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Chapter 12. Creating Community Forests

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Community forests have existed around the world for centuries. Community forests are properties historically owned and managed for a variety of forestry values by a village, city, town, school district, township, country, or other political subdivision of the state. In the United States, community forests have been owned and operated for more than a century by Native Americans, Spanish land-grant (Hispano) settlers in the Southwest, and by early colonists in New England (Baker and Kusel 2003; McCullough 1995). In the early twentieth century, the establishment of community forests was advocated by a small group of professional U.S. foresters, but their advice went largely unheeded (Brown 1941; Reynolds 1939). Today, efforts to establish community forests are coming from a new source—community-based conservation organizations seeking to avoid landscape parcelization and to maintain local access to and control of nearby working forests for the conservation of wildlife, rural lifestyles, jobs, recreation, and ecosystem services (Belsky 2004; Duvall and Belsky 2005; Braxton-Little 2006).

Creating community forests represents a new strategy in the U.S. community-based forestry toolbox. Whereas community-based forestry usually involves local communities and their allies collaboratively interacting to increase their involvement in sustainable public forestland

management, community forests refer to forests that collectively are owned and managed by communities, towns, municipalities and, in the case discussed below, by community-based conservation organizations.

This chapter provides a history and analysis of a community forest being created in the U.S. Intermountain West in the twenty-first century. The chapter begins with an overview of community forests, including a typology of their major forms. Insights from the literature on common property and community-based conservation follow to highlight challenges regarding the definition and nature of “community” in conservation and the complexities involved in coordinating conservation across mixed-ownership landscapes. The following section discusses corporate timber divestiture, a driving force behind current efforts to purchase and create community forests in the Intermountain West. The chapter then turns to the experience of the Blackfoot Challenge, a community-based conservation organization in western Montana that has been successful in acquiring former corporate timberlands and is in the process of establishing a community forest on a portion of them. The chapter highlights key lessons, caveats, and possibilities for community forests pursued by community-based conservation organizations in the United States today.

Understanding Community Forests

Community forests involve the ownership and management of forest resources by groups of people who establish rules for whom and how these forest resources can be used and may be viewed as a kind of common-property regime. A common-property regime involves resources that jointly are owned and managed by groups of people who use them and who have a set of

rules (formal or informal) defining rights and duties to access, withdrawal, management, exclusion, and alienation (Schlager and Ostrom 1992). Common property (be it forests, fisheries, waterways, or otherwise) often has been misunderstood and confused with “open access” properties, which are defined by a lack of clear ownership and exclusion-of-use rights. Common property has clear ownership and exclusion-of-use rights (at least it strives to have them). As such, it is useful to think of community forests as common property involving collective ownership and management of a forest parcel.

Definitions and Types

Community forests are owned, managed, and used by different types of communities, with different authority and ownership arrangements. The main types of communities who own and manage forests include two historical or archetypical examples and a third, emergent type. The three types are:

Indigenous Community Forests: The community is defined by shared residence, culture, and (mostly) customary forest access and resource use.

Town or Municipal Community Forests: The community is defined by shared residence and forest use administrated through a town or municipal (local) government.

Community-based Conservation Organizations Community Forests: The community is defined by community-affiliated landowners, partner organizations, and legal arrangements (see Table 12.1).

Each of these three types of community forests is examined below, highlighting the definition of community, ownership, and collective-management institutions. The third type of community

forest particularly is relevant to this chapter because it includes new community forests being established in the United States. After introducing these three types of community forests, the chapter returns to issues regarding common property ownership, governance, and community in conservation.

[insert Table 12.1 here]

Indigenous Community Forests

Perhaps the most widely held notion of community forests are those associated with indigenous or native peoples in remote locations. These include ancient community forests, such as those found in upland Asia (Conklin 1957; Kunstadter 1978; Poffenberger 1990; Peluso et al. 1995; Lynch and Talbott 1995), or more recent ones established as a result of peasant struggles such as the *ejidos* of Mexico (Bray et al. 2003). These community forests typically are connected to discrete villages with well-defined physical and social boundaries and cultures. They are self-governed by long-established traditions and rules, often involving leadership by community elders. The function of traditional community-forest authorities and governance institutions in this type of community forest includes setting rules on community membership and allocating forestland for various uses, including cultivating rotational agricultural plots (or “swiddens”); gathering wild foods, herbs, medicinal, and other useful plants; hunting or fishing; and cutting timber to build homes and other structures. In addition to allocating forest and appropriate forest uses, local community-forest authorities also are responsible for meting out penalties and fines to those who disobey local forest-management rules and for negotiating conflict and disputes.

Much has been written about the co-evolution, adaptability, and resiliency of traditional community forest knowledge and governance institutions, including the challenges they face in the modern era (Berkes 1989; Poffenberger 1990). Many indigenous community forests only are locally recognized based on customary use and local governance institutions. The territorializing and modernization interests of nation-states, as well as their interest in rapid resource exploitation for export production, has led most colonial and modern states to disregard customary community forests and to not protect them from competing interests. For example, earlier legal protections afforded to lands communally owned and managed in Mexico, known as *ejidos*, have been eroded with the passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement and state authorization of logging concessions (Bray et al. 2003). Today numerous transnational efforts are underway to gain legal protection of native land claims, culture and community-based forestry, and natural-resource management regimes (Brosius et al. 1998; Global Caucus on Community-Based Forest Management 2005; Li 1996).

