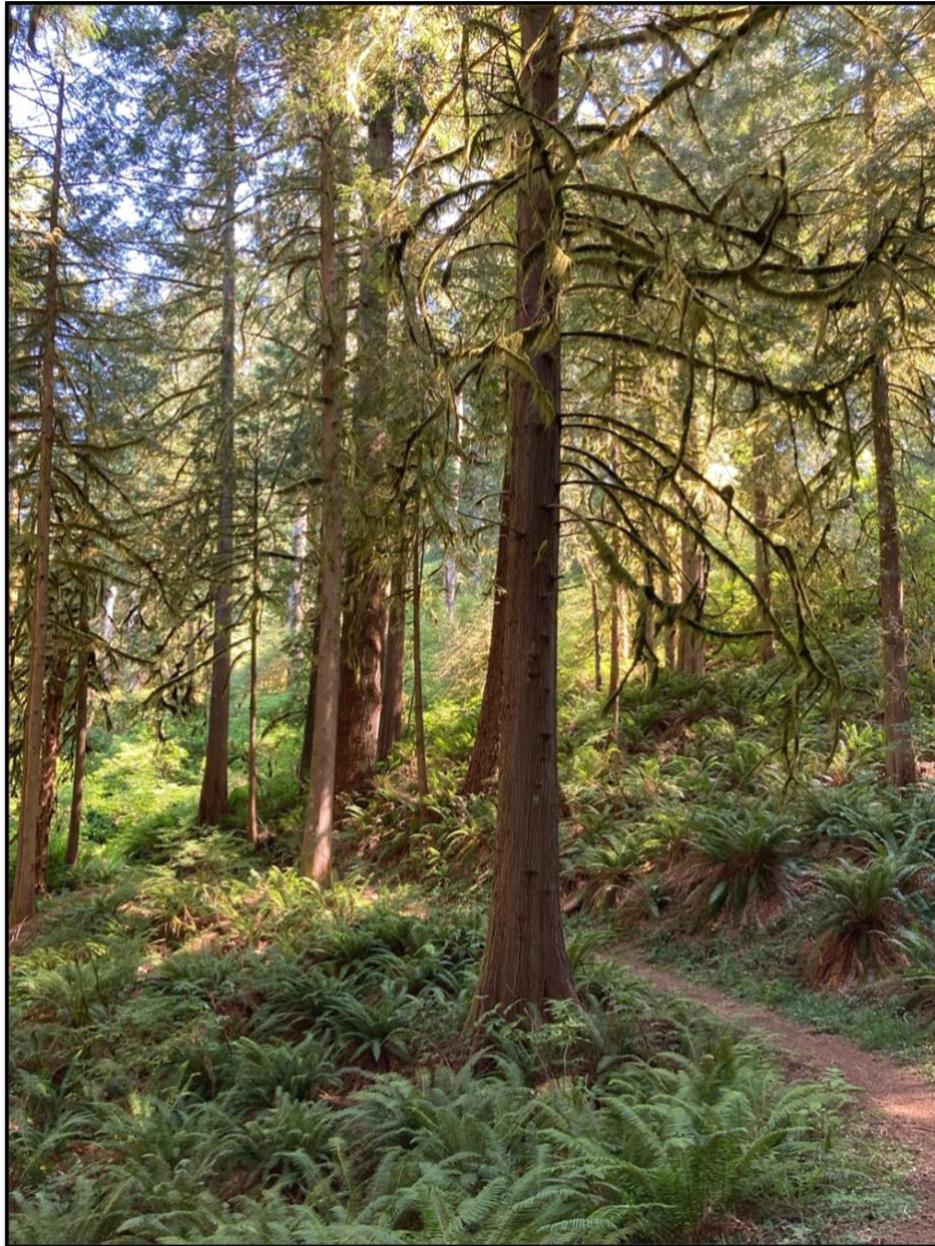


COMMUNITY FORESTRY IN THE UNITED STATES

AN ANALYSIS OF ITS POTENTIAL AND LIMITATIONS AS A
COLLABORATIVE LAND MANAGEMENT STRATEGY



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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE: THE NEED FOR ADAPTIVE LAND MANAGEMENT

Land management shapes how societies allocate resources, maintain ecological integrity, and support human well-being. Forests are critical components of these landscapes, supporting carbon storage, biodiversity conservation, and water regulation. They also provide raw materials for economic development, recreation opportunities, and cultural connections. Yet these benefits are increasingly threatened by climate change impacts and competing land use demands. In the United States, these pressures intersect with political polarization and economic uncertainty, making forest management not only a technical exercise but also a complex governance challenge that requires balancing ecological, economic, and social goals.

