

8.2 Selecting Metrics and Collecting Data

Your evaluation methodology—i.e., the metrics and indicators you collect and how you collect them—is determined by what you want to know ([see Section 8.1: Approaching Evaluation with a Learning Mindset](#)), the channels and materials you’re using to get the word out ([see Section 7.2: Planning Your Outreach Effort](#)), and what you are asking your audience to do ([see Section 2.2: From Project Goals to Landowner Actions](#)).

EVALUATING LANDOWNER ACTIONS (AND REASONS FOR ACTING)

Your learning questions help direct your focus. In the most basic evaluations, learning questions are often concentrated on your outreach process and initial outcomes. In these cases, you would probably want to track what you did (e.g., How many mailers did you send out?) and how the landowners reacted to that (e.g., Did landowners call you in response to your mailer?).

Further along in your process, your learning questions may be more focused on landowners’ progress along the Ladder of Engagement. Conservation and stewardship behaviors often involve a series of preparatory steps that can be tracked. For example, if your landscape goal is “healthy forests through active forest management,” you can track interim landowner actions such as: landowners’ requests for more information about active management, attendance at “how to” events, or signing up for cost-share in anticipation of taking action. If you did a good job of ensuring the desired landowner actions were specific, measurable, and time bound ([see Section 2.3: Choosing SMART Objectives](#)), it will be easier for you to track them.

If you are working through a partnership in which someone else is responsible for engaging with landowners at the next step of the Ladder of Engagement, you will need to coordinate with them to make assessments or be satisfied with collecting data that is publicly available ([see Section 3.4: Managing the Partnership, subsection: Evaluating Shared Efforts](#)). For example, in some states, you can access public information related to the number of people enrolled in cost-share programs, stewardship plans written, or thinning harvests completed.

At the next level of complexity, you may want to know more about what is behind landowners’ decisions and responses, so you can improve your outreach the next time around. This requires going beyond counting response rates and instead, connecting with responders and non-responders through surveys, one-on-one interviews, or focus groups. Through any of these methods, you can gain more information about why someone responded (or did not), including their main motivations or barriers to taking action.

GETTING INSIGHTS FROM YOUR AUDIENCE

Surveys are good for collecting quantitative data about what people have done or what they know, and answering questions such as: How many acres are being managed for invasive plants? How many people know about cost-share opportunities? etc.

One-on-one interviews provide richer stories and insights that help you understand why people think or act in certain ways. They can answer questions such as: Why do people own forested land? How do landowners feel about prescribed fire? Why did landowners not attend a meeting to which they were invited? etc.

Focus groups allow you to understand people’s thoughts and actions, but they also capture the discourse between landowners. While this can influence an individual landowners’ perspective, the discussion can be useful when you want to understand how the exchange of information will shape the collective opinion on an issue.

With any method, the more people you capture data from, the greater certainty you have that the findings are representative. However, collecting large quantities of data isn’t always practical, and there are still benefits from asking a few landowners to share their perspectives, as long as you understand the limitations of the data. Your evaluation doesn’t have to be perfect or totally comprehensive to be informative and useful.

EVALUATING DISSEMINATION CHANNELS

Many important learning questions revolve around the effectiveness of different channels to get the word out to landowners. Targeted channels with direct response mechanisms provide the simplest opportunity to evaluate channel effectiveness. You can easily track who you send mailers to and who sends back your reply card, or who attends your talk and who comes up afterward to request additional information. Broadcast channels, such as billboards or newspaper ads, with unknown direct impressions are more difficult to assess, particularly if your channels overlap in time and geographic reach.

EVALUATING PROJECT IMPACT

When thinking about measuring the landscape impact of your work, it's important to remember that changing people's behavior takes time, and it takes even longer for human actions to translate into measurable environmental impacts. The complete impact of your outreach may not be apparent for several years, or it may be subsumed by factors beyond your control. However, if you truly believe in the work you are doing and the landscape goals you are working to achieve, you must find ways to assess the impact of your work. Here are some that others have found useful:

- Partner with other organizations to gather landscape data or identify proxy measures that help you see the bigger picture. For example, in some regions, the Audubon Society enlists volunteers to do annual bird counts, which allows it to compare populations before and after management actions.
- Use GIS imagery to review information about land cover and previous management activities. Are you able to assess any trends over time or compare between regions that did and didn't receive your intervention?
- Use data collected by other organizations, including government agencies or your local colleges and universities. In some cases, you might even be able to work with your local educational institution to track relevant ecosystem impacts.

If you aren't seeing the landscape impacts that you expected, you will need to figure out what is causing the gap between the landowner actions you are

If you used multiple channels or messages for your outreach, it is often useful to vary their use over time or geography, so that differences in response rates can be tied back to a channel's reach and effectiveness. To get clearer data, you can also directly ask the respondents how they heard about you, or what made them reach out to you. By combining this information with the cost of using a particular channel, you can assess your return on investment and decide whether you think it would be a good idea to use particular channels or messages again.

pursuing and the landscape outcome. These are big, complicated questions, and you may not always have good information to answer them decisively. But it is important to use available data to have these discussions, because they have important implications for your program. Here are some examples of ways to think about closing the gap between actions and landscape outcomes:

- You may determine that you're not yet seeing an impact on the landscape because not enough landowners have taken the desired actions. That means you need to push harder to reach and convince more (and different) landowners.
- You may realize that landowners are not taking meaningful actions or aren't doing them in the most impactful way. You then have to change the focus of your outreach to get landowners to the "right" actions.
- You may determine that the actions aren't being done in the right places. This may mean that you need a different outreach strategy to target the appropriate geography and ensure the message is clear about where the actions should take place.
- Finally, maybe you are having an impact on the landscape, but that impact is being negated by a new and different threat. For example, you may be successfully preventing agricultural runoff, but the water quality in the stream may be affected by a new streamside factory. That determination affirms the value of your work, but also points to the need for a new effort to directly target industrial or zoning practices in the region.