Community Forestry Research Fellowship: Midterm Report
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1. Introduction

This year, my community partners and I have been evaluating participatory research initiatives that we have conducted in five rural North Carolina communities. The evaluation process is designed to test three interrelated hypotheses: 1) that our discursive research methodology was able to identify distinctive ecological narratives in each community (i.e. particular ways in which members of each community have socially constructed the local environment and their relationship with it), 2) that these narratives are salient not only among past project participants, but among community members at large, and 3) that these narratives can help build community capacity to collectively address landscape change.

I had originally conceived of each of these hypotheses as the precondition for the next one: a participatory research project must identify local ecological narratives, and these narratives must be broadly resonant in the community, in order to help effect grassroots change in that community. Mid-way through the evaluation process, however, these linkages seem less definite. Preliminary findings lend support to the first and third hypothesis, though the second hypothesis remains inconclusive. Is it possible to build community capacity without first establishing broad representativity? I will discuss findings further in section two, below.

To carry out the evaluations, we had planned to rely upon a combination of methods, including analysis of project documentation, follow-up interviews, and a research instrument aimed at community members who had not participated in previous stages of the projects. While the first two components of this plan have proceeded without incident, the third has proven challenging. Upon reassessment, we have shifted from a comparative survey approach to an approach that combines a survey instrument with comparative focus groups. These developments are detailed in section three, below.

2. Preliminary findings

Preliminary data analyses suggest support for hypothesis #1: significant differences have been identified among the predominant narratives that members of different communities use in articulating their relationship to place. Consider the example of western Rowan County, Stanley Creek (Gaston County), and eastern Catawba County. These three areas are all located within the same region—North Carolina's southern Piedmont—but the frequencies with which various narratives were invoked by project participants in each community varied markedly from patterns in the other communities. In western Rowan, community members most often described their local landscape in terms of the natural resources that it provides them. In eastern Catawba, the natural resource narrative was equaled by another, which represented place in terms of social interaction. In Stanley Creek, by contrast, a genealogical relationship to place was predominant: community members tended to speak of the landscape as a reflection of multigenerational family ties.

These differences suggest that heterogeneous values may motivate land use decisions in the southern Piedmont region. Such local insights illustrate the potential contribution that a discursive participatory research approach can make to natural resource management: community leaders and resource managers can tailor their initiatives in a given community to reflect salient narratives in that community, thereby achieving enhanced local relevance.

At the same time, commonalities among communities are also discernable. For example, members of all three of the aforementioned communities discussed their landscapes primarily in socio-cultural, rather than biophysical, terms—itself a meaningful finding for resource management agents. Upon further analysis, more systematic inferences about the scaling of ecological discourses should be possible.

There is also evidence providing support for hypothesis #3: the identification of salient ecological narratives in a community can help build that community's capacity to address landscape change. In two communities—Western Rowan and Stanley Creek—community partners have used our participatory research process as a starting point for motivating collective action to protect valued local resources. In Western Rowan, Adele Goodman rallied project participants to support the protection of a crucial 2800-acre tract in the heart of the community. In Stanley Creek, Joyce Burt organized project participants in successfully opposing a 1000-acre development that was planned for the area. Our participatory research, then, is directly credited in empowering community members to protect 3800 acres of their local landscapes.

Our methodology has also proven helpful in fostering new kinds of partnerships between communities and conservation organizations. For example, as a result of the Eastern Catawba project, community members there have begun a conversation with Catawba Lands Conservancy (a regional land trust) about a potential role for the organization in helping the community to achieve its open-space protection goals. Such dialogues are beneficial not only to communities, but also to conservation organizations, many of which are looking to reposition themselves as the fruitfulness of traditional land protection strategies wanes.

