

# The Stewardship Ethic: A Guide for Using Your Land

Cornell University Cooperative Extension and  
New York State Department of Environmental Conservation  
www.ForestConnect.info



Aldo Leopold, the naturalist and author, once wrote, "We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect." With these words, Leopold began a philosophy now known as the stewardship ethic. You may not be aware, but as a forest landowner, you may already practice stewardship on your land: the use and care of your land so that it remains fruitful and healthy for future generations.

The practice of stewardship is not limited by the size of a woodlot, the type of ownership, or even the boundaries of the property. The stewardship ethic can be employed by any landowner, and by landowners with a wide variety of ownership objectives.

This fact sheet provides tips for landowners who would like to incorporate the Stewardship Ethic in the use and management of their forest.

## Tip #1: Determine ownership objectives.

One of the most important steps in practicing stewardship is to understand what you want from your woods. Many people own forests for quality-of-life issues: to enjoy the scenery and watch wildlife, to have more privacy, to feel a part of the land, to have a place to play, or to work outdoors towards a goal. Others may own forestland for hunting opportunities or revenue from timber harvests. Ownership objectives vary from person to person.

Determining ownership objectives is very straightforward. You probably already are aware of what you like about your woods, but it is important to discuss it with your family and write your objectives down. Discuss questions such as

- Why do we have this land?
- What do we like about it?

- What things do we want it to produce?
- What do we want it to look like in 5, 10, or 20 years?

Answers to these questions will help you develop a vision for your woodland. The more focused you are, the easier it will be to identify activities that will help you meet your objectives. Re-visit this topic with your family every few years, because your objectives may change over time.

## Tip #2: Get assistance from experts.

Once you've determined your objectives, you don't have to figure out how to do everything yourself. There are many local forestry-related organizations you can contact for information.

## Tip #3: Consider your forest management style.

Everyone's management style for their woodlot is different. Some landowners want to leave the land alone and let nature take its course. This may be a viable strategy if it matches your ownership objectives. However, if you do nothing to manage your forest, the inevitable changes nature will bring may or may not accomplish your objectives.

Active management, or stewardship, of the vegetation on your land allows you to make it more productive and enticing for wildlife and more efficient at purifying air and water. Management can increase the value of the land and provide landowners with opportunities to exercise and find new hobbies such as bird



Many people own land because it gives them a place to relax and unwind.



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watching. In addition, it may provide opportunities for supplemental income from firewood production or timber harvests. Lastly, stewardship can also help maintain the character of your woodlot.

**Tip #4: Have a stewardship plan written for your land.**

Once you've decided on your objectives for your land and on active management of your forest, the next step is to develop a stewardship plan. The process of developing a plan will help you understand how your objectives are, or aren't, compatible. For example, you might want to harvest some trees for firewood. What if another member of your family wants to see more wildlife on the property? You can achieve both goals if you select firewood trees carefully. Cutting for firewood can improve the health of your land by opening up selected areas of the forest for more desirable trees to grow as well as making those areas more attractive for wildlife. Managing lands for wildlife usually means managing the vegetation that wildlife depend upon for food and shelter.



Creating forest openings or early successional habitat may increase the varieties of wildlife you will see on your land.

**Tip #5: Work with adjacent landowners.**

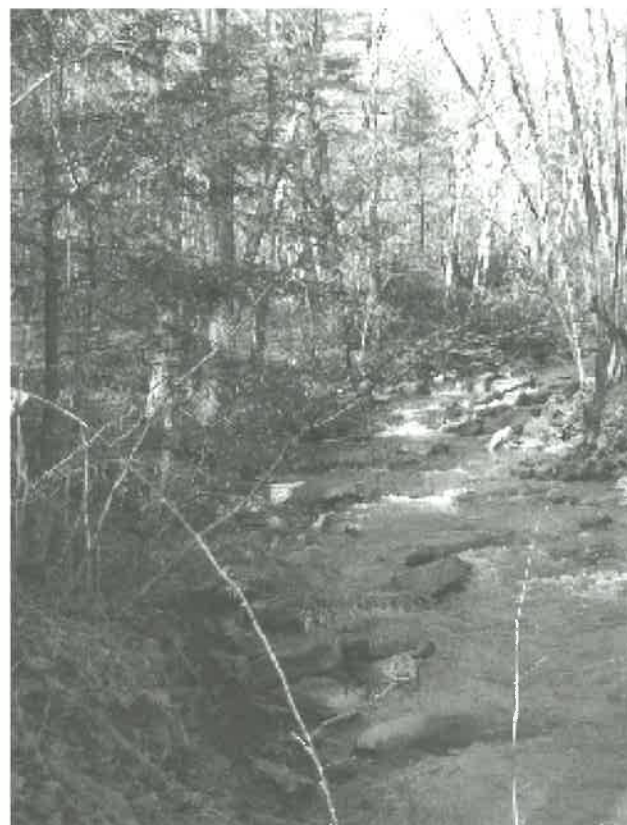
Nearly everyone enjoys seeing wildlife, and knowing that you are managing your property to provide important habitat components makes it especially rewarding. It is important to recognize that each wildlife species has specific requirements for space, cover, food, and water.

