Mid-Term Report

Social Networks in a Resource Dependent Community:

A Qualitative Study in Bristol, Vermont.

By

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The Research

The research question at the heart of this thesis asks: *How do rural resource dependent businesses use community social networks in creating successful production, distribution and market systems?*

Using qualitative methods this research investigates the connections to place, natural resources, and community held by resource dependent residents in one region of Vermont. Additionally, this research asks how the ties between place, natural resources and community are maintained through economic and social practices. Social practices in the host community are described using community social network analysis and economic practices are described through the rural market systems involved in local natural resource based industries.

The specific objectives of this research are to:

1. Identify the natural resource industries, businesses, products, services and market systems important to the target community's resource dependent character.

2. Document and describe how rural-resource based industries, businesses and market systems incorporate and rely on community social networks for sustainability and success.

3. Interpret the relationships between resource dependent industries, businesses, market systems and community in order to develop hypotheses about the interactions among them, and how these interactions can be used in creating sustainable resource dependent economies, communities and healthy ecosystems.

Several theoretical propositions are examined in this research:

• Individuals and families continually relying on one natural resource for their livelihood may hold feelings, ideas, expectations and attitudes about community, place and natural resources that are different from actors who are not dependent on the same resource. Differing attitudes about the environment and resource use may mean the existence of natural resource dependent activity and interest communities within Bristol's larger geographic community.

• The density of social networks in the target community may create crossovers between resource dependent communities and non-resource dependent communities. Crossing over between communities may be accomplished by social linkages between resource-based industries, businesses and consumers.

• Social networks and social capital within the target community may be used to guide business decisions which alleviate risk, increase profits and create sustainability for resource dependent business owners.

The primary research methods used in this thesis are ethnographic techniques such as formal, in-depth interviews with forest dependent business owners, participant observation at community events, and snowball sampling. Living in the host community made attending local events and meeting residents easy. Events such as town select board meetings, morning coffee hour with a group of retired gentlemen, community festivals, and local swimming days provided backdrops for beginning to meet residents, build trust, and identify individuals for in-depth interview. Some business owners were identified using more formal sources such as Chamber of Commerce publications, phone books, and marketing materials.

A goal of 20-35 interviews with forest dependent business owners was set at the onset of the research. However, due to the informal nature of many resource dependent businesses in the region, and their lack of formal marketing strategies, it was difficult knowing just how many community members were likely to be involved in the research and how many interviews would be needed to obtain an accurate understanding of forest dependent networks in the host community. Several checks were put in place to mark the end of the interview stage. For example, using snowball sampling for identifying business owners meant that the end of the project's interview stage was near when interviews stopped identifying previously unrecognized forest dependent individuals. Other checks for concluding data collection were: when interviews began to reveal little new information concerning industry and community practices; and when representatives from a variety of Bristol's natural resource based industries had been identified and interviewed.

In order to create a holistic understanding of the community the initial proposal for this research also called for 10-15 interviews with non-forest dependent community members. For this portion of the research a variety of legitimate and authoritative community leaders were identified. One emphasis of this interview sample was age, gender, and economic diversity. These interviews focused on community organizations and Bristol's relationships with the surrounding landscape and communities.

Analysis of the data began with transcription of the interviews and will be completed with social network analysis and mapping of each business's product development, marketing and distribution processes, and document analysis.

Current Stages of Progress

The data collection stage of the research is near its end based on the checks outlined in the proposal.

- Interviews with 28 forest dependent business owners and community members have been conducted.
- Interviewees rarely identify community members involved in forest businesses that I have not spoken with or am familiar with.
- Fewer new uses of social networks are identified in each interview.

• Remaining interviewees have been identified and contacted. Interviewing will
    likely be completed by March 15, 2003.
• Transcription of the completed interviews is vigorous and ongoing.

