

# The Politics of Place: The Struggle for Landscape and Livelihood on the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana

Community Forestry Research Fellowships Program  
Final Report

Laurie Yung  
Dissertation Fellow

## Introduction

This project examines the sociopolitical struggle over natural resource use and conservation on the Rocky Mountain Front in Montana. The research is grounded in a political ecology theoretical framework and explores politics and decision-making at multiple scales, with a focus on local communities. A number of different methods were employed to understand the multidimensional relationship between local communities, the landscape known as the Rocky Mountain Front, and natural resource politics. Research methods included interviews, a survey, work with two collaborative groups, and some use of existing socioeconomic and historical data.

In this progress report I discuss the evolution of the research questions, my experience in the field and participatory research, preliminary findings and benefits to local communities, and lessons learned from my experience thus far. I would like to thank the residents of Choteau, Augusta, Bynum, Dupuyer, and Wolf Creek for their work on this project. Their generosity has been remarkable. Without their thoughtful participation, this project would not be possible.

## Research Problem and Goals of Research

This project was deliberately broad at the outset. Questions that informed the research during initial stages included: What relationships do local communities have with the larger landscape known as the Rocky Mountain Front? What are some of the important natural resource issues in the area? How have community members engaged these issues? Initial interviews focused on people's experience of the area, what was important to them, and what kinds of tensions existed in local communities with regard to resource access, use and control, and the decision-making processes.

As research progressed these questions evolved. Some questions were answered, and others discarded. New questions emerged. I began to focus on how people worked on natural resource use and conservation across boundaries, both physical and social boundaries. New research questions included: How do landowners, agencies, and local communities work across property boundaries to facilitate landscape conservation and livelihood? How do the social and cultural changes that accompany new wealthy landowners affect this cooperation? How do politics and policy-making at multiple scales, local, state and regional, and national, affect local level collaboration?

As data collection and analysis continue these questions will likely be revised again, allowing for attention to emergent issues and phenomenon. Initial breadth and ongoing flexibility have allowed community priorities to influence the direction of the research.

## Field and Data Collection Experience

I lived in Choteau, Montana from June through August 1999 and September 2000 through May 2001. Living in Choteau made the formal components of the research, such as attending meetings, doing interviews, and gathering locally-stored and produced materials, much easier. But more importantly,

living in Choteau afforded me many opportunities for informal learning. Conversations with people on the street, observations of community activities, getting to know residents on a personal level, and participation in day to day life all provided insights into community social dynamics and people's relationship with natural resource politics in the area.

The research included 4 different types of research methods. Interviews, a survey, observations, including attendance at the meetings of two community groups, and some use existing land use and socioeconomic information all contributed to an understanding of community-landscape relationships.

I conducted a total of 116 interviews (20 at the national level, 20 at the regional level, and 76 at the local level). At the local level, I interviewed a diversity of community members, including ranchers, new landowners, agency personnel, conservationists, outfitters, and other community leaders. Wherever possible I was attentive to gender, race, and class in selecting people to interview. I talked with people who might be considered opinion leaders, as well as people who are much less visible and in some cases quite marginalized. Because ranchers are the predominant private landowners in the area, my sample was weighted heavily toward ranchers. I tried to interview a diversity of ranchers, young and old, men and women, newcomers and multigenerational families, and people with different political viewpoints.

At the regional and national levels, I interviewed people who were participating in political discourse and policy-making that affect communities on the Rocky Mountain Front. These interviews included politicians and congressional staffers, conservationists, stockgrowers association staff, private property rights advocates, and journalists. Local interviews also addressed linkages between federal policy-making and local level struggles for conservation and livelihood, and focused, in part, on public discourse and political strategies around level of decision-making (local, state and regional, national).

