

**Investigating Communication Strategies to Support Implementation of the
American Woodcock Conservation Plan**

Communications Strategy

Submitted by
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and
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Executive Summary

The Wildlife Management Institute, with funding assistance from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Webless Migratory Game Bird Research Program, contracted with D.J. Case & Associates to investigate communication strategies to integrate private landowner habitat management interests and capacities into programs designed to implement the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan*. Specifically, this project was designed to identify critical audiences, test key messages and document optimal delivery mechanisms for owners of small woodlands in the 11 states that are part of Bird Conservation Regions 14 and 28 (ME, MA, CT, VT, NH, NY, PA, OH, MD, VA, and WV).

Investigators used the following approach to develop this *Communications Strategy*.

1. Literature Review — collected and reviewed pertinent literature regarding private, non-industrial woodland owners and management of their forested lands.
2. Interviews — identified and interviewed 30 natural resource professionals who engage in early successional habitat management and outreach on private lands, to learn about their efforts, messages, audiences, and assessment of such efforts.
3. Focus Groups — conducted two separate sets of focus groups in New Hampshire, New York, and Pennsylvania, to determine the fundamental reasons why landowners might choose to either actively manage their land for early successional forest habitat or not, and to test the appeal of potential messages that might be used in a communications campaign.
4. NWOS Survey Analysis — reviewed results of the *National Woodland Owner Survey* for small woodland owners in BCRs 14 and 28, to determine their understanding of and attitudes toward forest ownership and management. Investigators also compared demographics of and results from survey participants with participants in Phase II Focus Groups, to determine whether results and insights obtained in focus groups could be applied to the broader population.

Based on this research, five target audiences were identified, with objectives for each:

1. Private, non-industrial woodland owners of 10-100 acres in BCRs 14 and 28
Objective: Create and maintain early successional habitat on their lands.
2. Conservation professionals with direct landowner contact
Objective: Help woodland owners create and maintain young forest habitat.
3. Other Conservation professionals
Objective: Allow and help woodland owners (both public and private) create and maintain young forest habitat.

4. Residents of forested communities
Objective: Allow creation and maintenance of early successional habitat on public and private lands.
5. Hunters, especially woodcock and grouse hunters
Objective: Advocate for and support creation and maintenance of early successional habitat on public and private lands.

Broad strategies for achieving these objectives with each target audience were also identified, along with messaging developed based on what these audiences said was important to them.

Three specific actions are recommended for the woodcock conservation community:

1. Comprehensive Web Site
Design and develop a comprehensive Web site that provides the information and resources needed by each of the target audiences. Segment the site so the various sections can be customized to each target audience. Early successional management is a complex topic, and a well-built Web site affords the opportunity to tell the full story in nested fashion, so people can access as much or as little information as they need.
2. Develop “Five-County Pilot Areas”
Create detailed pilot communications campaigns to increase young forest habitat management on private lands in one or more limited areas (five counties within one state, perhaps). There is too much variability (habitat, programs, social norms, etc.) across the range of the American woodcock to effectively implement a single communications campaign. Each of these pilot areas should be large enough to show impacts, but small enough so a reasonable amount of communications can be delivered and assessed in a meaningful manner. These pilot area campaigns should be customized to local landowners, ecology, assistance programs and wood markets. If these pilot campaigns show positive results, expand them to encompass broader areas.
3. Large-Scale Partnerships
Broad-scale communication efforts to landowners across large geographical regions to support young forest habitat for woodcock conservation is not strategically justifiable. That is, there are not enough landowners interested in woodcock conservation to make such a strategy succeed. However, there are other organizations also interested in young forest management, though not necessarily interested in woodcock conservation. Deer, grouse, turkeys, golden-winged warblers and a wide array of other wildlife and plants are dependent on young forests, just like woodcock. Engaging these groups will bring a much larger support base to bear on the issue.

Recognize that not all early successional management efforts will benefit woodcock. For instance, no amount of young forest on arid, upland sites will attract or hold woodcock. But partnerships can create synergy of effort for all partners, and help create informed consent for young forest management with the broader public.

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Introduction

The draft *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* (2008) established a goal of seeking full recovery of American woodcock populations to 1970 levels. To achieve this, the Plan identified the need to add 3.2 million acres of early successional habitat to existing levels in Bird Conservation Region (BCR) 14 (Atlantic Northern Forest). In BCR 28 (Appalachian Mountains), the recovery goal requires 3.0 million additional acres of early successional habitat. To achieve these goals, management on private lands to increase such habitat is critical.

The Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service have begun implementation of the draft *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* through a linked set of six strategies focused initially on BCR 14:

1. Develop Best Management Practices (BMPs) for American woodcock in diverse habitat types.
2. Implement and test BMPs on selected public and private land demonstration areas that reflect the diversity of habitat types available for woodcock.
3. Develop monitoring protocols for woodcock population response to site specific activities and include both measures of abundance and woodcock vital rates.
4. Use monitoring protocols to monitor the population response of woodcock to habitat management.
5. Create case histories for each demonstration area that showcase habitat management BMPs and the response of woodcock populations.
6. Use modern marketing techniques to determine effective outreach strategies to private landowners with BMPs, demonstration areas and case histories as key instructional tools. Techniques will include identification of primary audiences, evaluation of impediments, construction of key messages, development of effective outreach tools and responsive monitoring strategies.

The *Northern Forest Woodcock Initiative* is a linked set of studies and projects to define an effective management system to achieve the goals of the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan*. Ongoing studies are developing BMPs and testing how well BMPs meet metapopulation characteristics. Future studies will create monitoring protocols that are sensitive to site management and will demonstrate population response to habitat improvement. The long range strategy of the Initiative is to build a base of knowledge and then export the approach and lessons learned to other BCRs in the range of woodcock.

This communications project focused on strategy #6 identified above—modern marketing techniques.

The Project

The goal of this project was to “Investigate communication strategies to integrate private landowner habitat management interests and capacities into programs designed to implement the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* through identification of critical audiences, testing of key messages and documentation of optimal delivery mechanisms.”

The work described here is focused specifically on owners of small (10–100 acre) woodlands in the 11 states that are part of BCRs 14 and 28 (ME, MA, CT, VT, NH, NY, PA, OH, MD, VA, and WV). This project was not designed to address communication needs of large landowners, industrial landowners, or public lands managers. However, the work is designed to provide foundational insights, approaches and communications strategies that may be applicable in other areas.

This work is a project of the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) and was funded in part by a grant from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service’s Webless Migratory Game Bird Research Program.

WMI contracted with D.J. Case & Associates (DJ Case) to conduct the investigation and develop a communications strategy centered on increasing management of woodcock habitat on private land.

Communications Team

Project team members were identified by the WMI and DJ Case with input from Woodcock Task Force members and others.

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Approach

DJ Case and other communications team members used the following approach to develop this communications strategy. Reports that present the full results of each of these efforts are available under separate cover.

1. **Literature Review** (*Annotated Bibliography for Investigating Communication Strategies to Support Implementation of the North American Woodcock Conservation Plan Project*) — collected and reviewed pertinent literature regarding private, non-industrial woodland owners and management of their forested lands.
2. **Interviews** (*Summary of Semi-Structured Interviews with Natural Resource Professionals*) — identified and interviewed 30 natural resource professionals who engage in early successional habitat management and outreach on private lands, to learn about their efforts, messages, audiences, and assessment of such efforts.
3. **Focus Groups**
 - a. Phase I (*Summary of Focus Group Meetings with Private Landowners*) — conducted four focus groups (one in NH, one in NY, and two in PA) with private, non-industrial woodland owners to determine the fundamental reasons why they might choose to either actively manage their land for early successional forest habitat or not, and to test the appeal of potential messages that might be used in a communications and outreach campaign aimed at increasing the acreage of private lands being managed for early successional forest habitat.
 - b. Phase II (*Message Testing Focus Group Meetings with Private Landowners*) — conducted an additional set of three focus groups (two in NY and one in PA) to test communication vehicles (images, messages, tag lines, and print ads) that might be used to encourage private landowner participation in early successional habitat management, and to compare and contrast the characteristics of Phase I focus group participants with those of this Phase II focus group work.
4. **NWOS Survey Analysis** (*Analysis of National Woodland Owner Survey Data for Bird Conservation Regions 14 and 28*) — reviewed results of the *National Woodland Owner Survey* for small woodland owners in BCRs 14 and 28, to determine their understanding of and attitudes toward forest ownership and management, and other natural resource conservation issues. Investigators also compared demographics of and results from survey participants with participants in Phase II focus groups, to determine to what degree focus group participants were “representative” of the broader woodland owner population, and whether results and insights obtained in focus groups could be applied to the broader population.

