



An Evaluation of the Impact of the New York Master Forest Owner Volunteer Program

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About the Master Forest Owner Volunteer Program

The New York Master Forest Owner (MFO) Volunteer program was instituted in 1991 by Cornell University with the goal of training woodland owners in the principles of forest stewardship to better equip them to manage their own woodlands and also to motivate other woodland owners to become actively involved in their forestland (Goff and Muth 2006). The program follows the empowerment theory, in which the skills of individuals are recognized and developed to enact broader positive change (Westphal 2003). MFO Volunteers receive certification following a four-day 40-hour training session covering numerous forestry-related topics, such as wildlife management, forest economics, ecology, and related programs and organizations. Following certification, “empowered” MFO Volunteers are encouraged to spread their knowledge and skills to others and promote forest stewardship ethics.

The mechanisms by which MFO Volunteers fulfill the goals of the program are conducting on-site visits with other forest owners, collaborating with agencies and organizations on forestry educational events, and preparing forestry articles for media outlets. The program relies on peer learning strategies as well as landowner networks in achieving program goals.

The MFO program is intended to provide benefits that are internal to MFO Volunteers and external benefits to improving organizational and leadership skills of MFO Volunteers, as well as increasing the MFO Volunteers’ abilities to manage their land more effectively. Expected external benefits include the provision of enhanced information for better decision-making by other woodland owners.

The purpose of our evaluation was to assess the degree to which the MFO Program results in the expected impacts among the MFO Volunteers themselves and other woodland owners.

Research Methods

In May 2008, a pre-tested mail survey was sent to Master Forest Owner (MFO) Volunteers and a separate mail survey was sent to woodland owners (WO) receiving a visit from an MFO Volunteer. The MFO survey covered aspects of the MFO Program and forestry in general, including demographics, MFO activities, opinions of the program, and use of forestry knowledge. The survey sent to woodland owners visited by an MFO Volunteer covered topics of ownership motivations, the nature of the peer interaction, information exchanged, behavior that resulted from the peer interaction, attitudes about landowner cooperation and communication, and demographics. The response rate for the MFO Volunteer survey was 67% (n=95) and the response rate for the woodland owner survey was 56% (n=270).

Leadership Roles and Organizational Involvement

One aim of the MFO Program is to encourage involvement in conservation organizations. Since their certification, 76% of MFO Volunteers surveyed have assumed at least one leadership role. Respondents have joined a number of organizations, at least in part, because of their involvement in the MFO Program.

The most common organization that MFO Volunteers have become members of since certification is the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA) (n=35). At much lower frequencies, other MFO Volunteers have joined various wildlife organizations (n=7), such as the Audubon Society and Pheasants Forever, as well as the American Tree Farm System (n=6) and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) (n=5). Since CCE is not an organization that can be joined, it is not clear what respondents were conveying when they indicated CCE, perhaps describing participation in CCE programs.



Personal Applications of Knowledge Gained Through the Program

The MFO Program helps to expand the knowledge of Volunteers and allows them to better manage their property. Respondents have utilized this information in a variety of ways (Table 1).

The most common way that MFO Volunteers utilized knowledge gained is through conducting timber stand improvements. The MFO Volunteers surveyed also have frequently employed their newly-gained insights to create or enhance habitats for wildlife, manage invasive species and pests, prepare a written management plan, build and maintain trails or access trails, pond and wetland management, and consult with a professional forester or organization.

Table 1. Use of knowledge gained as MFO Volunteer to manage own property (n=87)

Activity	(n)
Timber Stand Improvement (TSI)	36
Created or Enhanced Habitat for Wildlife	25
Invasive Species/Pest Management	17
Prepared a Written Management Plan	16
Built/Maintained Trails or Access Roads	14
Pond and Wetland Management	14
Consulted with Professional Forester or Org.	13
Crop Tree Management	10
Tree Identification	10

Perceived Value of MFO Program

MFO Volunteers were asked to specify the value of the MFO program in allowing them to achieve certain goals. The mean scores are depicted in Table 2. The majority of MFOs surveyed consider the program to be very or extremely valuable in helping them make wise management decisions on their own property, promoting forest stewardship throughout their community, and in allowing them to get to know other forest landowners in their community. Very few respondents indicated that the MFO Program was not very or not at all valuable for fulfilling these objectives.