As described above, informal observations often filled out my picture of community-landscape relationships. Whenever possible, I attended public meetings and different kinds of community events. During Fall 2001 I began to attend the meetings of two community groups. From these meetings I learned about local efforts to promote economic development, sustain ranching, and encourage good stewardship. I also gained insights into how group dynamics and leadership influence the effectiveness of particular groups of people. The two groups I observed were very different and at times one floundered while the other flourished. Each group's success seemed to hinge on whether or not they had a good facilitator and whether or not they had a common vision and sense of purpose.

I collaborated with one of these community groups, the Teton County Growth Management Policy Citizens Advisory Committee, on the developed, administration, and analysis of a survey. The purpose of the survey was to gather information to assist this Committee in making recommendations to the Teton County Commissioners about policies to guide land use and economic development in the area. This mail back survey was sent to a random sample of Teton County residents (Teton County is the largest county on the Rocky Mountain Front), and was completed by 83% of the recipients.

I also gathered additional materials, including existing data on land use and socioeconomics. Brochures and literature provided information on how people portrayed the area. Historical accounts and back issues of local newspapers detailed changes in land use and resource control, as well as community social dynamics. GIS data illuminated land use and ownership patterns. I looked into particular policies that were relevant to community natural resource use on private and public lands. Census data provided a picture into the demographics of local communities.

### Participatory Research

Some portions of this research project were more participatory than others. In all phases of the research community interests and community priorities influenced the direction and approach of the project.

The 34 interviews that I conducted during summer 1999 were broadly focused on what kinds of issues were important to people and what they valued in the area. From these interviews, I developed a more specific set of questions focusing on some of the themes residents had emphasized. I also met with 10 different individuals one on one and asked what they hoped to learn from the research, what questions

they would ask, who I should talk with, how the research might benefit local communities, and how to get results to community members. I incorporated their advice wherever possible. Subsequent interviews were guided by a predetermined set of questions as well as the priorities and interests of the person being interviewed. Community members were part of a dialogue and had opportunities to "talk back" to the research.

The Community Land Use Survey incorporated many of the principles of participatory research. This survey was a collaboration between myself, the researcher, and a citizen's committee formed to address land use and growth in Teton County. I had been attending the meetings of this group for about 1 year before we began working on the survey. The purpose of the survey is to provide information that can be utilized by the citizen's committee in making recommendations about county policies.

Data entry is almost complete and we currently have an 83% response rate. My hope is that this response rate indicates that the survey addressed issues that are important to local communities. I am currently preparing a draft report for the committee which will provide them with descriptive statistics. The committee will then decide what kinds of additional information they need from the survey results.

The survey has truly been a collaboration, with community members' priorities and ideas driving the development of questions and the use of the results. My role as a researcher has been to provide technical assistance regarding sampling, survey design, and data analysis, as well as communicate the advantages and disadvantages of particular approaches. Because this is a rural county with a small population and tax base, I did not ask for any money, except for copies, postage, and data entry.

### Preliminary Findings and Analyses

Because data analysis is in progress any conclusions are tentative. I have analyzed about 70% of the qualitative interviews, and data entry for the survey is almost complete. Most additional material has been collected, but not all of it has been analyzed. Observation of community groups is ongoing. Despite these limitations a rough sketch of what the findings might look like follows. This description of preliminary findings will focus primarily on interview data, with some attention to field observations and other information.

In-depth interviews provided information on how meanings, values, and beliefs relate to the political claims people make regarding natural resource use and conservation across property boundaries. These interviews examined how the meanings of private rights and public goods relate to natural resource policy and management. Interviews also focused on the meanings of boundaries and how they affected cooperation across the landscape. The goal of these interviews was to understand how particular symbols, such as ideas about private property, wildness, ranching, and rural communities, influenced public discourse and political struggle over the future of conservation and community on the Rocky Mountain Front.