Town or Municipal Forests

Community forests based on geographically defined communities with town or municipal government jurisdiction represent the second type of community forests. Most common examples of these include town and municipally owned and managed forests in New England (McCoullough 1995), Western Europe (Jeanrenaud n.d.), Latin America (Ferroukhi 2003) and British Columbia (Canada) (Brown et al. 2005; McCarthy 2006).

Town forests are a tradition in New England. Some have been around for centuries, established by English immigrants to America in the mid-1600s. Colonial authorities granted land to groups

of individuals who established communities and were known as “town proprietors.” Proprietors determined the form of their village boundaries, assigned land for individual and community purposes, and kept remaining lands in common or what McCullough describes as “technically a form of undivided ownership, with each owner sharing a proportional right to use the whole subject to limitations against abuse or waste” (1995,15). Initially, councils of town proprietors collectively decided and enforced rules for different communal lands use. Later, some communal lands were transferred to public lands to benefit a broader, nonresidentially defined community or shifted into private ownership.

In the early twentieth century, all six states comprising New England passed laws allowing the establishment of town forests. Forests were acquired through donation, purchase, or seizure when tax bills went unpaid. Today, most are managed by local town councils for a combination of forest-commodity production, watershed protection, and recreation (McCullough 1995). In Vermont alone, it is estimated that about 120 of the state’s 251 municipalities already own a total of 140 forests and new ones are being established (Curtis 2006). Acquisitions include the purchase by Randolph, NH, of a 10,000-acre forest slated for development and a 5,300-acre community forest known as the 13 Mile Woods purchased by the town of Errol, NH, with the assistance of the Trust for Public Land. New England has been a leader in both historic maintenance as well as recent establishment of town or municipal community forests. The region also has been successful in hosting the third type of community forests, where ownership and management moves into the hands of community-based conservation organizations.

Community Forests of Community-Based Conservation Organizations

The third type of community forest is the newest form and represents a growing area of interest, not only in New England but in the Intermountain West region of the United States. It involves forests owned and managed by community-based or affiliated nonprofit conservation organizations, frequently collaborating or partnering with other nonprofit groups, landowners, local or regional land trusts, and state or federal resource-management agencies. These organizations go by a number of different names (e.g., partnerships, consensus groups, community-based forestry, community-based conservation, collaborative conservation, community-based ecosystem management, and grassroots ecosystem management), and literally have exploded in numbers since the 1990s (Conley and Moote 2003). A focus on local community and place differentiates these organizations from national-level, nongovernmental organizations working largely on policy or issues of a broader scale, such as the Sierra Club, Wilderness Society, or National Wildlife Federation (Cestero 1999). Many have evolved from informally organized associations meeting periodically to becoming more formally organized 501(c)(3) nonprofit organizations, legally able to negotiate government and other financial contracts. The long-term goals of many community- or place-based organizations are to resolve local resource-management conflicts through alternatives to litigation, to get forest-management activities moving, and to raise the capacity of their organizations to influence decisions affecting both the social well-being of their communities and the ecological quality of their lands. Indeed, the mission statements of many community-based conservation organizations explicitly seek to maintain and nurture connections between people and forests (Baker and Kusel 2003; Cestero and Belsky 2003; Gray et al. 2001; Moote and Bedel Loucks 2003).

As noted above, community-based conservation organizations often work collaboratively with land trusts, foundations, state and federal resource agencies, and limited-liability corporations to acquire land and establish community forests. Land trusts have played a particularly important role in such efforts. Land trusts are local, regional, or statewide nonprofit conservation organizations that help protect natural, scenic, recreational, agricultural, historic, or cultural property through assisting direct land transactions, primarily the purchase or acceptance of donations of land or conservation easements.¹ Land trusts often work to preserve open land that is important to particular communities and regions where they operate. There are nearly 900 independent land trusts in the United States. Foundations also can be affiliated with particular people and places and vary in size and scope but largely are defined by their nonprofit status. Limited-liability companies are organizations created under state law that are recognized as legal entities separate from their owners and offer their members' protection from personal liability for the debts of the company's business, similar to the liability protection that a corporation offers to its shareholders.

A recent legal change in the United States signals growing recognition of this third form of community forests. It is House Bill 2729, passed in Oregon in May 2005. The bill authorizes a city or county to create a special community-forest authority that is able to issue revenue bonds or other revenue obligations for towns, municipalities, or possibly local community organizations to acquire and maintain community forests on collectively owned, private forestlands. The bill defines "community forestlands" as "private lands that are zoned and permanently managed for commercial forestland use and any interests in those private lands,

¹ Definition from The Land Trust Alliance, the major coordinating and lobbying organization for the land-trust movement in the United States, founded in 1982. See the LTA web site: <http://www.lta.org>.

including related roads or other improvements financed by a community forest authority.” This legislation was sought to ensure the legal ability of towns, municipalities, and community-based conservation organizations to acquire and own community forests for both commercial and conservation means.

