

**Community Forestry Research Fellowship Program**  
**Final Report**  
**From Forest Communities to Community Forests? An Exploration of the Community Forestry Concept in the Acadian Forest**

**Katherine Albert**  
**Department of Geography**  
**Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey**

Research Problem and Goals

The nature of my research problem has changed in small, but important, ways since I first articulated the research questions for my dissertation proposal. However, one of the fundamental goals has remained the same – to solicit and record forest workers’ perspectives on changing conservation and management goals within a changing forest products industry. The perspectives of industry, the state, and environmentalists had previously been well represented in regional media and public discourse. Forest workers, on the other hand, are not only under-represented in relevant debates, but often completely forgotten. They work an average of 100 hours a week out-of-sight in the woods – in trucks on private logging roads, in machines or on hand crews, or in the hidden ‘cities’ of mills. Many don’t attend public meetings concerning forest management, industrial or labor reform, because they have been punished in the past by the companies they work for when they appeared to be involved in industry politics. A central goal of this project was to go to where the workers are and to write about their work and ideas, demonstrate instances of local environmental knowledge in operation (whether through on-the-ground practices or political interpretations and analyses), and to sketch the political-economic forces at play among workers in place, colonial histories, and a changing global marketplace.

Other initial goals included: investigating the applicability of political ecological analysis (arguably a “Third World” perspective) to situations of rural poverty and natural resource dependence in an industrial context; excavating the basis for the notion of an “Acadian Forest” region; situating ‘community’ within both local and regional settings; and observing how, and if, the international border impacted constructions of ‘community’ among workers, ‘local’ people, forest-related institutions, and other stakeholders within civil society. These goals remained as secondary interests throughout the research process – some are developed in my dissertation, some will be developed in future projects, and some led to new questions about the role of labor in the forest products industry. In particular, through the research process, I encountered elusive and unrecorded instances of women’s work that have led to questions about the gendered dimensions of, and relations within, the forest products industry.

My research sites are located in the largest industrial forest region in North America. They also constitute the core of a large international forest region, which has recently come to be known as the Acadian Forest. My principle research site is in Maine’s St. John Valley, which hosts the only communities in the nation that were divided by the establishment of the present-day U.S.-Canada border during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The cross-border industries, cultures and communities that comprise the Acadian Forest are subject to a number of centrifugal and centripetal forces that draw stark divisions between them at the same time as they are pulled

together by flows of workers, trade, identities, citizens, industries, environments and histories. This commingling of similarity and dissimilarity, of common and divided identity, also mark ideals of and approaches to forest management, as well as responses to a changing global forest product industry, on either side of the border. I initially chose two cases – a tenant forest farming project in Québec and certification programs in Maine - as illustrations of two different approaches to alternative forest management on either side of the border. My early research questions were: “What are the prospects and potential pitfalls facing proponents of ‘community forestry’ in a region that has been dominated by industrial control?”, “How successful have the two programs been at integrating environmental and social goals?”, and “To what extent might either of these ostensibly progressive initiatives serve as a model for community-based forest management in other marginalized regions of industrialized nations?”.

In conducting this research, not only did I refine and add to my case studies, but my questions were also transformed. For my case study in Maine, I focused on Master Logger Certification – the first program in the world to certify *harvesters* rather than land, products, or industry according to global environmental standards (Forest Stewardship Council, Sustainable Forest Initiative, and Canadian Standards Association – as well as Maine Forest Service Best Management Practices). The program started at a meeting of the Professional Logging Contractors of Maine in 2000, when loggers expressed a need for support in, and recognition for, doing superior work. In January 2003, when the contractors for the largest industrial forest land owner in Maine and Maritime Canada went on strike, the International Loggers’ Association (ILA) was formed and became a third case study for my research. The ILA was formed primarily to help secure collective bargaining rights for these contractors, but also to negotiate equipment deals, needed road improvements, and issues such as bonded Canadian labor in Maine and the diversion of wood cut in Maine to Canadian mills.