Many of the natural resource issues that residents and ranchers are concerned with cross property boundaries and are affected by management on Forest Service lands, private ranch lands, and others. Weeds spread downstream or across fencelines. Deer and elk feed on haystacks that ranchers need for their cattle. A neighbor's subdivision affects a rancher's ability to manage cattle. These cross boundary ecological issues exist in a landscape where land ownership and land use are changing. Wealthy people are purchasing large properties for vacation homes and hobby ranches. These "newcomers" may have very different ideas about issues like weed management, hunting, or neighborliness. The combination of an ecology that does not heed property lines and changing social dynamics means that class boundaries and property boundaries interact to exacerbate tensions.

For example, some "newcomers" close their property to hunting, which increases deer and elk populations on their property. These deer and elk then cross over to neighboring ranches to eat on haystacks that ranchers need for cattle. A four year drought has led to smaller hay crops and soaring hay prices. "Newcomers" have an external source of income, which creates animosity amongst ranchers who are struggling in the face of drought and low cattle prices. The *No Trespassing* signs that accompany

closure of these properties may symbolize different interpretations of property boundaries than have historically existed in the area.

Meanwhile, many residents and ranchers feel the spotlight of the national conservation movement on their communities and their landscape. Because the area is relatively undeveloped and adjacent to the largest wilderness complex in the lower 48, conservationists at local, regional, national, and even international levels are pursuing policies to prevent development. Many ranchers have the sense that their management activities are under surveillance by people who live elsewhere and have different values and priorities from them. There is a sense of disempowerment amongst some community members, a sense that the decisions that most affect landscape and livelihood in the area are being made in far away places. While many residents acknowledge the national interest in federal lands, they often argue for more local control, for more local knowledge and local priorities to be incorporated into decision-making.

The discourse about conservation in the area revolves largely around private property rights. As the federal lands of the Rocky Mountain Front have been protected as wilderness or withdrawn from development through agency decision-making, conservationists and biologists have increasingly focused on the private lands to the east. In many ways the eastern boundary of the Rocky Mountain Front is slowly moving eastward, as our understanding of wildlife migrations becomes more sophisticated, and as the wildlife actually extend their ranges in that direction.

The private property discourse turns in part on ideas about private rights and public goods, and the relationship between them. Ranchers and conservationists alike argue that good stewardship on private property protects public goods. However, there are significant disagreements about whether this means that ranchers should be compensated financially for providing wildlife habitat and open space, or whether their activities should be restricted and regulated to prevent damage to this public good.

Many of the research results point to the potential for local level initiatives that work toward both conservation and traditional livelihoods. These initiatives could exert local level power over decision-making in some arenas, in particular with regard to private lands. However, to date there has been little cooperation across property boundaries. While the Nature Conservancy is working with some landowners and the Forest Service argues for a landscape level approach, there are very few examples of different landowners actually making decisions together. Efforts at collaboration in the early 1990s were disastrous, increasing polarization in local communities instead of building bridges.

However, interviews indicate that people want to see more cooperation. And more recent efforts at collaboration seem poised for success rather than failure. Participants in these efforts argue that community dynamics have changed in the last decade, and that local communities may now be ready to work together on common goals.

### Benefit of Research to Community

At this point I can only offer some predictions about how this research might benefit local communities. Different components of the research may end up being more or less useful to local communities than others. Over time, portions of the research that did not appear to be immediately useful may provide valuable insights and information. Ultimately, community members themselves are best situated to decide how the research should be used.

Results of the Community Land Use Survey will benefit members of the Teton County Growth Management Policy Citizens Advisory Committee, who have been asked to make specific policy recommendations to County Commissioners regarding land use. Survey results will provide them with a sense of what residents value in the area, what they think about particular changes (such as subdivision or CRP), and what kinds of policies might facilitate the kind of future they would like. While the survey will provide valuable information, the Advisory Committee will still need to sort through different opinions, different methods of implementation, and the local politics of decision-making.

Survey results will be made available to community members at the County Courthouse. This will enable interested resident to access results and communicate how they hope to see the information utilized. Making other components of the research available to local communities may prove more

challenging, but will be essential for benefits to be accrued. I plan to engage local groups in dialogues about the research results during the summer and fall. Several groups have already asked me to make presentations at their meetings.