Review of Findings

Following are brief descriptions of the primary findings from each of the techniques described previously (see individual reports for more details and source information).

LITERATURE REVIEW

- Total forest area has remained relatively constant in the Northeast, but early-successional forest has declined. Fragmentation of forests into ever smaller ownerships has caused reduction in forest management options.
- Most disturbance-dependent species, especially birds, are declining throughout the region.
- Sixty-one percent of family forest owners in the U.S. own less than 10 acres of forest land, but 53% of the family forest land is owned by people with 100 or more acres.
- Most family forest owners own their forest land for multiple reasons, most commonly: beauty/scenery, to pass land on to heirs, privacy, nature protection, and part of home/cabin. Few indicate financial motivations.
- Compared to the general population, there are a greater proportion of family forest owners who are older, white, male, more educated, and wealthier.
- A key to increasing landowner participation in forest management programs is to promote the numerous social benefits that private forests produce, including clean water and air, biodiversity, lumber/wood fiber, wildlife for consumptive and non-consumptive uses, recreation and a scenic backdrop for a rural tourism industry.
- Environmental protection is not necessarily incompatible with forest management. It is possible to maintain privacy and scenery while harvesting.
- Appearance plays a major role in how land is appreciated and used by people. Of all management actions, clear cutting generally has the greatest negative visual impact, especially if large amounts of slash are visible.
- Significant segments of landowners and the general public believe that clear cutting should be banned.
- Helping people understand the purposes of forest management practices can help increase their tolerance of practices such as clear cutting.
- Most family forest owners do not have written management plans, and few have sought professional advice from a forester or utilized a public assistance program for forest management (owners of larger tracts are more likely to seek assistance).
- There may be substantial regional differences with respect to the propensity to use forestry services, attitudes toward regulation, and reasons for owning forestland.
- The sheer numbers of forest landowners complicates the task of designing programs to encourage them to adopt early successional habitat management, and their high turnover, diverse objectives, and varied participation presents additional barriers.
- The probability of program adoption is higher when management focuses on amenities, such as wildlife habitat, compared to timber harvests. Most non-industrial private forestland owners want to see a demonstration area before deciding whether to participate.

- Most family forestland owners appear interested in protecting their land from development, but few have conservation easements on their land.
- Researchers were able to segment NWOS respondents into four groups in terms of their interest and engagement in land management.
 - Model owners—already exhibit behavior consistent with good land stewardship and sustainable use (but not necessarily early successional habitat management).
 - Prime prospects—aren't currently engaged in land stewardship activities but are likely to take it up.
 - Potential defectors—currently engaging in land stewardship activities but are likely to quit because of lack of interest or other barriers.
 - Write-offs—exhibit low levels of engagement in land management and low levels of interest in doing so.

Communication efforts targeted to the first three groups (with separate messages and media for each) could yield good results in encouraging more early successional habitat management efforts among private woodland owners.

INTERVIEWS

- Interviewees represented state agencies, federal agencies, and non-governmental organizations and had been employed in their current positions for an average of seven years. Most (77%) interviewees contributed directly to outreach associated with early successional habitat and its management, and restricted their activities to a single state, though 23% had regional responsibilities.
- The outreach activities most commonly used were individual consultations, presentations, providing technical assistance, and participating in workshops. Private landowners and natural resource professionals were the primary audiences for these outreach activities. Objectives for outreach activities most commonly were related to wildlife habitat management, educating landowners and early successional habitat management.
- Four key messages were most often delivered by interviewees to their audiences: 1) management and wildlife populations are linked, 2) wildlife and habitats are linked, 3) specific “how to” advice, and 4) landowners have responsibilities and opportunities.
- Nearly two-thirds of the interviewees indicated that they worked with at least five partner organizations in their early successional habitat efforts.
- Only one-third of interviewees had any kind of formal evaluation built into their program/efforts. The evaluation efforts identified were generally limited to simple outputs, such as numbers of landowners enrolled or numbers of acres treated.
- The barriers to early successional habitat management on private lands that were most often perceived by interviewees included: 1) negative perceptions associated with cutting trees and 2) costs associated with creating and maintaining young forest habitats.
- The opportunities that were most commonly perceived were education and outreach (these were listed by interviewees twice as often as any other). The other opportunity commonly mentioned was funding.

