodland owners and qualified for the study if they owned between 10 and 999 acres of woodlands, if their primary residences were located in another county or at least 30 miles from their woodlands, and if they contributed to decisions regarding their land. Twenty-six absentee landowners with woodlands in Pennsylvania, Colorado, or North Carolina participated in the study. Each participant took part in a qualitative interview lasting approximately 15 to 25 minutes, during which time the landowner was asked to comment on a range of subjects related to the ownership, use, care, and future of his or her woodland.

The key findings from these interviews are described in this summary report. For greater detail, or for more information about the study, please see the full report located on the Sustaining Family Forests Initiative website (sffi.yale.edu) under Resources.

- 1. Absentee woodland owners are diverse in terms of their motivations for owning their land, their land use practices, and their attitudes about land ownership. Nonetheless, with the exception of landowners interviewed in North Carolina, absentee owners tend to regard their land as an important *escape* from daily life.**

Absentee landowners own and use their land in a variety of ways, making it very difficult to generalize about ways in which this group of landowners values, utilizes, or thinks about the land. Despite differences, many participants were united by a consideration of their land as an escape—as a special place of great symbolic and sentimental value. Many described the hectic nature of daily

¹ Unpublished preliminary data from the 2013 National Woodland Owner Survey, made available by Brett Butler, SFFI partner and contributor, USDA Forest Service, Northern Research Station.

² Findings from the latest focus group study of Woodland Retreat Owners and Working the Land Owners in North Carolina, Pennsylvania, and Colorado can be found in the report, “Motivating Woodland Owners to Take Action” (2014), available on the SFFI webpage: <http://sffi.yale.edu/about-sffi/resources>.

living and the prevalence of technology and digital entertainment. To them, the land provided a way to reconnect with nature and to deepen their relationships with family and friends. With their land located at a distance from their homes, absentee owners are able to achieve not only mental but *physical* separation from their daily stresses in a way that resident landowners may not. Woven into their narratives were expressions of nostalgia, good feeling, appreciation, and reverence.

2. Uninvolved does not mean unimportant. Even owners who visit their land infrequently are often proud to own it, especially when the land provides benefits to family, friends, or neighbors.

Landowners may not feel very involved with their land, but this does mean that they see the land is unimportant. Many participants emphasized the value of the land to their families and neighbors—who may use the land for hunting, recreation, or as a source of fuel wood. Participants also expressed satisfaction in maintaining a connection to the family legacy. While they may not visit their land frequently—or at all—many maintain close connections to the land through their families and friends.

3. Many absentee owners rely on local family members or neighbors to help care for their land, or to alert them of issues regarding their land.

Many view this cooperative effort as mutually beneficial. Landowners can stay abreast of issues or activities on their land, while trusted residents nearby derive recreational, aesthetic, or resource-related benefits from the woods. Overall, participants expressed a sense of responsibility for the land, even if they differed in what this responsibility entailed. At the very least, staying aware of activities on their land, with the help of family members and neighbors, was important to them.

4. Many absentee owners view their land as an investment, but with varying degrees of importance.

North Carolina landowners commonly emphasized the importance of the financial benefits of their land. Many grew timber as an important investment for themselves and for their children. Absentee owners in others states tended to place less importance on the financial benefits of their land, but several were pleased with their lands' appreciated values. To many owners, the financial benefits had grown more important as they spent less time actively visiting and recreating on the land.

5. Ignorance is bliss? For a variety of reasons, many absentee landowners have not actively sought help or information about caring for their woods. Many—but not all—also express few concerns or worries about their woods.

Absentee owners express a variety of reasons for choosing not to seek help or information about their land from foresters or land management professionals. They may feel it is best to “let nature take its course,” or they may feel as though they have enough expertise to manage the land properly. To some owners, the forest simply isn't a priority. Others perceive that foresters only care about timber, or that natural forces—such as drought stress or invasive specie—are beyond foresters' control. Finally, some landowners have never thought about managing their woods, some

do not feel they have the time to seek information, and some are interested but unsure about where to start.

6. Most absentee landowners who *do* seek help – or when asked where they *would* seek help – mention local government services and extension agencies.

The decision to seek help from local government agencies or extension agencies suggests that many absentee owners trust these organizations. Nevertheless, the infrequency with which absentee owners visit their land presents challenges for organizations trying reach these owners through the traditional methods of mailings and phone calls.

7. Legacy plays an important role in both land acquisition and land planning among absentee woodland owners.

The connection to both past and future generations was a central motivation for absentee owners to acquire, keep, and pass down land. This motivation was consistent for absentee owners across regions. The vast majority of participants inherited their land, received the land from a family member as a gift, bought the land from a family member, or bought their land because of its connection to the family. Likewise, most of the landowners intended to pass the land down to a family member, and about half have completed some form of formal estate planning.

Implications for Outreach and Increased Absentee Landowner Engagement

Collectively, these characteristics present both challenges and opportunities for organizations seeking to reach absentee landowners and increase their engagement in the care and management of their woodlands. One of the many challenges for land managers or forest professionals is that a majority of absentee owners are unaware of or skeptical about the programs that address their needs and concerns. Another is that absentee owners simply may not think of themselves as forest landowners during much of the time that they are away from their land, and may instead identify with those interests and activities that command more of their time. Most of the participants in the study, for example, were more than 65 years of age, and many expressed a preoccupation with other concerns, such as their health or their families. They may be difficult to reach through traditional channels, such as mailings and phone calls, as many spend only brief periods of time visiting the land.

Many older absentee owners also do not feel inclined to make major decisions or start projects on their land. A number of participants in the study wished to let their children, the inheritors, make the next decisions about how they would use and care for the forest. This result suggests that an important goal of future research may be to learn more about the next generation of forest landowners. How do they feel about inheriting woodland? In what ways do they value the land? And what needs and concerns do they have regarding woodland ownership and care?

Despite these challenges, insights from this study also suggest a number of opportunities for targeting absentee landowners. For one, absentee owners tend to have deep, sentimental attachments to their land. Despite their self-expressed lack of involvement, many still strongly value the benefits that their land provides to family members and friends. Many also express great pride in owning land that once belonged to their ancestors, or that was once a part of their childhood

home. This emotional connection to the land and appreciation for the family legacy suggest that successful outreach strategies might appeal to this sense of pride and responsibility to encourage good stewardship for future generations. The increased importance of the financial benefits of their land—relative to the aesthetic or recreational benefits—may also open opportunities for outreach. Effective strategies may emphasize the financial rewards of the woodland management, perhaps for their retirement or for their families.