I held on to my research question about whether ‘community forestry’ is possible in an industrial forest with a long-history of company-like towns. I looked at each case study, as well as the forest workers’ perspectives on each program, in terms of the goals and principles of community forestry as it has been conceived for international development efforts as well as conservation projects here “at home” in North America. I also used the tools within political ecological critique to reveal and/or anticipate the failings of these programs for various notions of ‘community’ in the Acadian Forest. This approach led me to interrogate the concept of community forestry, both historically and conceptually, and shifted my thinking so that my central research question has become: **How do developments within the industrial Acadian Forest speak to and modify “community forestry” as we know it?** I hope that this research can contribute to thinking about community forestry, and how to support the needs and desires of localities within a global forest agenda, among scholars, practitioners, and participants alike. I think that taking another look at the development of the concepts and values behind community forestry can expand our thinking about what is possible for the diverse forest environments, communities, economies, and politics that comprise North American forest use.

## Field Experience

Geographers and anthropologists have problematized the idea of field work and the position of the researcher in the field. Some of the key issues are the politics of selecting and defining research sites; the boundaries between the ‘research’/everyday life, researcher/subject, the ‘field’/not the ‘field’; the relationship between observation/knowledge and the position of the researcher as insider or outsider, etc. In an important commentary on fieldwork, Cindi Katz synthesized contributions to un-packing fieldwork and summarizes, “Under contemporary conditions of globalization and post-positivist thought in the social sciences, we are always already in the field – multiply positioned actors, aware of the partiality of all our stories and the artifice of the boundaries drawn in order to tell them” (1994, p.67). These problems are central to the understanding and practice of community forestry as they demonstrate the key role of ongoing debate about the nature of places and the politics surrounding situated action. They also highlight the role of researchers and other agents in setting the agenda through bounding sites and the stories attached to them.

The field sites I selected nearly comply with the idealized notion of a community as a collectivity of people who are more similar than dissimilar with a history of roots in place. In the Bas St-Laurent region of Québec the small parishes of New France settlements still exist, few people speak English, and people live in homes that have been in their families for generations. In the St. John Valley of Maine, nearly everyone identifies as French and Catholic and can trace their families back to the native Mikma’q and Malecite communities and/or the early white settlement of the St. John Valley by Acadians, Quebecois and later, some Scots-Irish. People live near their grandparents and cousins and childhood friends. I also grew up in the area, and before commencing my field work, had not been back for more than a few days at a time as I had spent the previous 12 years living away. I spent the first few weeks of my research period re-learning how to live in a community and remembering the place. On one of my first days back, I walked to a nearby grocery store, planning carefully how much time it would take to walk there and how much time I could spend in the store before I had to be back at home to make phone calls. Instead, while running that small errand, I got a taste of most of the issues I would face for the next year. While walking, I had to stop in my tracks as I was greeted by a scent of dust, engine oil, and wood that I hadn’t experienced for such a long time, and it represented one of the first confrontations with my own emotions that may be a part of any research with people, but seem to be heightened by working “at home”. I had been walking fast with my gaze fixed nowhere in particular, when the salutation of a driver passing by caught my eye. Each passing driver waved or nodded, and I felt self-conscious of my gait and gaze when I remembered how I should behave. Once I entered the store, I encountered another lesson about social space in the St. John Valley. I hadn’t counted on people remembering me, but they did and wanted to hear where I had been and what I was doing.

I battled some anxiety about getting back and getting to work as I realized that I had to re-think strategies for “work”, and that those conversations in the grocery store were part of it all. I heard about classmates who had gone into woods work, others who had given it up, and stories about how much the profession and industry had changed. It was a matter of switching modes –

from holing up with books and notes and a computer, to a more appropriate approach to understanding and thinking. Indeed, much of my research was planned. I conducted formal interviews, observed organizational meetings, and used local archives. I thought about how to get, record, and analyze information carefully. But many of the most important research moments I had were in diners at 5am, in bars during the mud season, riding in trucks to work sites, walking around in the woods, in the grocery store, and showing up at meetings and events that I hadn't known about before hand. In other words, I quickly let go of my assumption that good research is planned and carried out systematically. Instead, I drew upon skills I developed as a community coordinator and other field methods training I had, where skills for listening and for navigating the progress of the research "from the ground" are the most valuable.