- Most interviewees (73%) indicated they had produced outreach materials related to early successional habitat and/or wildlife for use with private landowners.

FOCUS GROUPS – PHASE I

- Most focus group participants indicated their parcels of land were owned individually or jointly. Nearly half had owned their parcel more than 20 years, and more than half lived on or within one mile of their parcels. Most (80%) indicated they were the primary forest management decision maker for their parcels.
- More than half indicated that their woodland parcel was less than 100 acres in size and almost a quarter indicated that their parcels were 100–199 acres in size. Most said their parcels were at least 50% wooded.
- Focus group participants said beauty was the most important reason for owning their wooded parcel; three reasons ranked second—to protect the land, to be close to nature and to provide wildlife habitat. The reason ranked least important was to cultivate/collect non-timber forest products.
- Nearly three-fourths of participants had participated in some kind of cost-share program on their land, the most common being the Wildlife Habitat Incentive Program (WHIP) through the USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service.
- About a fifth of participants indicated they currently had an easement on their parcel.
- Most participants had harvested trees on their parcels, most commonly for firewood and saw logs.
- The sources of forest management information most commonly consulted with were state foresters (79%) and Extension foresters (64%).
- Focus group participants were asked to rank the appeal of eight potential messages for use in a communications and outreach campaign to encourage private landowners to manage or create early successional forest habitat on their land. The two messages ranked highest by focus group participants were:
 - “A diversity of wildlife requires a diversity of habitats”
 - “Early successional forest habitat has greatly decreased in [location], and so have the dozens of wildlife species dependent on this habitat.”

FOCUS GROUPS – PHASE II

- Half of focus group participants had owned their parcel more than 20 years, while about a third had owned it less than 10 years. Two-thirds lived either on or within one mile of their parcels. Almost two-thirds of participants said they were the primary forest management decision makers for their parcels.
- A majority of participants stated their woodland parcels were > 50 acres in size, while about a quarter had parcels of 100–199 acres.
- Focus group participants ranked “to enjoy beauty or scenery” as the most important reason for owning their woodland parcels. Second in importance was “to protect nature and biodiversity” and third was “for privacy.” The reason ranked least important was “to cultivate/collect non-timber forest products.”

- Only 15% of participants had participated in any kind of cost-share program on their land or had a written management or stewardship plan for their parcels.
- Only 6% of participants had any kind of conservation easement.
- All participants had engaged in one or more management activities on their parcels. Almost three-quarters of focus group participants harvested trees on their parcels, mostly for saw logs.
- About a third of participants had received advice or information about their woodland parcels. The two sources most often consulted by participants included state Department of Natural Resources (DNR) employees and private consultants.
- Participants ranked the usefulness of 12 sources for information about woodland management. Sources rated highest included talking with a forester or other natural resources professional; newsletters, magazines or newspapers; publications, books or pamphlets; and talking with other woodland owners. A blog for woodland owners was ranked as the least useful of the sources.
- Participants were asked to rate the appeal of six images, six messages, seven tag lines and five print ads.
 - The image with the highest average appeal was that of a stand of mature, deciduous trees; the least appealing image, which scored in the “low appeal” range, was of a clearcut.
 - The message which participants gave the greatest average appeal score to was “A diversity of wildlife requires a diversity of habitats;” the least appealing message was “Shrubby habitat helps to preserve privacy.”
 - Participants rated the tag line “Do right by the land” as the most appealing. The tag line which rated least appealing was “Forever young....”.
 - The five print ads which were rated by focus group participants all received “medium appeal” scores.
- Participants were less familiar than Phase I focus group participants with natural resource professionals and programs, and the language of natural resource management and conservation. For example, they did not know what was meant by a “species of greatest conservation need” and wondered what it meant for landowners. There was also disbelief regarding the message about a decrease in young forest habitat and the animals dependent on it.

NATIONAL WOODLAND OWNER SURVEY ANALYSIS (RESPONDENTS FROM BCRS 14 & 28)

- The average age in both BCRs was ≥ 55 .
- About 83–85% of respondents were male.
- Most acquired woodland parcels through purchase.
- 73% of owners lived within 1 mile of their woodland parcel.
- Less than 10% of owners in both BCRs had written management plans.
- Beauty or scenery was the top reason for owning woodland, followed by “privacy,” “part of home,” and “protect nature and biodiversity.”