Insights from Common Property and Community-Based Conservation Research

Community-based conservation organizations face considerable challenges as they become involved in the community-forest movement in the United States. A first set of issues involves ideas about property. While numerous ideas of property exist in the United States, two narratives are particularly salient: the first emphasizes inherent rights and characteristics associated with property as a material entity, while the second approaches property as a more socially oriented process and set of relationships (Freyfogle 1998). In the first narrative, the sanctity of individual, private-property rights is a central tenet, as is a belief in the essential right of individuals to participate in a vigorous, self-regulating market without interference by government. This approach builds on the seventeenth-century work of John Locke and emphasizes a laissez faire approach to regulation, positing that the greatest efficiency in resource use and long-term protection of the resource stems from the voluntary efforts of private owners. Accordingly, in this view, the most effective land-use decisions are those made by individual landowners due to their confidence in their ability to control future products of their efforts. This tradition has bolstered the growth of a private-property rights movement in the United States that has great support in the Intermountain West (Brick and Cawley 1996).

The second narrative does not view property arrangements as inherent (or natural) but as evolving cultural creations influenced by particular historical contexts. The rise of modern business enterprises and corporate charters in the late nineteenth century challenged the above ideas about property and put pressure on them to change. Property rights evolved from a focus on the physical thing, such as land, to its market value. This shift enabled the development of the now familiar view of property as a bundle of sticks. In this metaphor, property is treated not as a single right, but rather as a collection of specific powers (or “sticks”) where property rights more easily could be divided, with different individuals holding different sticks in the bundle (Bromley 1991).

This second property narrative has paved the way for a growing complexity of property arrangements. The increasing popularity of purchasing development rights (or conservation easements) illustrates that Americans are able to separate the different rights bundled together in private ownership and make arrangements for protecting those rights that markets alone fail to protect (Geisler and Danker 2000). Easements also suggest an evolving ecological approach to property that has generated momentum to update United States common law and evolving meanings of ownership, including what it would take in property law to enable greater coordination among levels of government, meaningful citizen involvement, and understanding of the weaknesses as well of the strengths of markets in providing public goods (Freyfogle 2003). Fairfax et al. (2005) use the term “mosaics” to draw attention to the diversity of ownership arrangements under which land is purchased by different acquirers under varying terms and conditions and is managed to meet very different goals.

Common-property regimes, widely misunderstood in the past, have received considerable attention over the last few decades, in part because of increasing recognition of the benefits of community-level ownership and management. An important benefit of group ownership is that it can avoid the parcelization associated with individual ownership and land markets, such as with forest landscapes, which are more likely to sustain multiple ecological functions if they remain intact and connected rather than sliced into uncoordinated parcel. A second advantage is that because of long-standing rules, customs, and local knowledge, rural communities often are capable of self-regulating resource management (Lynch and Talbott 1995; Western and Wright 1994). Third, group ownership can promote social justice because it nurtures community participation and inclusive decisionmaking procedures and restores customary resource access and control where these have been ignored, overwritten, or forcibly appropriated (Brechin et al. 2002).

Advocates of common-property regimes recognize the practical difficulties of implementing them on the ground and suggest a high priority should be identifying conditions under which such regimes actually work (Ostrom 1999; McKean 2000). These terms and conditions have clear implications for community forests in the United States and include: 1) clearly specified property rights among potential users; 2) appropriate legal support from governments; 3) clear boundaries of the common resource; 4) clear criteria for membership in the group of eligible users of the resource; 5) rules that are clear and enforceable; 6) the right of users to modify their use rules over time; 7) rules that correspond to what the system can tolerate and be environmentally conservative; 8) infractions of use rules must be monitored and punished

appropriately; and 9) distribution of decisionmaking and use rights to co-owners of the common need not be equal but “fair” (i.e., acceptable to members).

Community-Based Conservation

Creating the conditions under which common-property regimes work is extremely difficult. Whereas communities among indigenous groups and municipal or town forests are defined by fixed residence, shared culture and local government, this definition of community is neither stable nor universal (Agrawal and Gibson 2000). Community-based conservation organizations in the United States face vastly different social and political conditions than found in these archetypal types. As such, they need to be wary of uncritically transferring community-management and property models. Critics of community-based conservation and collaborative conservation have been quick to point out the limitations of these approaches for the United States. Two key criticisms are first, that they redirect attention away from gains achieved in the United States through passage of environmental rulings, regulations, litigation, and land purchases or exchanges (Coggins 1996), and, second, while community-forestry advocates lament interest-group politics for disadvantaging marginal groups and the considerable time embroiled in conflict and litigation, community- or place-based collaborative planning privileges local residents and communities who also are more vulnerable to elite, and especially corporate, capture (McCloskey 1999).