I started this project with several weeks of archival research in the Acadian Archives at the University of Maine at Fort Kent, the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine at Orono, and the Archives de la Côte de Sud in La Pocatière, Québec. I also interviewed scholars at the University of Maine, Université de Moncton – Edmundston, and Université Laval about various aspects of changes in the culture of woods work and the history of land ownership and industry in the Acadian Forest. These interviews led me to additional life history interviews with 5 retired loggers and 3 cultural activists.

One of my first formal field research activities was to accompany candidates for Maine Master Logger Certification (MLC), while they were being interviewed or having their jobs evaluated by a staff verifier. This allowed me to understand the operations of the program, the relationships between harvesters and MLC staff (who must be experienced loggers or licensed foresters), and to hear about the candidates' hopes and criticisms for the program. I also learned about how these harvesters felt about their work, what they saw as the future of the forest and the profession, and their thoughts on the importance of the profession to "ways of life" in the St. John and St. Lawrence River Valleys. These visits also included conversations about border issues, safety at work, the changing and internationalizing work force, and the political economy of woods products.

Formal interviews with successful and denied candidates, as well as harvesters who opted not to get involved with Master Logger Certification followed the site verifications. The interviews lasted from one and a half hours to four hours long and many of them spurred follow-up interviews. Some of the informants would call me periodically to ask me if I would come talk to them about recent events in the industry. They saw this project as a chance to provide their perspective with impunity, and for some (including myself), it became evident that it was nearly a therapeutic process. It was a concrete way to acknowledge and manage anxiety during periods of uncertainty and change.

Among those who didn't already know me, I became known as "the lady who cares about logging" and conversations about the profession spilled over from formal interviews and telephone calls into much of my life in the community. These experiences opened up an opportunity for me to be a part of the first ILA meetings, when the contractors for the largest industrial forestland owner in Maine decided on a work stoppage. During the initial meetings, I took notes for the group, so that they would have a record of their proceedings. I also wrote columns for the local newspaper to help make the larger community aware of the harvesters'

situation. When it became evident that there were multiple understandings of the structure and ideals of the large, transnational company and that company leaders were offering different conditions to different contractors, I worked with a group of members to literally “map” out what we know about the company in general and, in particular, about the strategies deployed to weaken the contractors’ first attempt to organize for collective bargaining rights.

During the winter, I visited the tenant forest farmers (*métayers*) of the Bas St-Laurent Model Forest frequently and conducted 27 interviews with *métayers* from both forest farms in the Model Forest. I also visited and talked with some *métayers* in another region of the province who had organized a tenant forest farm based on the BSL Model Forest. I did 3 life history interviews with people who had lived through and/or been a part of the *Opérations Dignité* – a set of rural development programs that laid the groundwork for tenant forest farming.

I spent the remainder of the research period conducting additional follow-up interviews, attending board and certification board meetings for MLC and the Model Forest and additional ILA meetings. At the end of mud season, I also dedicated more time to observing woods work in northern Maine’s mechanized context and among southeastern Québec’s hand crews. I co-organized a conference at the University of Maine aimed at bringing key players in the North Maine Woods to explain changes in land use and ownership as well as to give their predictions for the future to an audience made up of northern Maine citizens. I also presented the research at several conferences, including the Eastern Canada – U.S. Forest Conference, the American Council of Québec Studies, and the Maine Acadian Heritage Council annual meetings.