- Top three reasons for conducting management on their property in past five years were: “private recreation,” “post land,” and “road/trail maintenance.”
- Top three channels through which survey respondents said they could be reached regarding forest management issues were: “publications,” “talk with natural resources professionals,” and “newsletters, etc.”
- NWOS respondents in BCRs 14 and 28 were similar to Phase II focus group participants in composition, motivations, and preferences for advisors and communication channels.
- Notable differences between NWOS respondents and Phase II focus group participants:
 - Focus group participants demonstrated a greater propensity to engage in timber harvest and other land management activities.
 - Focus group participants were more likely to have a written management or stewardship plan, hold a conservation easement on their properties, and have participated in a cost-share program to manage their woodlands.
- Overall, results from our comparison suggest that insights gained from the Phase II focus groups should be broadly applicable in communicating about and promoting young forest habitat management to many private woodland owners in BCRs 14 and 28.

Guiding Principles

The following guiding principles are based on results described above, and should be taken into account during the planning and implementation of communication efforts regarding development of early successional forest management for woodcock habitat in BCRs 14 and 28. The list is numbered for ease of discussion—the numbers do not indicate priority order.

1. Communication efforts should be directed to a broader audience than just “woodcock fans.” Efforts can focus on a single ecosystem or habitat type (early successional forest), but should cover all species—both animals and plants—that benefit from or require young forest habitat for survival. Specific target audiences (see below) should receive specific messages, but the overall campaign should not be limited to any single target audience. Support for woodcock conservation alone probably is not broad or deep enough to achieve habitat goals, but support for other plants and animals of young forest habitats can assist tremendously.
2. Communication efforts should focus on the fact that young forest habitat (early successional management) is necessary for the survival of a host of declining species of wildlife and plants. Next to beauty/scenery, the highest rated reason for owning woodland property for most landowners was protecting nature or biodiversity. A simple description of the ecology of early successional habitat will be compelling for many landowners.
3. Many private woodland owners have negative perceptions about how early successional forest management (especially clear cutting) will make the land look. Most bought their land for beauty or scenery, and they are concerned that heavy

cutting will create an eyesore, or that young forest won't be as picturesque as mature forest. It will be important to communicate to them the management options (techniques, spacing, timing) that will address their concerns.

4. Active communications efforts to encourage private landowners to establish and maintain young forests on their lands must be conducted forever. Young forests are always growing into old forests, and even if the lofty habitat goals of the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* are reached, they will not be maintained “automatically.” It will require continual and considerable effort to communicate the benefits of young forest management to landowners and their heirs.
5. Most woodland landowners have harvested trees on their property, most often for firewood or saw logs. This suggests that they are not opposed to harvest per se; however, asking them to implement a clear cut is very different from asking them to cut some firewood or have a selective cut. They will need to understand how early successional management can fit with their other objectives.
6. For a large majority of woodland owners in our target audience, financial return is not a primary motivating factor for owning their lands. However, the financial implications of implementing early successional management (lack of sufficient return, poor timing of return, etc.) might be a significant obstacle to them changing the way they view this management regime.
7. Many woodland landowners do not “speak the language” of natural resources conservation. Many have limited or erroneous understanding of even the most basic ecological concepts—not to mention forest management techniques and programs. It is critical that the conservation community begin with very basic, non-technical, “non-jargon” approaches to communicate the benefits of early successional management with this audience.
8. Many landowners are willing to meet with experts. Nearly one in five NWOS survey respondents had sought forest management advice in the past five years, and most indicated the best way to communicate with them was through a natural resources expert. State agency natural resources staff, extension experts, and private consultants were sources most often sought for advice and deemed most credible.
9. Face-to-face meetings are preferred for delivering key messages to target audiences, but there are far too many small woodland landowners (between 10 and 100 acres) to be reached this way. Reaching this diverse and far-flung audience will require use of “extensive” communication techniques such as Internet, publications, and media.
10. There is a need for more and better evaluation of outreach efforts. Currently, very little is known about what methods are effective at getting landowners to adopt early successional management on their lands.