Table 2. Average ratings of value of MFO program for achieving aims

	Mean Rating*
Making Wise Management Decisions Regarding Forest Land	4.48
Fulfilling Desires to Promote Good Forest Stewardship in Community	4.47
Getting to Know Other Forest Owners in Community	4.13

* 1=not at all valuable, 5=extremely valuable

Landowner On-Site Visits

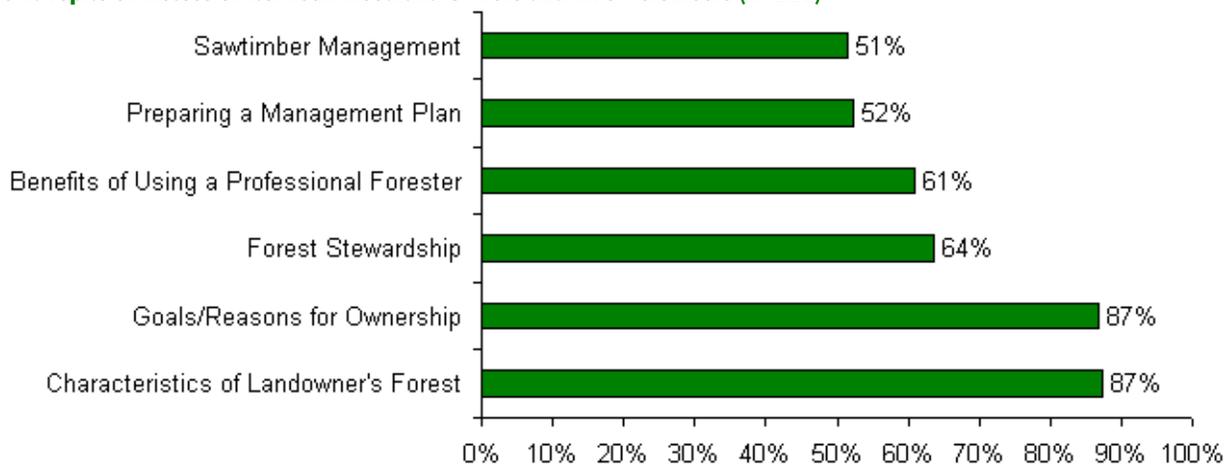
On-site visits with area landowners are one of the primary means by which MFO Volunteers execute the mission of the Program. During these visits, MFO Volunteers interact with other woodland owners in their community to encourage active management of their forests and offer suggestions on forestry management practices. In 2007, 97 MFO Volunteers conducted 230 on-site visits with landowners. These MFO Volunteers were certified between 1991 and 2007. Since being certified, 97 MFO Volunteers reported that they have conducted a total of approximately 1,528 on-site visits with landowners. This shows that MFO Volunteers conducted an average of 2.40 on-site visits in 2007 and average of 15.75 visits in total since their certification. Based on data provided by these woodland owners, a total of 23,714 acres were visited, of which 13,864 were wooded.

Woodland owners were asked to rate the quality of their interactions with MFO Volunteers. A majority of forest owners found these interactions enjoyable (62%) and found the MFO Volunteer to be credible (66%) and worthy of recommendation to other forest owners (68%). Woodland owners were asked what topics were discussed during their visits with MFO Volunteers. The most commonly discussed topics were the characteristics of the landowner's forest (n=194), the goals and reasons for owning woodland (n=193), forest stewardship (n=141), and the benefits of using a professional forester (n=135) (Figure 1).

MFO Success Story:

“A neighbor who owns a 50-acre woodlot came to me and said she had been offered \$5,000 for her timber by a logger. I suggested she contact a forester for advice in marketing her timber and suggested a couple of foresters. She did this and received \$25,000 for her timber.”

Figure 1. Topics of Discussion between Woodland Owners and MFO Volunteers (n=222)