### The Participation Problem

My approach to participation in this research was two-fold. Firstly, I focused on understanding my role as a researcher in a community of laborers as well as my responsibilities and opportunities for reciprocity. In some ways this dimension of participation was exploratory. For example, how could I reciprocate the time offered and risks taken by my informants while avoiding advocacy? As advocacy is one of many centers of debate concerning participatory research, I went through a process of debate with myself. In the spirit of participation as liberation, I have no ideological conflict with doing academic research that advocates. At the same time, my earlier experience in community-based resource management taught me that advocacy almost always happens at someone’s expense. To draw again from Cindi Katz’s (1994) comments on researchers in the field, “At this historical moment, and in all the geographical sites of research, it is crucial that social scientists inhabit a difficult and inherently unstable *space of betweenness*[...]in order to engage in rhetorical, empirical, and strategic *displacements* that merge our scholarship with a clear politics that works against the forces of oppression”. Part of my experiment with participation, was focused on the different ways I could dis-place and re-place myself, in both literal and figurative senses, to better understand, interpret and respond to what I was learning about workers’ perspectives. The emphasis on role and place was also about navigating a bundle of complex historical politics and about specifying what ‘community’ means and how it shows up and behaves in research.

The second prong of my approach to participation is to be engaged in *transformation*, whether it is facilitating change already set into motion or by raising awareness of alternatives

and possibilities. It is a challenge, as a researcher with ideas and investments in a community and its basis of reproduction, to refrain from judging changes as good or bad. I ultimately learned that there is no way to stay perfectly neutral – that when you are constantly asking people what they think, you have to be prepared to give honest responses to their questions about your ideas. This is one way that participatory research can depart from conventional scientific methods that caught me unprepared, but it also provides an opportunity to argue that participation can be sufficiently *rigorous*. In one sense, people in research situations modify their behavior and responses to their interpretations of what is going on, and so creating a discourse can help people to focus and to relieve some anxieties about presenting their ideas – without necessarily controlling or preconditioning responses and outcomes. My feelings and judgments are also part of the *placing* process as I am located both inside and outside of the ‘community’. Expressing my subjectivities also helped me to avoid consciously or unconsciously imposing them on the processes of idea-making and change that provide the foundation for alternative approaches to forest management in the Acadian Forest.

### Preliminary Findings/Analysis

My preliminary findings regarding the central research questions required me to “back up” in my thinking and actually tackle the questions I raised, somewhat rhetorically, in my initial proposal. Firstly, asking about the potential for community forestry in an industrial forest region begged an historiography of the concept of community forestry. Roots for the idea of community forestry, as it is discussed in contemporary literature, can be traced to a number of different origins – from U.S. conservation history to international environment and development interventions to traditions of peoples’ and social movements to the development of neoliberal political-economic ideals. The questions then becomes – How have the conscious and unconscious engagements with these various roots resulted in programs and parameters that make up community forestry as we know it.

Backing up even further, the problems of ‘community’ and ‘place’ had to be addressed. Defining the community is a first-order problem in participatory and community-based research. I tended to see sets of nested communities in my research sites, but also to understand the cleavages in sets and sub-sets that disrupt any assumption of cohesive community. I have described, in part, how my research sites retain the markers of “placeness” in a global context, and yet the ‘community’ I defined – a community of laborers – is firmly located in the midst of an increasingly transnational and global set of relationships. Forest workers’ identities, then, are dual – 1. On the one hand, they choose their profession so they can stay “in place” to continue work that has been handed down through generations and has shaped the local landscape, where they feel ‘at home’. Many commented that they couldn’t make it, or wouldn’t be happy, anywhere else in the world. 2. At the same time they are keyed into the international dimensions of wood markets, regulation and the articulation between local natural resource economies and a global political-economic structure. In this way, they see themselves as players on a much larger stage. The significance of this problem for the goals of community forestry is that while ‘place’ is fundamental to the identity-building that underpins political action, the definition of the problems and the related injustices are happening in ‘space’ – or at much larger spatial scales. A common refrain in thinking about community forestry is that each site is unique and that the