Target Audiences

This *Communications Strategy* for helping to achieve the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* is targeted at the following audiences:

1. Private, non-industrial woodland owners of 10-100 acres in BCRs 14 and 28
These are the “end users”—the people who are prime candidates to implement young forest habitat management on their lands. This communications strategy is focused specifically on the owners of small parcels (other efforts are targeting large parcel owners).
2. Conservation professionals with direct landowner contact
These are people who have direct contact with small parcel owners as part of their normal operations/activities. They could be agency or extension staff, members of conservation organizations that encourage young forest management, etc.
3. Other conservation professionals
These are people who have potential contact with end users, and/or whose agencies/organizations have programs or efforts that encourage young forest management.
4. Residents of forested communities
These are people who live in or near communities that have significant forested acreages (or lands that could be managed as young forest habitat).
5. Hunters, especially woodcock and grouse hunters
These are people with a vested interest in young forest habitat because of the positive impacts such habitat has on the species they like to pursue. In particular, there is a segment of this audience that has a real passion for taking action to further their hunting and conservation interests.

Objectives and Strategies

Following is the objective for each target audience, along with the recommended broad strategy for achieving it.

1. **Private, non-industrial woodland owners of 10-100 acres in BCRs 14 and 28**

Objective: Create and maintain early successional habitat on their lands.

Strategy: Because there are so many landowners in this target audience, and because their holdings are relatively small, it is not likely that natural resources agencies and their partners will be able to have direct, face-to-face contact (“intensive methods”) with enough of them to achieve the overall habitat objectives. Therefore, “extensive methods” (indirect or less personal contact) will need to be developed, delivered and evaluated. A comprehensive Web site should be a major part of this strategy. This Web site should have sections specifically targeted to the target audiences. Direct mail and/or direct e-mail could be used to encourage landowners to visit the Web site (perhaps with incentives for participation). Brochures and information sheets could be developed as well. All communications should include a reference to the Web site. Landowners said that good ways to deliver information to them included written

materials (newsletters, magazines, pamphlets) and other landowners (or both). If the conservation community can identify key landowners (early adopters and influentials) in target areas, it might be worth making direct contact with them. If they can be convinced to adopt young forest management, they are likely to have positive influence among their neighbors.

2. Conservation professionals with direct landowner contact

Objective: Help woodland owners create and maintain young forest habitat.

Strategy: There are conservation professionals who are already making contacts with small woodland owners in the target areas as part of their existing jobs (agency landowner program managers, extension professionals, conservation organization landowner liaisons, etc.). The top priority will be to assess whether these professionals are supportive of young forest management. That is, what do they know about it? Are they willing to recommend it to the landowners they contact? For some, there may be cultural, economic or other reasons that they do not recommend (or might even oppose) early successional management to their constituents. Getting these professionals to advocate clearcutting will be an entirely different challenge than getting them to advocate selective cutting. For these, the primary effort becomes learning about their objections to young forest management and showing them the need for and benefits of this management regime. For those that are willing to support and recommend it, the primary effort should be to provide training and materials to help them communicate effectively with landowners about the benefits of young forest management and how it can help them achieve their objectives. They need to know the messages and delivery mechanisms to use, and the resources available to help them. If possible, they also should be provided lists of key landowners in key areas (early adopters, influentials) who could influence other landowners regarding forest management.

3. Other conservation professionals

Objective: Allow and help woodland owners (both public and private) create and maintain young forest habitat.

Strategy: There are numerous conservation professionals who have indirect contact and interaction with small woodland owners and/or who administer public forest lands. These professionals may have the opportunity to support (or oppose) young forest management through their work and interactions. Educating them about the importance and benefits of young forest management will help support the concept. For agencies that administer public forest lands, the primary effort should be to encourage young forest management wherever appropriate. Rotating demonstration areas (with easy access) that show what young forest management looks like over time could be particularly important in encouraging other landowners to adopt it. In addition, more emphasis needs to be placed on coordination among all conservation professionals, so all know about the decline in young forests and associated species.

4. Residents of forested communities

Objective: Allow creation and maintenance of early successional habitat on public and private lands.