In recent years, community-based land management approaches have gained popularity, reflecting public demand to decentralize decision-making authority and more effectively integrate local knowledge. These efforts supplement—and in some cases challenge—traditional top-down approaches to land management which have long been dominant in the U.S. Community forestry offers an alternative to conventional forest management by emphasizing collaborative governance and place-based stewardship that deliver ecological and social benefits. This paper investigates the opportunities and challenges of community forestry as a pathway toward more sustainable forest management in the United States, focusing on how governance structures, local capacity, and equity considerations shape its effectiveness.

CONTEXT: FOREST MANAGEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Forest land in the United States is owned by a mix of public and private entities, including federal, state, and local governments; corporations; individuals and families; tribal nations; conservation groups; and land trusts. Forest management in the U.S. is grounded in principles of private property, where landowners generally have ultimate authority over their land. Management of public land has historically been centralized, driven by extraction of forest products and Progressive Era conservation policies, with management authority vested in private industry and federal agencies such as the U.S. Forest Service (Swette et al., 2023).

Since the 1990's, the U.S. has moved toward more collaborative land governance models, which seek to involve diverse stakeholders in land use decision-making. Collaborative governance theory describes an approach to solving complex problems by building consensus among a group of stakeholders (Margerum, 2011) emphasizing principles of diversity, interdependence, and authentic dialogue (Innes & Booher, 2010). Federal programs such as the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program established collaboration requirements for forest management (McIntyre & Schultz, 2020). Community forestry can be understood as a subset of collaborative land management, sharing its emphasis on multi-stakeholder engagement and participatory decision-making, but differing in that it typically prioritizes community benefits and local land stewardship.

DEFINING COMMUNITY FORESTRY

Charnley and Poe (2007) contend that community forestry is characterized by three core elements: “(a) some degree of responsibility and authority for forest management is formally vested by the government in local communities; (b) a central objective of forest management is to provide local communities with social and economic benefits from forests; and (c) ecologically sustainable forest use is a central management goal, with forest communities taking some responsibility for maintaining and restoring forest health” (p. 303). Proponents argue that community forestry decentralizes decision-making, empowers local communities, and fosters place-based stewardship, making governance more inclusive, responsive to local priorities, and informed by ecological knowledge (McIntyre & Schultz, 2020; Souther et al., 2023).

COMMUNITY FORESTS: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN A U.S. CONTEXT

OPPORTUNITIES

Community forests in the United States present meaningful opportunities for advancing innovative land governance models, ecological sustainability, and social equity.

1. PARTICIPATORY GOVERNANCE

Community forestry governance in the U.S. is highly variable, shaped by local contexts, institutional conditions, and community priorities. Ownership and governance structures

range from municipal forests in New England—managed to generate revenue for town budgets and public services—to tribal forests where management reflects cultural values and indigenous sovereignty (McGinley et al., 2022; Hajjar et al., 2024). Other examples include NGO-led acquisitions designed to prevent land fragmentation and maintain working forests, and stewardship agreements on federal lands that formalize community participation without transferring ownership (Charnley & Poe, 2007). These arrangements employ mechanisms such as conservation easements, local ordinances, and collaborative boards to set management objectives, which may prioritize timber production, recreation, watershed protection, or habitat restoration depending on local needs (Beckley, 1998; Hajjar et al., 2024). By creating spaces for shared decision-making and integrating local knowledge, these governance models can enhance legitimacy, strengthen community capacity, and foster more adaptive and socially responsive forest management.