unfolding of CBF processes is context contingent, and yet there is a larger goal of reforming a natural resource industry with a long history and a large spatial reach. Promoting a sense of place at the expense of understanding important structures and developing a broader-scale program for social change is an inherent risk. Secondly, the Franco-Americans who live in the research sites have historically been both colonizers and colonized. Social identities built on sense of place inevitably write other claims to territory out of history and present day economic and conservation goals. This is an illustration of how defining ‘place’, ‘community’ and a ‘field’ for research is necessarily a project of imagination that is separate from geographic process and flows of time. It also keeps us stuck in thinking of culture as dependent on place, or as Arjun Appadurai (1988) warned against keeping “places as guardians of cultural features”,

My initial goals and hypotheses represent a place along the path to interrogating community forestry concepts in order to better critique the resource conservation, social justice, and regional development claims behind the ideal. The historical dimensions of the research led to questions about histories of the resource base and of place-making that relate to the present-day achievement of those goals. The ethnographic dimensions of the project provided rich details concerning the complex analysis of new conservation and development programs by the workers who sustain the industry.

### Benefit of Research to Community

It is hard to know and make claims, from the perspective of the researcher, about what the benefits of a given project are to a given community. Certainly there are both benefits and harms that may go unvoiced and unknown in the unfolding and aftermath of the research process. I only know what people have said to me about my presence and work. I can also discuss things I did purposively that I presumed would benefit the forest workers who participated in the project.

The people who participated in and were impacted by this project initially made me aware that my presence and concern were a benefit. Many of them expressed regret that their families didn’t really know what they did for a living and felt something like reparation by talking about what the work is like. There were many times throughout the field work when they also expressed the benefits of being able to *commiserate* with someone not directly in the business. This is another arena where the unexpected research problem of emotions arose. There were many moments of celebration – for example when loggers started visioning about how to restructure the industry and reverse a long history of powerlessness in the realm of conservation and management and they began to see that it is truly possible. There were also many moments of grief – when the loggers’ first stand for collective bargaining rights not only failed, but was manipulated by industry leaders and legislators to result in a punishment of their actions, when individuals made hard choices to leave the profession, and above all, when accidents happened on the job in spite of vigilant safety precautions. Many involved in the project viewed the process as an opportunity for catharsis – a place for expressing, without judgment or consequences, the disappointments and injuries to pride that they endure every day in order to stay in the business. Guarding this trust through maintaining confidentiality procedures and through carefully considering the content of my own “talk” throughout the research process

was a high priority for me as the research developed. In the context of community research in a small rural area, being judicious and yet forthcoming in conversation is a major challenge, and many uncertain decisions had to be made about the line between information that is fair game for ethnographic research and protecting the personal ideas of research collaborators who navigate the roles of participant, subject, neighbor, elder, friend, etc.

Other sources of community benefit were *information gathering and sharing*, through recording notes, making phone calls, conference organizing and newspaper article writing. These activities also contributed to the goal of *recording and revealing* the invisible work of forest industry laborers. I also impacted the community and its issues through contributing the *framing* of problems and questions. In discussions, I shared my perspective, giving anyone a chance to rethink and/or criticize other ways of understanding issues such as the interpretation of Canadian bonded labor in the Maine Woods, industry motives and strategies, etc.

In general, I held a unique position in this process – as both a local and a researcher with an external gaze. Gaining trust was nearly automatic and the responsibility attached to it was weighty. In my daily interactions, I tried to encourage critical thinking without dumbing down my interpretations. It was advantageous to understand the processes of woods work without knowing everything – the workers themselves retain this expertise, and they appreciated my investment in learning more while respecting their accumulated on-the-ground-experience.

### Lessons Learned

The lessons I learned are almost too numerous to list here, but I can draw 2 broad categories of “lessons learned” from this experience. The first category would include all the lessons I learned about designing research – about moving from the drawing board to the field. The second category concerns strategies for research, or how to conduct it from the ground in a real-time context.