Strategy: Even if they do not have direct control over the land, residents living in and around forest lands may have influence (often significant influence) over how such lands are managed. For instance, if the common feeling among residents is that clear cuts look terrible and should be banned, they may be able to bring tremendous pressure to bear on the landowners to avoid this type of management. On the other hand, if these residents understand the benefits of young forest management, they are less likely to actively oppose this management regime, and may actually support it. The primary objective for this audience is informed consent. The conservation community should identify key areas where tracts of forest lands are interspersed with homes, and attempt to communicate extensively with the residents over time about the benefits of young forest management. Communication should address the clear cutting issue head on. That is, we should not try to convince people that clear cutting is not “ugly” to the eye. Rather, messaging should focus on how ugly is good in other ways, and how ugly grows quickly into beautiful. Messaging should focus on creating social acceptance. If residents in and around a forested area are not actively opposed, it will be much easier for the landowner(s) to adopt young forest management. This will be a communications challenge, and likely will not be achieved quickly or easily.

5. Hunters, especially woodcock and grouse hunters

Objective: Advocate for and support creation and maintenance of early successional habitat on public and private lands.

Strategy: Many species of wildlife that are hunted benefit from young forest management, so hunters should be strong proponents for this management regime. However, some hunters don't recognize or understand this connection. The conservation community needs to communicate with hunters the fact that in many cases, the more young forest habitat that is available, the more animals they will have to pursue. With the advent of electronic licensing systems, it is possible in many states to identify hunters who buy specific license types. For instance, in many states, woodcock, grouse, turkey and deer hunters (all of whom benefit from young forest management) could be identified and communicated with directly. This will require cooperation from the state wildlife agency, but it should be a natural partner in promotion of young forest management anyway. Sportsmen's groups and conservation organizations (e.g., National Wild Turkey Federation, Ruffed Grouse Society, and others) should encourage their members to advocate for young forest management in key areas. Members of these organizations are often passionate, action-oriented people who could be well suited for this type of work. Hunter-related organizations could develop demonstration areas that show what young forest management looks like, and they could sponsor and administer information sharing campaigns among their members and/or landowners in key areas.

Messaging

When developing messages, the conservation community should always take into consideration target audience, regional considerations, and context of usage, but in general, communication efforts to help achieve the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* should follow these guidelines.

Messages should incorporate:

- Enjoying natural beauty, scenery — these were the most popular reasons that focus group participants gave for buying their lands
- Conserving wildlife and nature for future generations — this was a strong motivator for most landowners
- Young forest habitat contains high plant and animal diversity — landowners want to contribute to healthy ecosystems
- Iconic species of local or special interest to engage audiences — not all landowners will care about woodcock conservation, but there may be other species that will motivate them to take action

Messages should use this wording:

- “Young forests”— focus group participants liked this wording; it invokes a sense of a healthy, vigorous ecosystem
- “A diversity of wildlife requires a diversity of habitats”— this was the top-rated message as identified by focus group participants

Messages should **NOT** use this wording:

- “Early successional”—most people do not understand what this term means
- “Shrub” or “Scrub”—both these terms had negative connotations for most focus group participants
- “Woodcock” as the lead concept (except with the hunter audience)—many people do not know what a woodcock is, and may not care about woodcock conservation
- Jargon, such as SGCN, SWAP, etc. Nothing makes people lose interest in a message faster than seeing an acronym they don’t recognize. It tells them that they are not the intended target audience, so they don’t need to pay attention.

Recognize that getting small woodland owners to adopt young forest management will be a big challenge. Most bought their land for beauty/scenery, and there is no way to convince them that a clear cut is as beautiful to the eye as mature woodland. Messaging will need to focus on the other benefits provided by young forest management.

Actions

Following are key actions the conservation community should take to persuade small parcel landowners to implement young forest management on their lands in BCRs 14 and 28 for the purpose of achieving the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan*. That is, these actions are designed to benefit woodcock habitat specifically, not just young forest habitat. Action 3 broadens the effort beyond woodcock conservation—in order to seek synergies and economies of scale—but woodcock conservation is the ultimate goal of all efforts.

1. Comprehensive Web Site

Design and develop a comprehensive Web site that provides the information and resources needed by each of the target audiences. Segment the site so the various sections can be customized very specifically to each of the target audiences. Early successional management is a complex topic, and a well-built Web site affords the opportunity to tell the full story in nested fashion, so people can access as much or as little information as they need.

- Research existing Web sites that already deliver various pieces of this information, and build the site to complement and leverage these efforts.
- Create section(s) of the site that encourage and sustain two-way communications with the target audiences. Create an on-line community for the effort.
- Build relationships between and among the target audiences.