Preliminary Findings

   A diverse group of forest dependent industries occurs in Bristol and the
surrounding area. Individuals involved in logging, log truck driving, mill management
and operation, firewood cutting, furniture and craft making, herb collection and
tincturing, berry collecting, forestry consulting and land management, mapping, and
community forestry advocacy have been interviewed. The connections to community
held by the individuals and industries involved in the project are as diverse as the sample
itself. Preliminarily, three typologies describe the connections to community held by
Bristol's forest dependent business owners.

   Group 1- Some business owners openly describe the ways in which they rely on
social networks and community for conducting business. These business owners tend to
clearly describe tangible ways in which social networks have created business
opportunities, and tangible ways their business interacts with the larger community. For
example, respondent 10 actively uses and builds social networks in an attempt to utilize
local materials for local building projects.

I. *Are there certain loggers, truckers and architects that you routinely use?*

R. *Definitely.*

I. *And are you partnering with those loggers and architects because of relationships that
you already have?*

R. *Some of them have been prior relationships, but the architects are always new. They
are just folks that come into view. Generally its people who get the notion that place
based wood is a good thing. There are some folks that really don't care and don't get it.
But of those that do, we seem to get attracted to each other.*

I. *Those that you knew prior to doing business with them, do you see them out of the
business arena?*

R. *Yes, yes, yes. That's the thing about this whole deal. It's hard to know where business ends and community or other things start. It could be at a local play, at the hardware store… you know anywhere. You just run into people. You could be at a Terry Tempest Williams reading at Breadloaf and run into four of those folks.*

Respondent 10 works for a non-profit organization explicitly promoting community forestry. The non-profit agency promotes a forest industry model reliant on social networks and community by serving as a clearing house for creating connections between forest industry professionals. While respondent 10's attention to networks and community may seem exaggerated and influenced by the very nature of the agency's mission, many forest business owners involve themselves with the organization because they receive increased business from the agency's marketing force. For example, several respondents noted the importance of the non-profit agency in finding new projects. As a result of associating with the non-profit agency these folks also recognize their connections and reliance on community and networks.

Group 2- Most of the individuals and businesses involved in the project describe ways that they use social networks and community to create successful business practices, but they do not actively work to create new network relationships as those in *Group 1*. Instead, *Group 2* business owners use existing relationships and community institutions to their benefit. For example, respondent 1 uses his children's networks at the local high school in order to find seasonal employees.

I. *How do you find a high schooler to work for you?*

R. *We have kids in high school, so it's like networking through them. Within the high school there are a few kids every year that are interested. Usually they have their first car and want to be able to buy gas.*

Members of the *Group 2* typology use several community institutions for finding employees, customers and materials. Some of these are:
- Local gathering places such as restaurants, cafés and diners.
- Message boards at local convenient stores and in store windows.
- Farmer's markets and community festivals.
- Friends' and family's places of employment.

Group 3- One commonality among members of *Group 3* is that they don't describe themselves as reliant on community or networks for success. Many businesses in *Group* 3 tend to rely heavily on business from non-local sources such as tourists or large out-of-state buyers. Many of the respondents in this category deal in high-end furniture production or large scale timber extraction and land management. Interestingly, these businesses are connected to local community institutions and social networks in diverse ways and on many levels. These businesses hire local employees, use local materials when possible, and at times contract work out to other local businesses. Additionally, some members of *Group* 3 interact frequently in non-work related environments. Respondent 3 manufactures child-size rocking chairs and gave a clear description of his ideas concerning woodworkers and community connections:

I. *Do you chat with other woodworkers about buying saws and things?*

R. *A little bit. I have my child rocker sides made by a guy who does woodworking in Vergennes and he does jobbing. In other words, he'll take small jobs from anybody and make parts. So he makes the sides for the child rocker and he has a router, a C. & C. router... So he takes the router and cuts the child rocker sides because he does it out of plywood and I don't want plywood in my shop. He's got better bits for that, so we talk over bits and tools and he'll sharpen things for us...The talking or social aspect of woodworkers—and I don't know if this is confined to woodworkers—but woodworkers are by their nature, well, you get people that are in a shop and don't get around that much. Probably an extrovert wouldn't become a woodworker. An introvert will become a woodworker. They want to make things and maybe don't want to be talking. They don't want to meet 25 people that day. An extrovert might want to meet 25 people today but an introvert doesn't want to do that, so he's going to stay in his shop. So the result is that woodworkers don't talk a lot, certainly not like salespeople.*