Questions regarding the ability of community-based conservation efforts to effectively engage and represent broad interests across their communities have been raised by those who otherwise are sympathetic to community-based resource management. Common-property scholar McCay

(2004) is concerned that those living in highly capitalistic, industrialized worlds may be prone to mythologize an earlier, pre-capitalistic time and romanticize “the commons” as part of a Western suspicion regarding unrestrained individualism, as well as romanticize small, rural communities as democratically sharing and sustainably using forests. Empirical studies document that small, rural communities are not always homogenous, harmonious, and built around shared values and governance capability (Brosius et al. 1998; Agrawal and Gibson 1999). On the contrary, the costs and benefits of participating in community-based, natural-resource programs are not always borne equally or fairly across members within small, rural communities. Differences based on class, race, gender, or age can influence how community members are involved in resource management and the particular knowledge they potentially bring to bear on it. Even in well-intentioned, community-level focused efforts, unintended consequences occur that intensify state control over local resources, lives, and livelihoods (Li 2002) and even involve sabotage by factions within communities who think they are excluded from the benefits of community conservation efforts (Belsky 1999). Community-based conservation organizations must grapple with the complexities involved in justifying who they define as “the community” in conservation, who decides this based on what criteria, and how they go about being inclusive. These issues are most contentious where demographic change and resource conflicts are highly dynamic, such as in the U.S. Intermountain West.

Lastly, there is a question of the stability and endurance of community-based conservation organizations. Many community-based conservation organizations have not been around for more than a decade or two. It is not clear if they will be able to maintain the necessary, long-term commitments involved in forest ownership, planning, monitoring, and reinvesting. It also is

unknown if they can be sophisticated and resilient enough to deal with the tensions and challenges they face in defining community, property, and governance regimes, let alone how to resolve conflicts among competing forest users. I turn now to a discussion of the restructuring of the timber industry, as it sets the current context for community-based conservation organizations' involvement in land acquisition and establishment of community forests.

Converting Working Forests to Real Estate with Corporate Timberland Divestment

Restructuring within the corporate timber industry provides a context for recent interest of community-based conservation organizations in creating community forests. In the 1990s, private industrial forestlands produced one-third of the total timber in the country (Best and Wayburn 2001). Over the last decade, however, this percentage declined as the forest-products industry substantially changed. Some estimates suggest that about 25 million acres have been sold by the forest industry and acquired by investment-oriented landowners since 1985 (Stein 2005), with 15 million acres nationwide changing ownership between 1998 and 2002 alone (Ingerson 2003). Timber companies have sold timberlands to alleviate debt and to shift capital toward more economically productive activities. Some strategies include moving capital away from less productive timberlands into lower cost, higher productivity timberlands or moving out of timber completely; some companies also are refocusing on production manufacturing and biotechnology research (Block and Sample 2001). Some divested timberlands are being purchased by institutional timberland investors outside the forest-products industry known as Timber Investment Management Organizations, while some are sold to support environmental conservation (Block and Sample 2001).

Of most concern to many local communities and community-based conservation organizations is the recent trend for corporate timber companies to value some of their lands as having a “higher and better use” as real estate than for timber or providing ecological services (Stein 2005). Many soon-to-be-sold “higher and better use” parcels are heavily cut before they are subdivided and placed on the market (known as “liquidation harvesting”). Even as clear-cut parcels, they are desirable to those seeking to live in less crowded, less polluted, and less crime-filled areas near scenic public lands with public services such as airports, such as is found in the Intermountain West states of Montana, Colorado, and Idaho (Rasker et al. 2004). Strong pressure from the environmental and preservationist sectors to maintain lands for biodiversity value, paradoxically, also have contributed to the rising value of western lands for real estate. The idea that nature can be restored to a “pristine” condition has motivated campaigns to remove cattle from public rangelands and to reduce timber harvesting, presuming that the shift away from a landscape based on resource production would necessarily benefit wildlife and biodiversity. But as Sayre (2002) writes, opposition to natural resource-based livelihoods actually aided and abetted the subdivision and suburbanization of the West by appearing environmentally benign if accompanied by the elimination of timber cutting and cattle grazing on public lands. The restoration of these lands, in a perverse way, has encouraged other rural lands to be developed.

Plum Creek Timber Company is a major player in the divestiture trend. The Plum Creek CEO actively promotes Plum Creek as a land company and is often quoted as saying “It’s not just trees; it’s the underlying value of the land.” Plum Creek estimates the value of its targeted 1.3 million acres of “higher and better use” lands at nearly \$2 billion, most of it in Montana,

Wisconsin, Georgia, Florida, and Maine (Ward 2006). Conservation organizations, government agencies, and local communities in western Montana are extremely concerned about Plum Creek timberland divestiture and future land sales. Alan Wood, Wildlife Mitigation Coordinator for Montana Fish and Wildlife and Parks, sums up his concerns:

These lands are valuable and are at risk of being lost. Who will own these lands? What will be the forest management? How will they contribute to the local economy, community and jobs? All these questions are important, but once the lands are sold and subdivided those options are gone... forever. (Wood in Hartmann 2004, 40)

To date, 7,000 acres of Plum Creek “higher and better use” lands have been sold to the U.S. Forest Service, 1,400 acres have been sold as real estate, and 1,500 acres remain on the market (Parker 2005). Rural communities and affiliated community-based conservation organizations, not willing to let the market determine that the highest value of these lands is for residential development, are raising funds to purchase former timberlands and manage them for an array of social and ecological concerns, including broad, landscape-level forest conservation. While this trend is occurring across the country, below we take a brief look at the experience of the Blackfoot Challenge in Western Montana.