2. Develop “Five-County Pilot Areas”

Create detailed pilot communications campaigns to increase young forest habitat management on private lands in one or more limited areas (five counties within one state, perhaps). There is too much variability (habitat, programs, social norms, etc.) across the range of the American woodcock to effectively implement a single communications campaign. Each of these pilot areas should be large enough to show impacts, but small enough so a reasonable amount of communications can be delivered and so impacts can be assessed in a meaningful manner. These pilot area campaigns should be customized to the local landowners, ecology, assistance programs and wood markets. If these pilot campaigns show positive results, expand them to encompass broader areas. Managers should consider incorporating the following elements into the pilot campaigns:

- Develop specific campaign plan for the pilot area. The plan should identify and take advantage of the habitats, landowner programs, audiences, iconic species, and other issues specific to the local (five-county) area.
- Design/develop/conduct a series of workshops/presentations with natural resource professionals in the pilot areas to convince them of the need for young forest management (as necessary) and to share the key messages and communication techniques they should use with private woodland owners.
- Develop a Powerpoint presentation that natural resources professionals can use with landowners (one-on-one or small groups) to encourage participation in young forest management.

- Develop a series of printed informational materials that natural resources professionals can leave behind with woodland owners to encourage participation in young forest management. Identify and include information on all currently available funding/cost-share programs. All materials should be designed to share a “family look” with the design of the Web site.
- Create a network or registry of small woodland owners who are engaged in young forest management. Be sure they understand the key messages so they can advocate for young forest management with other landowners who may contact them.
- Include evaluation metrics in all actions so they can be assessed for effects on increases in acreage of young forest habitat on private lands, improved knowledge/attitudes among target audiences, and utility of specific techniques and methods used in the campaign.

3. Large-Scale Partnerships

Broad-scale communication efforts to landowners across large geographical regions to support young forest habitat for woodcock conservation is not strategically justifiable. That is, there are not enough landowners interested in woodcock conservation to make such a strategy succeed. (That approach probably is not economically feasible, either). However, there are other organizations and partners that are also interested in young forest management, though not necessarily interested in woodcock conservation. Deer, grouse, turkeys, golden-winged warblers and a wide array of other wildlife and plants are dependent on young forests, just like woodcock. A wider array of species of interest will bring a much larger support base to bear on the issue. Messages that all such groups hold in common include:

- Young forest habitat is important for healthy ecosystems
- Timber harvest and other forest management, when done responsibly, are good for many types of plants and wildlife.

Recognize that not all early successional management efforts will benefit woodcock. For instance, no amount of young forest on arid, upland sites will attract or hold woodcock. But partnerships can create synergy of effort for all partners, and help create informed consent for young forest management with the broader public.

Evaluation

Evaluation is an important component of any communication effort, but it is often overlooked. Because woodcock conservation is tied so closely to habitat management, the National Woodland Owners Survey (conducted every five years) offers the opportunity to evaluate landowner perceptions and attitudes about young forest management over time at a coarse scale; however, the NWOS will not allow researchers to drill down into local areas to establish cause and effect relationships between proposed outreach efforts and survey results. This should be accomplished at the local level. That is, every communication effort conducted as part of the pilot area campaigns should have a monitoring strategy associated with it. This will allow the community to fine-tune efforts to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. The methods and metrics to be used should be developed at the same time as the communication efforts.

Where to From Here?

Achieving the *American Woodcock Conservation Plan* in BCRs 14 and 28 will be dependent upon cooperation and participation from private landowners throughout the region. Building this cooperation and participation will require strategic and effective use of communication efforts.

Given the diverse and far-flung nature of the private landowners in these BCRs, communications will need to rely on extensive (rather than intensive) efforts. That is, the woodcock conservation community will need to develop and implement communications that deliver their messages broadly across their target audiences, and only focus intensive efforts on a few key landowners who control large or critically important lands.

Based on the research described in the *Approach* section, this *Communications Strategy* identifies the guiding principles, target audiences, objectives, strategies, messaging, and actions best suited for communicating effectively with small woodland owners in BCRs 14 and 28. These recommended actions are likely to be effective in other BCRs as well, but given limited resources, the actions should be implemented and evaluated in pilot area campaigns, and refined appropriately before expanding the efforts into other regions.