### Lessons Learned

I probably learned as much about the research process and my role as a researcher as I did about the relationships between local communities and the landscape they live in. Here I focus on some of the challenges of the field experience and participatory research. I also make some recommendations for the Community Forestry Research Fellowship program.

There were times when I found it difficult to be a researcher living in the community I was researching. I felt that I was always in the role of the researcher because at any moment I could learn something relevant to the project, which meant I was always at work, unless I was sleeping. At first I tried to build relationships with people who I considered outside of the research; people who I did not interview or discuss the research with; people who were just my friends. But my attempts to separate certain individuals from the research were futile. They wanted to know what I was doing and what I was learning, and often told me stories that were very much connected to the project. At the same time, I often felt simultaneously part of and completely separate from the community I was living in. Was I a member of this community, or a person observing it? After awhile I realized that, while difficult at times, this is the essence of field research; the lines between researcher and community become blurred. Ultimately, I learned a lot more because I did not adhere strictly to these boundaries. For instance, the personal anecdotes of friends provided important details about particular community issues. I was able to ask them for clarification on sensitive topics. And, my position as mostly outsider, but a little bit insider, provided me with insights into the relationship between "newcomers" and "oldtimers" in the area.

I was also continually learning that participatory research is emergent and proceeds according to an utterly unpredictable timeline. At the outset of this project I could not have predicted exactly how and when the participatory elements of the research would take shape. At times I felt woefully inadequate due to the lack of participation by community members in the research. My early attempts at meaningful collaboration with community members seemed contrived and self-serving. While people expressed interest in the research and confidence that findings would benefit local communities, exactly how the research might be used and what specific benefits might be accrued eluded me. Through some perseverance and some luck I finally hit on a component of the research that could be a meaningful collaboration between myself and community members, and directly inform a community-based decision-making process. I found this project simply by continually talking with different community members about ways to collaborate until we finally hit on one that would really be useful to residents.

I also learned that research is never comprehensive, never really complete. There were so many topics I wanted to learn about, so many people to interview, and so many potential sources of insight and information. But I soon realized that I could not learn every detail and follow every thread. I had to prioritize. This was difficult for me because I felt that I was doing an injustice to local communities and ranchers in the area. How could I present anything but a wholly complete picture? Of course, I realized that I could work on the project for a lifetime and never have anything near a complete picture. While I understand that research is always a partial and incomplete representation of the world, it was still difficult to abandon particular topics and ideas.

How can the Community Forestry Research Fellowship (CFRF) program better help graduate students along this road? I think the CFRF program is an incredibly valuable program that is having an important impact on community forestry and participatory research.

With regard to fostering participatory research, I think working with predissertation fellows early in the process is key. If predissertation fellowships are awarded during the first year of study, graduate students have time to build the relationships required for participatory research. Perhaps communication with faculty advisors during the predissertation stage would help make expectations clear. And perhaps fellows should sign a contract stipulating that they are committed to the principles of participatory

research, will make meaningful attempts to make research a collaboration between the researcher and the community, and will be honest and open about these attempts at participation. Maybe the CFRF program could develop a paper on participatory research and community forestry to ensure that fellows and advisors were on the same page from the beginning (not a position paper that would stifle creativity, but a document that would provide a common foundation to work from).

More generally, encouraging mentoring and working groups might help fellows troubleshoot and keep them apprised of the latest research. When I was a predissertation fellow we were each assigned a steering committee member as a contact person. While I rarely took advantage of this opportunity, it was nice to know there was someone I could contact if necessary. Perhaps fellows, steering committee members and/or other people in the CFRF network could form small 5 person working groups that touch base regularly, monitor progress, answer questions, and provide support.

Overall, I think the CFRF program is doing excellent work and providing an exceptional opportunity for graduate students like myself. I have been honored to participate and have learned so much from the workshops and the steering committee members and other participants. I appreciate the sincerity and enthusiasm with which steering committee members and program coordinator approach their work with the CFRF program.