Creating Community Forests: The Experience of the Blackfoot Challenge in Western Montana

While several community-based conservation organizations in western Montana in the Yaak, Flathead, and Upper Swan Valleys are seeking to acquire Plum Creek timberlands that are for sale, the Blackfoot Challenge has had the most success. A brief examination of the Blackfoot

Community Project suggests factors that account for this organization's successes, as well as future challenges it faces to develop and operate a community forest.

The Blackfoot Challenge is a community-based conservation organization that began with the efforts of local landowners and ranchers to conserve the famous Blackfoot River and its spectacular watershed. In 1993, it incorporated as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with the mission to protect native streams, habitat, open lands, ranching, and a rural way of life across the 1.5 million-acre watershed from "ridge to ridge." The organization consists of an executive director, a board representing diverse interests of residents, and employees from local government resource agencies and nongovernmental organizations; subcommittees are tasked to do the actual work. The Blackfoot Challenge and its many partners have, over the years, accomplished an impressive array of conservation projects that have gained them national prominence. These include extensive stream and grassland restoration, weed control, and brakes on development involving conservation easements on some 90,000 of the 300,000 acres of private land in the Blackfoot Valley (more than any other watershed in Montana). Importantly, these efforts have been reached through a consensus-oriented, collaborative approach to decisionmaking and stewardship (<http://www.blackfootchallenge.org/am/publish/>).

The idea to create a community forest arose within the context of the recent Blackfoot Community Project, a joint effort of the Blackfoot Challenge, The Nature Conservancy, and Plum Creek to enable the latter to sell timberlands it intends to divest to the project instead of putting it on the open market. The goal of the project is to prevent further land fragmentation via land sales and residential development and to promote conservation of working forests, wildlife

habitat, and a land-based, rural lifestyle. The project successfully produced an agreement for Plum Creek to sell approximately 89,000 acres of its former timberlands in the Blackfoot watershed to the project, with The Nature Conservancy serving as the bridge financier. The transaction involved years of quiet deliberation among the partners. The plan involved The Nature Conservancy owning the land until it can resell it to either adjacent landowners for consolidation of ranches, to private buyers with conservation easements, or to federal agencies for inclusion into public land holdings. Decisions regarding which lands are to be resold and under what arrangement are decided through a process of public involvement, led by the Blackfoot Challenge's land director. By late 2006, the partnership has been able to purchase 68,000 acres of former Plum Creek timberlands; nearly 25,000 acres have been resold to public agencies with money from the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund and 160 acres have been resold to private buyers. To offset the loss of tax-exempt federal lands, the partnership is attempting to raise an endowment fund to pay payments in-lieu of taxes (PILTs) to the counties involved. As the name suggests, PILTs provide funds to compensate for funds lost when taxes are not charged such as when property shifts from private to public ownerships.

Approximately 5,600 acres of the project's acquired land located at the base of Ovando Mountain will be resold to the Blackfoot Challenge for the creation of the Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (BCCA). While these lands have been repeatedly logged and are of marginal timber value, they are located in an important transition zone between federally designated wilderness, national forest, and fertile valley bottomlands, rich in riparian and wetland vegetation and providing critical wildlife habitat. Furthermore, they are highly valued by valley residents and users from other communities (such as the city of Missoula located 45 miles away) for

world-class recreation and hunting. With restoration, they also can be a future source of timber revenue. Thus, goals for the BCCA include restoring the 5,600 acres of the BCCA and coordinating its management to meet user as well as ecosystem needs and priorities of adjacent private and public lands (Blackfoot Challenge 2004).

From the project's inception, organizers of the BCCA have said that the specifics of who will own and manage the BCCA will be decided according to a "community-driven plan." Putting this mandate into action has posed many challenges. An initial challenge was identifying who constitutes the "community" for whom the BCCA shall be owned and managed by and for. The Blackfoot watershed consists of 1.5 million acres, including the 132 mile-long Blackfoot River, and lies within three counties containing seven towns with a total of approximately 2,500 households. Some households are part-time or seasonal residents. Much of the non-corporate private lands are large, working ranches. Prior to the Plum Creek sales, ownership was divided between public land (60%), corporate timber holdings (20%), and private landowners (20%), however, these statistics hide much of the complexity involved in the mosaics of land ownership and control associated with recent conservation transactions.

The leaders of the Blackfoot Community Project have pursued a definition of "community" based largely on the watershed's landowners. Public involvement practices initially involved meetings with landowners up and down the valley. The leaders of the project worked closely with town officials to organize and advertise public meetings, share information, and solicit feedback. Additional activities involved maintaining web sites and hanging posters and bulletins around town centers. Again, the focus was on the watershed's residents and landowners.

According to press releases, meeting notes, and interviews with project organizers, participation at these public meetings was high, as was support for the conservation partnership to acquire former Plum Creek timberlands.