As you look around your property, across to your neighbor's backyard and out beyond that to the larger landscape, ask yourself about what important wildlife needs are unmet in this defined area. You may have everything some species need right on your property for at least part of many animals' life cycles, but often you can't meet all the needs all the time.

Talk to your neighbors about their management goals and interests. In rural as well as in suburban environments, a single owner's property may not be able to meet all the habitat needs of many species. As forestland nationwide is being split into smaller and smaller parcels, the health of our natural ecosystems increasingly depends on smaller and smaller lots and how well they work together.

**Tip #6: Protect water resources.**

Water is probably the most surefire way to attract wildlife. It is important to realize that the decisions you make about how to manage your forestland affect others as well as the water and air quality in your area. Forests are extremely valuable landscape features. A typical forest acts like a filter and a sponge. Forest soils are much less compacted than are soils in intermediate-use areas such as lawns. The leaf litter layer in forests protects the soil, there is less concentrated physical use of the land, and burrowing animals such as worms and small rodents are more active in forests. The lack of compaction makes it easier for precipitation to penetrate forest soils than a lawn. The forest soil filters out many impurities in water so water coming from largely forested landscapes is typically some of the cleanest water available.



Protecting your water resources takes careful planning and forethought.

A big part of ensuring high water quality on forested land involves reducing erosion (keeping soil in place), and slowing down the flow of water so it can seep into the soil and be naturally filtered. Some practices that help reduce erosion include:

- Replanting any areas that have been stripped - intentionally or unintentionally (e.g., fire, major ice or wind storms) - of vegetation
- Stabilizing eroding gullies, stream banks, drainage ditches, and trails
- Locating trails and logging roads so that they do not accumulate water or direct runoff into streams during rain storms

As you walk through your property, note areas that are wet much of the year. These may have a spring or a seep - a natural source of freshwater that emerges from the ground - often at the base of a hill or mountain. Springs and seeps can provide habitat for amphibians and reptiles and be a year-round source of water for other wildlife. Reconsider any water bodies on your neighbors' properties. Can you do anything on your property or in cooperation with your neighbor to enhance wildlife use of these areas?

**Tip #7: Work towards sustainable forests and avoid high-grading.**

Sustainable forest management considers the entire forest ecosystem - all the parts of a forest - and not just the valuable timber trees. Forestry is sustainable if it plans for the future by considering wildlife, soil, and water resources, in addition to timber resources, and both short- and long-term economic resources. Conversely, forestry that is not sustainable focuses on the removal of value from the forest in the short-term and does not focus on regenerating a new forest.

One commonly employed harvesting practice that will degrade your forest and eliminate your future options is called high-grading, also referred to as diameter-limit cutting or selective cutting. That's what happens when a harvester "takes the best (trees) and leaves the rest". This practice leaves behind the low-value, often diseased and malformed trees, and the quality of the forest declines rapidly.

If managed properly, your land can provide ecological, social, and economic benefits forever. The best way to get the greatest benefits from your land and protect yourself from unsustainable practices like high-grading and selective cutting is to take control of your land by becoming a forest steward. This means setting and achieving objectives for your land while maintaining its integrity for future generations. Your objectives may include some or all of the following:

- Timber production
- Wildlife habitat enhancement
- Aesthetics
- Recreational use
- Protection of soil and water

Whatever your objectives might be there are people and resources available to help you identify your objectives and develop a plan to achieve your goals.

How you choose to manage your forest is up to you, but the impacts of your choices will last long after you have gone. As Leopold once said, "Your woodlot is, in fact, an historical document which faithfully records your personal philosophy." This is your opportunity to make your woodlot a testament to your stewardship ethic.

**Additional References**

Sullivan, Kristi L., Peter J. Smallidge, James C. Finley, and Michael G. Jacobsen. 2006. *Forest Resource Management: A Landowner's Guide to Getting Started*. Natural Resource, Agriculture, and Engineering Service. NRAES-170. 84 pp. To order call (607) 254-8770 or visit [NRAES@cornell.edu](mailto:NRAES@cornell.edu)

**Web Pages of Interest**

You and Your Forest: A Guide to Understanding and Managing your Forest Resources [forestandrange.org](http://forestandrange.org)

Look for Forest Stewardship and other publications at Cornell's Forestry Extension Program [www.forestconnect.org](http://www.forestconnect.org)

New York Forest Owners Association - [www.nyfoa.org](http://www.nyfoa.org). NYFOA promotes sustainable woodland practices and improved stewardship on privately owned woodlands.