In designing my research, I read a lot about methods and read countless samples of proposals in order to figure out how to design activities that speak to the research problem. This process was complicated and improved by my attempts to make the design participatory. Once I defined my questions and had a set of ideas about how to go about answering them, I talked to people – on the phone, at meetings, in the store, etc – who knew about or considered themselves members of the research communities. This is when I was reminded that loggers might be unwilling to discuss the industry in a formal setting, especially with other people they don’t know, and so focus groups were not a great idea. This process also provided important feedback about how to get people involved in data collection – that only disabled or retired workers would even have the time to get involved, no matter how much I could pay. These pragmatic issues were the catalyst for my re-thinking ‘participation’ and how to use this opportunity to respond to what workers’ would want to do if they had the time and political freedom. How could I help reduce the distance between them and those goals?

In terms of my role as researcher, I considered carefully, the state of “in-betweenness” Katz, Mascia-Lees, and other social scientists have elaborated, and began to see the practice of



'displacement' for myself and research participants as a mode of being in-between. Displacement can be a means of avoiding "the romance of community"(see Joseph, 2004) – of focusing on the articulation of place and global process while taken lessons learned "in place" and then relocating to build on/call in to question those lessons learned (see also Harvey, Katz, Appadurai). Some remaining questions are: What are some of the other ways I could have 'displaced'? How can it inform my future treatment of this and other research problems?

Finally, I was able to draw upon the diversity of language-based identities in the Acadian Forest to reach into non-anglophone literatures on environment and development and to float differences in ideas about the human-nature relationship among research participants. Concepts that are being developed in Québécois scholarship, known as "the inhabited forest" and "forests for inhabitation" may help us to step out of the space/place, community/globe problem by focusing on historically-informed notions of place, territory, landscape, forest, and ecosystems in developing plans for resource conservation and rural development. In response to the political ecologist, Kerry Whiteside, who has recently written about the fundamental difference in anglophone ecological thinking (anthropocentric vs. ecocentric) and francophone ecological thinking (focus on processes linking environments and human identities), we examined the "inhabited forest" idea as an alternative, or modifier, to community forestry as we know it. The goal of the 'inhabited forest' approach – one that recognizes a long history of so-called anthropogenic forests – is to restructure socio-economic life through access to surrounding public forests. Normally, regional development strategies are established through other parameters, often resulting in the decline of small communities or otherwise marginal populations. It is a concept that has the potential to avoid the exclusive tendencies of development strategies based on an idea of 'community' as inhabitation begs an historically aware development of territorial identity – rather than a struggle to define entitlement based on present structures of power. In other words, it holds additional potential to recognize multiple claims along with community forestry, as we know it.

### Selected References

- Appadurai, A. 1988: Place and Voice in Anthropological Theory. *Cultural Anthropology* 3:16-20.
- Bouthillier, L. and Dionne, H. 1995: La Forêt à Habiter: La Notion de "Forêt Habitée" et ses Critères de Mise en Oeuvre. Service Canadien Des Forêts – Québec
- Dunk, T. 1994: Talking About Trees: Environment and Society in Forest Workers' Culture. *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 31.
- Freire, Paulo. 1972: *Cultural action for freedom* Penguin education. Harmondsworth,: Penguin.
- Harvey, D. 1989: *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural*

*Change*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Joseph, M. 2002: *Against the Romance of Community*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Katz, C. 1994: Playing the Field: Questions of Fieldwork in Geography. *Professional Geographer* 46(1):67-72.

Mascia-Lees, F., Sharpe, P. and Cohen, C. 1989: The postmodernist turn in anthropology: Cautions from a feminist perspective. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 15: 7-33.

McCarthy, J. 2002: Community-based forestry in the United States: Antecedents and New Foundations. A report to the Ford Foundation, funded by the Ford Foundation Community-Based Forestry Demonstration Project.

Whiteside, K. H. 2002: *Divided Natures: French Contributions to Political Ecology*. London: The MIT Press.