In an attempt to more systematically understand residents' views on the proposed community forest, a mail survey was sent to all landowners adjoining the BCCA; cost and logistics restricted the population to this sub-sample as an initial stage (Duvall and Belsky 2005). More than half of respondents defined the "community" for which the BCCA is to be owned and managed for to involve the entire Blackfoot Valley rather than just nearby landowners in the town of Ovando, as well as users from other areas such as Missoula. Less than half said that the community should only refer to landowners near the proposed community forest. The survey also confirmed that residents supported acquisition of these lands to maintain undeveloped forest and grasslands for wildlife, to safeguard public access for hunting and recreation, and to more effectively manage grazing and invasive weeds.

A second set of challenges face all community forest regimes but present particular challenges for community forests established by community-based conservation organizations. These entail ownership and management institutions, rules, and objectives. Results from the landowner survey found that about half of respondents wanted more information before supporting the proposal that the Blackfoot Challenge becomes the legal owner and key manager of the BCCA. This finding is very important. It underscores the greater ambiguity regarding the terms and conditions of ownership in this third and evolving community forestry regime. Unlike in indigenous community forests and town forests, where local authority and jurisdiction is held by

long-term and custom-established authorities, in community-based conservation organizational-led efforts, residents questioned the endurance of such an organization, as well as its capacity to be responsive to broad interests and to create institutions and rules for effective management (Duvall and Belsky 2005).

When asked if respondents supported the Blackfoot Challenge with community input to develop the BCCA management plan, approximately 21% did not answer and 16% wanted more information before deciding who exactly should develop the management plan (Duvall and Belsky 2005). Based on these results, in 2005 the Blackfoot Challenge leadership created a Blackfoot Community Conservation Area Advisory Council charged to solicit ideas and offer recommendations. Council membership was open to volunteers from across the valley. The council currently meets once a month to identify key issues and work toward developing a “community-driven” plan for owning and governing the BCCA.

Among the challenges facing the BCCA council is deciding what exactly it means for the community forest to be managed for the protection of the “rural lifestyle.” The survey found that residents defined rural lifestyle as involving ranching and other natural resource-based livelihoods, as well as enjoying open space, low population density, close community interaction, and a variety of ecological amenities (Duvall and Belsky 2005). The challenge facing the BCCA management plan is to accommodate all of these values; trade offs and choices will be inevitable.

A third set of issues arise from the particulars of the Blackfoot experience. The Blackfoot Valley case suggests a winning mix of conditions that enabled a successful land sale and the promise of developing effective ownership and management institutions. The combination of factors that led to these successes are unlikely to exist elsewhere or even in this valley at a different point in time. The factors that were most important to their success include the following. First, there was a history of close personal relationships between leaders of the Blackfoot Challenge, The Nature Conservancy, Plum Creek and local public natural resource management agencies. In reflecting about their experience, the partners emphasized the importance of their close and trusting relationships. Second, Plum Creek was a willing seller in the Blackfoot Valley. Plum Creek considers timberlands in the Blackfoot to be of comparatively marginal value to them—they are not particularly productive and are located far from the closest mill—and they are available in large parcels, which lowers transaction costs. Third, the market value of timberlands in the Blackfoot Valley is lower than elsewhere in the state. By way of comparison, Plum Creek has been more reluctant to sell “higher and better use” lands to a community conservation organization in the nearby Swan Valley, where timber is of higher quality and the company plans to remain in the timber business and where real estate prices are among the highest in Montana. They seem to be particularly unwilling to support land acquisition for the expressed purpose of developing a community forest, possibly because the latter could be perceived as competing with their corporate forest operations and demonstrating better forest stewardship practices. Lastly, finding a willing and able banker, or “bridge financier,” is very difficult for most community-based conservation organizations. There are few organizations as capable and willing as The Nature Conservancy to take on a multi-million dollar debt. In fact, until The Nature Conservancy can resell the lands it has purchased in the Blackfoot Valley, it is not in a position to provide

financing to other efforts, even if it desired to do so. A last site-specific factor underlying the success in the Blackfoot involves the high degree of support from Montana's former Senator Conrad Burns (himself a former farmer), who provided considerable influence to gain federal funds for the acquisition of public lands in the Blackfoot Valley.

Conclusion

Community forests have provided food, fuel wood, non-timber forest products, employment and other forest values for nearby communities. In the past, community forests have been owned and governed by two types of communities: indigenous villages and towns and municipalities. Over the last few decades, a third type of community forest, spearheaded by community-based conservation organizations, has arisen to maintain local access to and control over forests for the goods mentioned above and to slow the advance of landscape fragmentation and conserve ecosystems and their ecological goods and services across landscapes with increasingly complex ownership arrangements. In this final section, I call attention to key lessons that both the literature and experience of the Blackfoot Challenge in western Montana suggest as particularly pertinent to this new experiment.

Ownership

Community forests are about ownership. Collaboration in forest management in the United States has increased public involvement in forest management discussions on public lands but has not given them any more power over forest management decisionmaking, implementation, or stewardship over the long term. In the United States, that right and responsibility rests with forestland owners and, in the case of publicly owned forests, the land management agencies.