2. ECOLOGICAL BENEFITS

Community forestry is widely recognized as “an effective approach for achieving sustainable and equitable forest use” (Siegener et al., 2025, p. 64). By prioritizing ecologically sustainable forest use as a core management goal, community forests contribute to biodiversity conservation, watershed protection, and carbon sequestration (Charnley & Poe, 2007). Global assessments of community-based forestry by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2017, p. 7) have documented “substantial improvements in forest condition (forest area, density, productive capacity and sometimes species diversity), expansion in the forest estate, and reduction in threats such as illegal logging and wildfires.” In the U.S. context, conservation-oriented objectives dominate

community forest governance, often emphasizing habitat restoration, open space protection, and climate resilience (Hajjar et al., 2024). These priorities reflect a shift away from industrial forestry's narrow focus on timber production toward integrated management strategies that align ecological goals with community well-being (Beckley, 1998). Collaborative processes further reinforce these outcomes by supporting landscape-scale restoration and adaptive management practices, such as reestablishing natural fire regimes and improving forest health through multi-stakeholder planning (McIntyre & Schultz, 2020). Evidence suggests that local participation in activities like fire control, monitoring, and habitat management enhances ecological outcomes when supported by adequate technical assistance and institutional capacity (Bhusal et al., 2025). The ecological benefits of community forestry initiatives stem from participatory approaches that integrate local knowledge with broader conservation objectives.

3. SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS

Community forests offer pathways for strengthening rural economies and enhancing community well-being by linking forest management with local livelihoods. Participation in forest governance “fosters a sense of ownership and responsibility among local communities... promotes social cohesion and empowerment by providing marginalized groups with a voice” (Bhusal et al., 2025, p. 2). In the U.S., community forests frequently aim to “generate income from timber and other resources for town budgets or specific projects and public services, to protect water, soil, and wildlife habitat, and to provide recreation and education opportunities for local community members” (Hajjar et al., 2024, p. 282). These objectives reflect a broader effort to maintain working forests for community

benefit, thereby sustaining rural economies and local property values (Hajjar et al., 2024). Community Forestry Enterprises (CFEs) expand these opportunities by creating small-scale businesses that integrate “environmental responsibility, socio-economic responsibility, and collective or participatory decision making” (Siegener et al., 2025, p. 64). CFEs diversify local economies through timber processing, non-timber forest products, and ecotourism, while reinvesting earnings into community development (Siegener et al., 2025). Hajjar et al (2013) note that participatory governance in community forestry can foster trust and social cohesion, but only when communities have meaningful decision-making authority. Linking economic development with participatory governance strengthens local resilience and demonstrates how collaborative approaches can align ecological stewardship with community priorities.

CHALLENGES

Despite their potential, community forests in the United States face significant structural, institutional, and social constraints that limit their effectiveness and scalability.

1. COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND INSTITUTIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Historically, U.S. forest management has been guided by centralized approaches designed for “large-scale operations with a primary orientation toward... production” and guided by “principles of scientific management” aimed at maximizing profits (Beckley, 1998, p. 737). These systems prioritize uniform, top-down regulations that are “technically complex, capital intensive, and requiring extensive forest areas,” making them less compatible with community-based governance and addressing the heterogeneous needs of local

communities (Cronkleton et al., 2012, p. 100). As a result, “devolution of authority to communities to manage federal forests has rarely occurred,” with federal agencies retaining ultimate decision-making power even in collaborative arrangements (Charnley & Poe, 2007, p. 311). This resistance stems from legal barriers and fears that community control could “favor local over national interests” or lead to forest degradation (Davis et al., 2020, p. 2). While collaborative governance models have emerged as an alternative, they often replicate structural inequities by imposing resource-intensive processes and technical requirements that “encourage dependence on external technical support” (Cronkleton et al., 2012, p. 99). Consequently, institutional rigidity and entrenched management paradigms constrain the transformative potential of community forestry in the U.S., raising questions about how regulatory frameworks can adapt to enable genuine local empowerment and place-based ecological resilience.