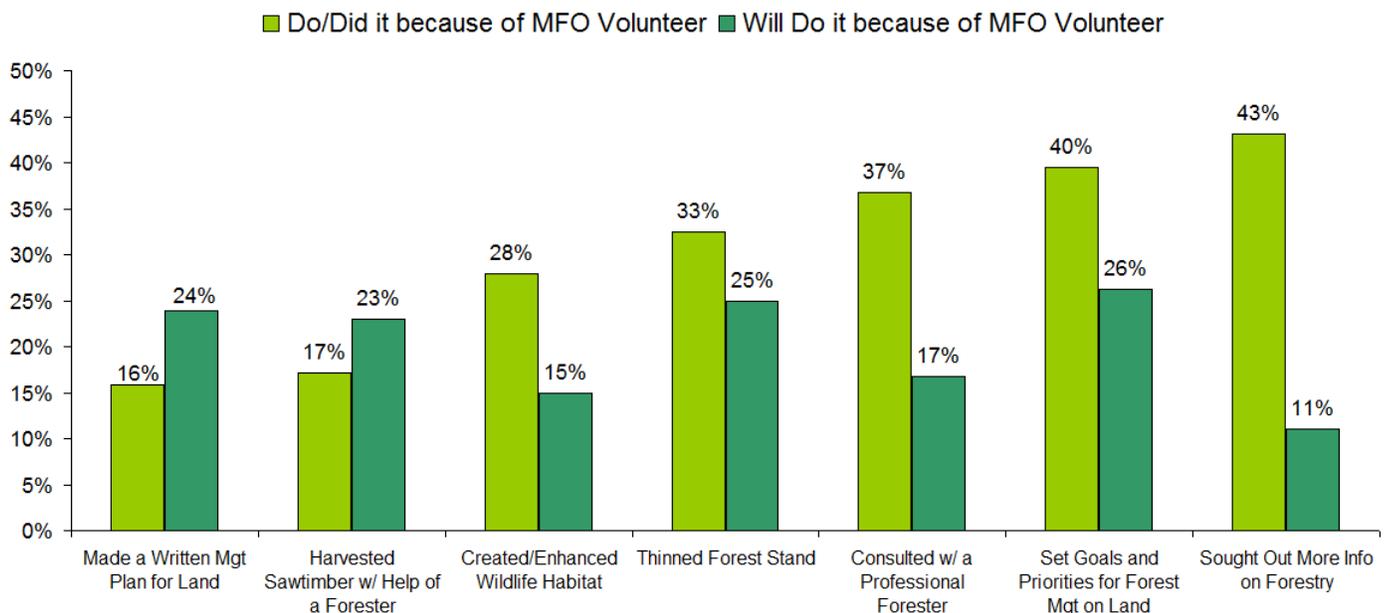


Impact of Communication with MFO Volunteers on Landowners

To determine if there were any external benefits of the MFO Program, respondents were asked if MFO Volunteer interaction had any impact on subsequent decisions or behavior concerning their woodland property. MFO Volunteers had the most influence on other woodland owners in helping them to seek out more forestry information, set goals and priorities for forest management on land, consult with a professional forester, and thin forest stands (Figure 2).

Respondents also reported economic benefits through the influence of MFO Volunteers. Among 206 respondents, a total of 135 actions with economic impact were carried out as a result of contact with an MFO Volunteer. For 64 forest owners, MFO Volunteers helped them gain or save an approximate total of \$258,715 compared to practices used before contact with an MFO Volunteer. After visits by MFO Volunteers, landowners earned an average of \$9,778 more by selling timber for a higher price than they would have otherwise (n=36). Landowners also gained an average of \$8,825 by deciding to do a timber sale (n=25).

Figure 2. Woodland owner decisions influenced by MFO volunteers (n=210)



Conclusions

The MFO Program empowers MFO Volunteers to make wise management decisions regarding their forested property and to promote forest stewardship in their communities. In managing their own property, MFOs frequently use the information they have learned through participation in the MFO Program, such as timber stand improvement and creating and enhancing wildlife habitat.

The MFO Program also produces external benefits to woodland owners. MFO Volunteers help forest owners to better manage their woodlands by providing helpful advice and information regarding forestry topics, which can lead to improved woodland health and economic benefits. Since 1990, MFOs have conducted over 1,528 on-site visits with woodland owners. A majority of forest owners found these interactions enjoyable and found the MFO to be credible and worthy of recommendation to other landowners. The most common topics of discussion were the characteristics of the landowner's forest and the goals and reasons for owning woodland. MFOs had the greatest influence when considering seeking out more forestry information, setting goals and priorities for forest management on land, consulting a professional forester, and thinning forest stands. Sixteen percent of surveyed woodland owners indicated that they have already developed written management plans for their land because of their contact with an MFO Volunteer. This is significantly higher than the percent of woodland owners with management plans in the state of New York (1.7%) and the entire United States (3.7%) (Butler et al. 2009). Woodland owners also reported economic benefits through the influence of MFOs, most frequently by selling timber for higher prices. MFOs consider the MFO program to be extremely valuable to make wise management decisions, promote forest stewardship, and getting to know others.

The results from these surveys show that local peer-to-peer programs can have positive influence on woodland owners in local communities. Through programs like the New York Master Forest Owner Volunteer Program, it is possible to spread valuable information concerning forest resource management.

MFO Success Story:

"Last summer, my father-in-law and I did a woods walk where we were able to persuade the owners to hire a consulting forester to arrange a timber sale, rather than accepting the 'high grading' offer first proposed by a forestry 'friend.' They were very pleased as they gained considerably more money in the sale, and kept the quality of woods that they valued very highly!"

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