Local residents compete with other stakeholders to influence public land policy, even when the lands under question adjoin their fields, homes, and communities. Involvement in collaborative forest management on public lands has produced recommendations and, sometimes, small forest management projects. But there is no guarantee that recommendations or the fruits of these collaborative efforts will persist into the future. Community-owned forests hold out the promise that local ownership will provide greater opportunities for local residents and community-based organizations to have authority and decisionmaking power over local forests and will allow them to control the future fruits of their collaborative decisionmaking, recommendations, and labor. Ownership is understood to be both materially and symbolically important. A long-term observer of the U.S. Intermountain West suggests that local ownership is critical to “a newly self-determining West” that can “begin claiming sovereignty over its own landscape” (Kemmis 2000, 3).

But there are limitations to ownership. We have seen above that changing ideas about property in the United States have been critical to the formation of new types of ownership arrangements and landscapes characterized by complex ownerships. The acceptance of property as a bundle of rights has facilitated the widespread use of easements as a conservation tool. Under these conditions, ownership no longer means total control over land, but claims of ownership also require persuasion in addition to a legal basis (Fairfax et al. 2005). Unpersuasive land ownership claims are common: governments often fail to protect their timber and land trusts may not be able to protect their agreements, especially as parcels change ownership. The most persuasive ownership claims are those with strong community support (Rose 1994). This observation underscores the growing popularity of community-based conservation. However, such

organizations and efforts face many uncertainties regarding who they represent, how legitimate they are, and how capable they are of fulfilling their missions, including new attempts to acquire land and establish community forests.

Romancing the Commons

Conservation discourse worldwide has asserted a strong role for community support and governance, and there also has been a spate of calls to recreate, extend, or return to commons of many kinds (Bollier 2002; Donahue 1999; Klein 2001). Such invocations embrace a wide array of resources, domains, and scales. But they overlap in their desire to return to a local, community-centered scale defined by culture and concerns of people at that scale rather than let such things as food production and distribution, governance and values be decided by market forces, especially the growing (global) belief that “free markets” can and will allocate resources best (McCarthy 2005). As people in places such as the Blackfoot Valley realize that markets are not responding to their own social and ecological concerns to maintain working forests, landscapes, and resource-based livelihoods, a window opens for alternatives that are outside the market to be considered. Community forests appeal to positive connotations of community, commons, and the good old days of rural, resource-based livelihoods. But community-based conservation organizations in the United States need to be wary of uncritically adopting community management and property models that co-evolved slowly over many generations under very site specific socio-ecological conditions. Indeed, when applied in the U.S. Intermountain West the concept can carry negative or even pejorative connotations for corporate timber companies or to rural communities who see communist features imbued in the term or fear that the “community” in charge of determining management priorities will not be their own.

While often trying to show themselves otherwise, community-forest supporters in the United States remain entrenched in interest group politics. A major goal of community forest efforts is to maintain the “rural lifestyle.” Of course, the question becomes whose or which rural lifestyle? Even among small, rural communities there are various “rural lifestyles” to be recognized, respected, and accommodated in a community-based endeavor. A call to maintain rural lifestyles can be interpreted as an interest group strategy to privilege resource-based livelihoods and production landscapes over the recreation-amenity-consumption landscapes that are growing elsewhere. In the Blackfoot Valley, where land ownership and use involve large ranchers, easements have been widely established and growth is not as rapid as in other valleys and there may be a larger consensus on the rural lifestyle most residents want to protect. Maintaining ranches and land-based livelihoods, as well as undeveloped landscapes and the activities they support, underlie the 30-year mission of the Blackfoot Challenge. In this situation, the call to maintain a particular lifestyle and land use may be widely supported and provide an effective defensive response to free market and development forces likely to spur development and sprawl. But even here it is important to remember that respondents to the survey administered in the Blackfoot Valley raised questions concerning the ability of the Blackfoot Challenge to represent broad interests in the valley. The reality is that most rural areas are internally differentiated and attention to public engagement rarely is sufficient to reach and resolve all differences. The opportunity for “misrepresenting” the interests of communities by communities themselves is high in places where there is greater heterogeneity. There is always the risk that conservation organizations (and the councils that so many rely upon as their chief governance units) can become strongly insulated and lose contact and legitimacy among the larger

communities they claim to represent. Interest group politics are inevitable within and beyond rural communities and among so-called community-based organizations. The latter cannot and should not see themselves as above or outside politics.

Indeed, critics of community-based and collaborative conservation emphasize that such efforts are most definitely not above or outside politics. By definition, community forests privilege local residents and communities over others, including potential non-resident users of the community forests. As private forest owners, this may not concern those entrenched in the traditional Lockean property narrative. However, community-based land acquisitions and collective management regimes blur the lines between public and private transactions. Because of their goal to provide public goods on private lands, community forests are supported by private and public funds and involve public agencies, private nonprofit organizations, and private citizens. But critics remind us that the “public” they represent is local, not national. Furthermore, they are not legally obliged to follow standard protocols for public accountability. Organizers of the Blackfoot Community Project have said they considered years of relatively private negotiations to be imperative for sensitive land deals to be worked out and for the large amount of funds needed to make them happen be raised. In the Blackfoot case, while no media coverage occurred during the early stages, meetings were held continually across the valley during negotiations and Blackfoot Valley residents were kept informed of the transactions and their input was solicited. These are delicate matters. Nonetheless, ethics of transparency, inclusion, and participation need to be recognized and addressed.