Our discursive approach has potential to affect the work of resource management organizations much more than it has: thus far, I have largely neglected this aspect of project follow-up. Informed by participatory research, resource managers can potentially gain rhetorical competence in the ecological discourses of the rural communities they serve. They can then better assist those communities in achieving their goals. Such an approach reconceives the relationship between the land protection and community outreach functions of a conservation organization: rather than simply promoting the organization's existing land protection program, community outreach can guide that program in new directions. I am working with Catawba Lands Conservancy to develop a follow-up workshop for that organizations' staff and board members, in which we will review research findings and consider their implications for conservation praxis.

The capacity-building already evident in some project communities has proceeded despite the fact that we are only now carrying out the evaluation steps needed to test hypothesis #2—i.e. to determine how representative the participatory projects were of views in the communities where they took place. This suggests that the representativity of a narrative in a community does not have to be established before that narrative can be used to inspire collective action. Burt and Goodman, after all, were not interested in waiting for a more thoroughgoing assessment of their base of support before they took action—they mobilized community members whom they knew to be supportive of addressing landscape change (those who had taken part in the community project) to address imminent threats.

The de-linking of hypotheses #2 and #3 illustrates the centrality of community partners in participatory research. Among our projects, those that have already led to demonstrated increases in community capacity have done so not by establishing a mandate from the entire community, but by empowering partners to lead fellow project participants in effecting change. I increasingly feel that the main direct contribution of our participatory research may often be to empower community partners, rather than communities per se. This may be a noble purpose in itself, since these partners have a demonstrated ability to lead fellow community members in collective action.

Acknowledging the centrality of partners to design and outcomes of participatory research projects, however, means modifying the criteria for assessing representativity: in addition to asking how well the community is represented in the research, one must also ask how well a given community partner represents her community. I would caution against the tendency in participatory research to equate the interests of community partners with those of the community as a whole. When a researcher is working in close collaboration with a partner, this could be an awkward distinction to raise, but it is one that I plan to investigate further.

At the outset of a participatory research project, both researchers and partners should decide what the project's goal is: is it the empowerment of the entire community, the empowerment of a concerned constituency within a community (i.e. those who are motivated to participate in the project), or the empowerment of the partners to take leadership within the community? Any of these goals might be acceptable, but their limitations should be interrogated: which community voices will not be represented in our chosen goal, and should we seek those voices out? In future projects, I plan to do a better job of clarifying goals with partners from the beginning.

3. Fieldwork successes, challenges, and changes

As a whole, the follow-up evaluation of the community projects has been proceeding well. Analyzing documentation from the projects and reviewing project outcomes with community partners has been illuminating. These conversations have been good opportunities to reconnect with partners and catch up on developments in each community. We have come up with some ways of renewing our projects' relevance in the communities, and we have gleaned valuable lessons that will inform future endeavors.

Implementing the evaluative survey instrument has proven the most significant challenge. Rather than evaluating both the Little Tennessee Perspectives (LTP) and Perspectives on Land (POL) projects using surveys, we have decided to use focus groups to conduct our comparative evaluation, while focusing our survey instrument on LTP alone. The reasons not to conduct surveys in both study regions are twofold. First, we determined that only LTP could be effectively evaluated using a sample survey, because it was the only project that was recent and large-scale enough to potentially represent the population of an entire jurisdiction (in this case, Macon County). Second, I had originally underestimated the cost and logistic complexity of administering such a survey. In order to answer the questions and achieve the response rate desired by both researchers and partners, the Macon County survey has become such a major undertaking that it threatens to exceed the budget originally allocated for all of the surveys put together.

I anticipate, however, that our combined survey and focus group approach will achieve our evaluative goals. LTP represents the final evolution of the participatory methodology that we have honed over the course of the five community projects. So, a survey evaluation of LTP should serve as a referendum on our methodology more generally. Focus groups, meanwhile, will be effective in comparing the results of the different projects. They will be a more appropriate way of reaching the smaller populations represented by the POL projects. Furthermore, the focus group format more closely replicates the participatory research environment, allowing for in-depth, multi-modal exploration of project findings.