2. CAPACITY AND FUNDING LIMITATIONS

Creating and sustaining community forests requires technical expertise and financial resources that often exceed the capacities of rural communities. As Cronkleton et al. (2012, p. 99) observe, communities face “complex requirements... involving technical and administrative hurdles, and capital investments” that impose substantial start-up costs. Forest management planning demands specialized skills in silviculture, GIS mapping, and data analysis, necessitating reliance on external technical support (Cronkleton et al., 2012). Land acquisition and restoration costs compound these challenges, and most community forest models depend on outside funding for both initial establishment and ongoing operations (McGinley et al., 2022). This dependence raises concerns about equity

and sustainability, as communities without access to aid or technical assistance are often excluded from participation. Collaborative governance further amplifies these burdens: “management by consensus tends to involve more time, money, and diplomacy than management by decree” (Beckley, 1998, p. 739), creating participation fatigue and uneven engagement among stakeholders (McIntyre & Schultz, 2020). Ultimately, these structural and financial constraints can limit the scalability and inclusivity of community forestry.

3. EQUITABLE PARTICIPATION AND REPRESENTATION CHALLENGES

Although collaborative governance is intended to democratize decision-making, representation within community forestry often remains uneven and exclusionary. Collaborative groups frequently fail to incorporate the full range of perspectives necessary to address complex environmental issues, and “without these diverse perspectives, how groups define success may be misguided and could hinder the long-term viability of collaborative groups” (Wilkins et al., 2021, p. 2). In practice, well-resourced actors such as environmental NGOs and industry representatives often dominate discussions, while marginalized groups and communities of place remain underrepresented (Swette et al., 2023). Formalized procedures and technical discourse associated with the creation and implementation of forest management plans exacerbate these disparities, as this dialogue is “replete with... ecological concepts and agency acronyms that are not immediately accessible to non-professionals” (Davis et al., 2020, p. 7). These dynamics create barriers to meaningful engagement and risk reinforcing existing power imbalances, ultimately undermining the legitimacy and equity of community forestry governance. Addressing

these representational gaps is critical to ensuring that collaborative frameworks fulfill their promise of inclusive and socially just forest management.

IMPLICATIONS AND AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Community forestry in the U.S. demonstrates potential for advancing collaborative governance and local empowerment but faces persistent challenges related to inequitable or limited community influence. Future research should examine adaptive co-management models that balance federal oversight with locally tailored governance, replacing one-size-fits-all, industrially-oriented regulations with flexible standards that accommodate diverse ecological and social contexts (Cronkleton et al., 2012). Comparative studies of hybrid governance systems could identify mechanisms for enhancing community authority without compromising national priorities. Additionally, research should investigate strategies for improving inclusivity, such as participatory facilitation methods, equity safeguards, and mechanisms to incorporate local and Indigenous knowledge into decision-making, and should evaluate their effectiveness in reducing power imbalances and enhancing legitimacy (Wilkins et al., 2021; Davis et al., 2020).

Community forestry also requires substantial technical expertise and financial investment, creating dependence on external support and excluding communities with limited resources. Remedies may include expanding federal and state programs for multi-year funding, technical assistance, and training in forest planning and restoration (McGinley et al., 2022; Cronkleton et al., 2012). Future research should explore scalable models for capacity-building, including partnerships with universities, NGOs, and private actors, and

assess how these interventions affect long-term sustainability and equity. Balancing conservation goals with economic needs also remains a central challenge. CFEs offer one potential model for generating income, but require further study to determine how participatory governance and ecological integrity can coexist with market competitiveness (Siegener et al., 2025). Research should examine financial models that diversify revenue streams and assess policy tools that strengthen economic resilience.

CONCLUSION

Community forests represent a viable alternative to conventional forest management, offering strong ecological and social benefits. Evidence shows that these models can strengthen climate resilience and improve local livelihoods while fostering cultural continuity and social cohesion. By decentralizing authority and embedding governance within local contexts, community forestry challenges rigid, top-down land management systems and promotes more adaptive, place-based stewardship. When implemented effectively, these initiatives can deliver benefits that extend beyond local communities to broader landscapes and political systems. As environmental pressures and social demands continue to evolve, community forests offer a promising pathway toward sustainable, inclusive, and adaptive forest governance.

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