Coordinating Land Management Across Ownership Mosaics

By definition, community forests have a different mandate than federal or state forests and a narrower constituency. Those involved in creating community forests do so to maintain connections between intact and working forests and the rural communities and residents who live, work, and play nearby. Community forests are built upon the recognition that local residents represent the major stakeholders of these forest parcels and claims that they have stronger incentives for long-term management than distant owners and can offer long-term, experiential-based local knowledge to complement professional forest scientists in determining forest management objectives and procedures. As such, community groups and community forests may have greater potential (i.e., than the U.S. Forest Service) to be resilient and adaptive to change and to keep working forest landscapes intact and connected to the broader ecosystem.

But what is the capacity of community forests and community foresters to self-manage, let alone coordinate, management of their forest parcels with others across complex, mixed ownership landscapes? The reasons given for supporting cross-boundary stewardship are more highly documented than their challenges on-the-ground. It is well known that landscape-level conservation represents a formidable challenge in the Intermountain West, where land ownership reflects complex, checkerboard pattern of alternating square-mile sections of federal, state, non-industrial, and industrial private lands. Where the checkerboard pattern is pronounced, coordinating land management is difficult because individual landowners have different values, goals, and financial resources (Cestero and Belsky 2003). In landscapes such as in the Blackfoot Valley, where parcelization is not as extreme and relationships and partnerships effectively cross private, state, federal, and corporate landowners, cross-boundary conservation is possible.

But there are limits to the ecological benefits of community forests in landscape ecosystem management. Community forests strive to provide public goods on private lands, especially those in between more conventional public and private individual lands. Theoretically, they can enhance connectivity. But land acquisition generally and for community forests in particular is controlled largely by the priorities of the seller. In the Blackfoot case, the seller was willing to part with worked-over timber lands low on timber inventories but valuable to local residents and conservation organizations as important linkages between upland national forests, productive private valley bottoms, and productive grasslands, riparian, and wetland areas. Here, there is great ecological potential for the community forest to play an important role for scaling up community-based conservation to meet the goals of enhancing biological connectivity, ecosystem management, and biodiversity conservation. But as noted elsewhere (Fairfax et al. 2005), through their deference to willing sellers, local conservation organizations and the federal government itself reduce their ability to target ecologically important parcels for conservation. It is always important, therefore, to not rely only on land acquisition as a conservation strategy but to utilize the full array of tools in the conservation toolbox, including such other measures as zoning, regulation and litigation (Doremus 2003).

Community forests clearly have captured the attention of community-based conservation organizations in the United States. They are showing great potential for exciting rural residents to not passively accept the increasing sale and subdivision of corporate timberlands and to work cooperatively for a common goal of conserving working forests. But land acquisition is extremely costly, requires a willing seller, and involves delicate deliberations. As such, community forests are likely to be possible in only a handful of places. Even where local

acquisition is successful, there is no guarantee that ownership by a community-based conservation organization or affiliated entity will be able to produce inclusive, collective self-governance capable of meeting a wide array of local forest objectives coordinated further for ecosystem management across broad, mixed-ownership landscapes. Nonetheless, unlike in the case of collaborative, community-based forest management on public lands, creating community forests gives local communities real ownership and say in forest decisionmaking, management, and stewardship over the long term. Fruitful engagement between practitioners and academics can help to raise awareness of the promise and pitfalls of community forests and hopefully better enable them to be a progressive force for maintaining connections between working forests and an inclusive array of local people who desire access to and control of them.

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Table 1. Types of Community Forests

	Indigenous Community Forests	Town or Municipal Community Forests	Community-based Organization(s)
Ownership	Community, tribe or village	Town, municipality	Non-governmental organizations including foundations, land trusts, and limited liability companies.
Community	Community defined by shared residence, culture	Community defined by shared residence; political jurisdiction	Community defined through affiliation with place and/or interest
Access and Control	Customary and Legal	Legal	Legal
	Clear delineation of who constitutes forest users/managers	Clear delineation of who constitutes forest users/managers	Evolving delineation of who constitutes forest users/managers
	Forest land and use rights held in common for all community members	Forest land and use rights not held in common for all community members	Forest land held on behalf of community members or as a share
Governance	Tribal council or council of elders	Elected or appointed town or municipal officials, advisory council	Elected or appointed sub-committees, advisory councils
Examples	Dayak, Borneo Ejidos, Mexico	North Cowichan (BC) Mission Municipal (BC) Hampshire Town Forest	Blackfoot Community Conservation Area (MT) Vermont Family Foresters

Forest (Mass)
Forestry Partnership
(Maine)

(VT) Downeast Lakes