Successes and Challenges

This research has been successful on a variety of levels. Most tangibly, I presented the research in October, 2002 at the University of Vermont's School for Natural Resources Graduate Symposium, and am scheduled to present the research at the 15th Northeastern Recreation Research Symposium at the *Sagamore Resort* in Bolton Landing, New York this April. Additionally, I recently wrote an article highlighting the ways three business owners interviewed for the project use and create community through their forest businesses (the article is attached to this email in a PDF file). My

article is one piece of a larger Vermont Forum on Sprawl publication highlighting rural-urban connections and Vermont's working landscape.

Examples of other successes are: identifying key community members I was not previously familiar with for interviewing (these moments reinforce my trust in snowball and judgmental sampling as tools driving a successful process and meeting goals); obtaining interviews with individuals I perceived as difficult to track down or had been told would not talk with me; and hearing complex thoughts, ideas and facts from multiple and diverse sources and learning to understand them.

Several difficulties I faced and overcame as the project progressed were methodological in nature. Developing a tool for identifying and gauging social network use and reliance was a challenging task. As the project grew and developed I examined survey tools, focus groups and mapping exercises as mediums for talking about community with interview respondents. Finally, the tool which seemed most efficient and effective at obtaining this data was an in-depth interview model. Throughout the interview, as respondents identify people and relationships important to their business's success I ask a series of questions detailing the relationship, and fill out a chart which places all of the information in one easy-to-read format. This model is imperfect, yet seems the least complex for reading and recording information, and adapts well to interviews conducted outside or while walking and touring work sites.

Other difficulties have come from my own expectations about the information my interview model would generate. My expectation that business owners would speak clearly about their relationships and business, and that the different types of relationships expressed through the interviews would fit neatly into categories, was, needless to say, incorrect. It seems that relationships and networks are not often thought about by many of the folks involved in the research. Relationships "just happen" and recalling the circumstances of informal and happenstance meetings such as those involved in *word-of-mouth* communication is difficult. One major difficulty has been describing, documenting and teasing apart the ways that happenstance meetings, and short term or one time relationships, are imbedded in business and community.

Thoughts Concerning Participatory Research

Participatory methods have been wonderful and frustrating to use. Living in the host community, getting to know community members as friends and neighbors, and using snowball sampling created more than just data. For me, these techniques generated strong and personal feelings for places and people, and a determination to accurately interpret and describe the data and community. For community members involved in the project these research tools created feelings of belonging, ownership and curiosity. Many community members took time to inquire about the project's progress and give words of encouragement and advice whenever they saw me. Others took their opportunity to be interviewed as a chance to look inward at themselves and community. One participant even described their two-and-a-half hour interview as "therapeutic!" Still other community members found the research subject inconsequential and irrelevant to community and business success. Residents' stake in the study may be less emotional than the researcher's, but their investments of time and information, and devotion to their community and landscape, do give them value in the project's outcome. Additionally, community involvement and snowball sampling were perhaps the only way to identify the less formal businesses around Bristol and include their contributions to community in this research.

It is likely that the project could have been completed using less participatory techniques. The ethnographic tools used were not complicated, but at times did create frustration. The need for triangulation around information gathered from community members is great; some data can be difficult to obtain and even harder to understand once gathered; and knowing when an accurate picture of community and networks is understood is difficult. However, these concerns are justified by the methods' ability to paint a comprehensive picture of the community—described by local residents—at a depth of understanding other methods may not have approached.