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## ***Forest Story Cards, a Visual Survey Tool***

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**Abstract:** A visual survey tool for initiating dialogue about forests with adults and youth, *Forest Story Cards*, is described. The cards include 52 selected photographs related to forests, a wild card, and instructions. Field-testing by natural resource professionals, Extension educators, and forestry volunteers indicate the photographic cards help individuals communicate and make associations about their life experiences, concerns, and hopes for their own forests and for forests in general. Visual survey techniques such as *Forest Story Cards* hold promise for use in other educational situations when addressing issues and topics about which the individuals involved lack shared background or experience.

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### **Background**

Natural resource professionals, Extension educators, and volunteers often encounter the challenge of working with individuals unfamiliar with forestry concepts and terminology. At times, confusion arises when clarity and understanding are essential. Traditional methods for generating discussion or gathering information on forestry topics from forest landowners or the public include surveys, interviews, and field visits. However, the need for better tools to foster interactive dialogue and understanding with diverse and sensitive audiences is long standing (Elmendorf & Luloff, 2001; White, Sasser, Bogren, & Morgan, 2009). One new tool, *Forest Story Cards*, developed by the author, offers unique opportunities via a visual survey technique.

Visual surveys have been used in a variety of ways, most recently for gathering information about urban landscapes, building design preferences, perceptions on climate change, and spiritual issues (Local Government Commission, 2008; Nicholson-Cole, 2005; Sierra Business Council, 2008; United States Department of Transportation, 2008 & New Life Resources, 2008). Visual surveys can take several forms. They may involve a large number of images that a person studies or rates for communicating their thoughts or preferences (A. Nelessen Associates, 1996; Hudson, Harrison, & Koelsch, 2006), or simply present a few images that require the choice of one to answer a question. Visual surveys can be displayed on computers (Nicholson-Cole, 2005) or conducted with hand-held photographs.

Regardless of the format, the images help people make associations and communicate. People perceive the images through the grid of their own experiences and knowledge, and then use the images to describe their preferences, feelings, or ideas (New Life Resources, 2008; White, Sasser, Bogren, & Morgan, 2009).

## Methods

A set of *Forest Story Cards* includes 52 photographic images selected from the following categories (number of photos): forest management (14), water resources (6), forest products (8), hunting (5), wildlife (6), recreation (6), and intergenerational/youth photos (6) (Figure 1). The categories represent key interests of forest landowners and the public, and topics of educational importance. Along with the images, the following detailed directions spell out how a facilitator should use the cards, and what questions to ask.

**Figure 1.**

*Forest Story Cards* Consist of 52 Photographic Images of Forestry Topics Representing Seven Different Categories



### **Forest Story Cards—Directions**

1. Prepare: Look through the 52 *Forest Story Cards*, and read the set's questions card. Consider how you would answer each question. Familiarity with the images and questions will enable you to share and listen better when you sit down to have a "live" dialogue with someone else. The green wild card is included to allow participants the opportunity to add an idea or topic not represented in the photos.
2. Introduce: Initiate a *Forest Story Card* dialogue geared to your audience. Adults who own forestland might need only a simple explanation about how the cards are designed to open a discussion. Adults (and youth) who do not own forestland might benefit by knowing that you are interested in exploring what they like about and how they relate to forests.
3. Implement: After handing the participant(s) a full card set, ask the three questions that are appropriate for the person(s) you are working with. Ask the questions one-at-a-time, and let each participant choose three cards that represent his or her answer. Tell them to explain their choices and listen carefully to their answers before moving to the next question. All 52 cards should be considered for each question, do not remove any cards between questions.
4. Record: Take notes on responses, and write down the ID numbers of the cards a person chooses. This will facilitate follow-up discussion and help you remember each unique story.

## ***Forest Story Cards—Questions***

For Forestland Owners:

1. Which 3 images best describe your forestland property?
2. Which 3 images depict the things that concern you most about your property?
3. Which 3 images represent what you most wish or hope for about your property now or in the future?

For Adults (Forest and/or Non-Forestland Owners):

1. Which 3 images best describe your experience or interaction with forests as a child?
2. Which 3 images best describe what you think about forests today?
3. Which 3 images represent your hopes and intentions about forests for the future?

For Children (adjust wording as appropriate for age):

1. Which 3 pictures show what you like best about forests?
2. Which 3 pictures show something that people need from the forest?
3. Which 3 pictures show something you would like to learn more about in the forest?

**Figure 2.**

An Individual Looks Over the Full Set of *Forest Story Cards*, Picks Three Cards That Best Answer Each Question, and Then Explains His Selection



During summer 2007, *Forest Story Cards* were demonstrated with 145 individuals. Most were forest landowners, natural resources professionals, or high school students (Figure 2). Then, in September 2007, a self-selected group of seven Pennsylvania Forest Stewards (master forest volunteers), nine Pennsylvania Bureau of Forestry Service Foresters, and three Penn State Cooperative Extension Educators were recruited to field-test the cards themselves with landowners, adults, and youth. Semi-structured telephone surveys with these 19 field-testers, conducted in November 2007, yielded valuable information and insights about the usefulness of the cards.

## Results & Conclusions

The telephone survey yielded general findings about the *Forest Story Cards*. All agreed that the cards are an effective tool for initiating dialogue about forests with adults and youth. However, the field testers reported that the cards should be numbered and that fewer images would be easier to use. Further, the field-testers reported that when the cards were used with individuals who had many things in common, they received similar responses for the same questions. This gave a sense of credibility and reliability to the visual survey approach. On average, it took each person 30 minutes to complete the survey.

The field-tests by natural resource professionals, Extension educators, and forestry volunteers indicated the photographic cards helped individuals communicate and make associations about their life experiences, concerns, and hopes for their own forests and for forests in general. Important, individuals were able to do this in their own language, without feeling self-conscious or knowing forestry terminology. Visual survey techniques such as *Forest Story Cards* may hold promise for use in other educational situations when addressing issues and topics about which the individuals involved lack shared background or experience.

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