

Community Responses to Land Ownership Parcelization in Michigan's Keweenaw Peninsula CFRF Midterm Report

Progress, Challenges, and Success

During the summer and early fall of 2006 I conducted 27 semi-structured interviews, and attended numerous community events in the Keweenaw. Informants were selected using a snowball sampling approach. These interviews were roughly divided evenly between individuals involved in conservation organizations, the forest products industry, and recreational forest users. The project had a slow start as many outside of conservation groups were reluctant to be interviewed (discussed below), so the majority of interviews were conducted during the month of August.

One of the greatest challenges in this project was finding ways to connect to elements of the community outside of conservation groups. Members of conservation organizations generally showed willingness to arrange interviews; however, community members employed in the forest products industry were initially more reluctant to agree to interviews. Some of this reluctance arose from individuals' worries about the political nature of the subject: one potential respondent declined an interview citing that he "didn't want to get involved in that type of stuff." Although I made clear that interviews would be confidential, based on the nature of the political debate that has arisen around these issues in the past, this is not a moot concern. A second source of reluctance for some to be interviewed was my association with Michigan Tech (MTU), which is the largest industry in the area, and in the not too far distant past has also been a major landowner. My association with MTU was a mixed blessing, as many were eager to help me because of that association, but others were suspicious of the university through associations of power and elite status. Within the forest-industry community, I was able to mitigate this problem by relying on personal references, and through my association with MTU. Several foresters are, through membership or contracting, connected with the land preservation community. Many are also graduates of the MTU forestry school and feel some loyalty to their alma mater. Through personal references of these foresters I was able to overcome the reluctance of many logging contractors to speak with a university researcher.

Beyond these difficulties, my research was largely successful. Most of my interview respondents, including those who were reluctant to be interviewed, found the subject of the project to be interesting. Many asked for a copy of my results and an entire hunting club asked to attend my thesis defense. Most interviewees were aware that land-ownership change had become a divisive local political issue and many expressed genuine curiosity about the opinions of the broader community (see returning my results to the community below). My fieldwork in the Keweenaw Peninsula was mostly concluded by the end of September 2006, however I continue to live in the area and continue to attend community events relevant to my research. At this point my research has moved to the analysis and writing stage; I will present my results at the AAG annual meeting in April and defend my thesis in May.

Changes to Research Agenda and Preliminary Results

Over the course of my fieldwork my research agenda took some unexpected turns. My early research questions focused on how and why a network of land-protection organizations had grown up in the area instead of a more unified single effort. In a sense this was an easy question to answer: first, different funding sources lead to different groups forming to support similar but slightly different goals; secondly, organizations with common goals were also often divided by individual personality politics.

Over the course of the summer I became interested in why it was that the community broadly spoke of the same goals in what they enjoy and would like to preserve in the area, yet the community remains sharply divided over how to reach those goals. As I conducted interviews and attended local events over the summer, I came to realize that the major divide that separates people in the solutions to land-ownership parcelization is a debate

currently occurring in the Keweenaw over the what the idea of ownership will mean to the community as land ownership changes.

While all in the community seem to agree on the juridical meaning of ownership, the community is still negotiating the local social meaning of ownership. In the Keweenaw, the social meaning of ownership has rarely been contested in the past because land-ownership has been quite concentrated. These concentrated landowners have traditionally allowed open access to their land for recreational purposes, and provided a source of jobs in the community, separating the ideas of ownership of land from the ability to access land. The social responsibilities associated with ownership were clear for this type of large-scale land-tenure: public access and local employment. However as the U.S. timber industry restructures, these lands are being sold, creating a land ownership pattern that is far more heterogeneous than before. With the appearance of individual rural land-holdings in the Keweenaw an imperative has emerged to establish local social norms of land-ownership.

Much of the political conflict over land-ownership within the community seems to arise from divergent views of the social relations entailed in rural land ownership. Interestingly, much of what divides these norms of community access relates to specific limits of common, community-wide goals. For example, there is widespread consensus that a responsibility of owning land is allowing public access, however much contention arises over the degree and type of access. Many conservation-minded community members view “public access” as applying only to foot access. As a result, many motorized users tend to view lands owned by conservation organizations as “locked-up” and describe it with the same language that they use to describe land that is posted no trespassing. Similarly, most community members believe in some form of ecological ethic, all groups that I spoke with, including those not traditionally associated with environmentalism, took pains to point out their environmental responsibility.

One major factor affecting how local social norms of land-ownership are developing in the Keweenaw is the relationship between group identities that function at different scales. Specifically, wider-scale national and political identities that emphasize individual owners rights must be negotiated with local identities that place more importance on community responsibilities. The Keweenaw was largely settled by Finnish immigrants, who brought with them a strong communal sense (including widespread socialist leanings early in the last century), which persist to this day in attitudes towards access to land. This emphasis on communal access towards land can be seen in local attitudes towards posting private property: only one of my respondents advocated posting private property, all others either vehemently opposed it or viewed it as a necessary evil. However, many Keweenaw residents also strongly associate with an American national identity that is often framed in terms of individualism and autonomous property ownership. Several respondents described increasing private ownership as part of “the American way.” While a strong sense of American national identity is not new in the Keweenaw, its association with private property is, and the negotiation of these two identities shapes individuals’, and the community’s social norms of land ownership.

At the heart of this debate is how public goods are provided from private lands. In the past, corporate ownership has been something of a hybrid between Lockean notions of private ownership and a public ownership. The profits from the lands accumulated to landowners, but in its relationship with the community these forests differed little from national forests. As these lands are sold into smaller holdings (a process most often called ‘privatizing’ in the area), the community is in the process of negotiating to what degree community goods of access will remain as the land is owned by individuals.

Returning Results to the Community

So far little of my work has been returned to the community, however, there are three ways that my research will be returned to the community.

- Using GIS, I created a map of changes in parcels size for one representative township in Keweenaw County. This research has been turned over to the Keweenaw County Board of Commissioners, and pending approval for further release of proprietary data, will be made more widely available.
- I intend to create a 5-10 page document reporting my findings. I will particularly emphasize those areas where the community has widespread agreement on its goals. Highlighting areas of agreement will be important because the community is largely polarized, and does not recognize areas of agreement already exist. This document will be completed this spring, and will hopefully include some work with local media.
- My results will also help local land conservation organizations, particularly the Keweenaw Land Trust, unite broader swaths of the community.
 - o Working with the land trust, I included questions within my interviews to assess individuals' perceptions of conservation easements in general and working forest easements in particular. This will help the Keweenaw Land Trust understand what social barriers may exist to more widespread adoption of conservation agreements in the community.