



Community-Based Organizations Help Revitalize Forest Communities in the U.S. West

CBOs Work to Bring About Interrelated Economic, Ecological, and Social Outcomes

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INTRODUCTION

Rural communities that are or once were dependent on forest resources are found throughout the U.S. West. Many of these places were hard-hit by forest industry restructuring and federal land policy changes in the 1980s and 1990s (Charnley et al., 2008). In the aftermath of these changes, traditionally forest-dependent communities typically experienced high unemployment, social conflict, outmigration of working-age families, steep declines in the federal government workforce, and ecological consequences from a century or more of production-oriented forest management—in short, numerous far-reaching yet highly inter-related challenges. In the midst of this crisis many community leaders sought to transition to more sustainable and local natural resource models based on restoration and stewardship. Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) played a key role in navigating this transition, and continue to drive innovation across the West (Abrams et al., 2015, and Danks 2008). CBOs are grassroots non-profit organizations that work to achieve sustainable natural resource-based economic development in their communities. CBOs tend to start from a fairly simple set of commitments, including to: maintain and strengthen the community's connection to natural resources; search for sustainable solutions; and remain closely guided by local needs, interests, and knowledge.

Each CBO has its own particular history, mission, and a unique set of place-based opportunities and challenges. But CBOs share a focus on advancing conservation-based natural resource management, economic development, and community resilience. Their pursuit of these interrelated goals makes them unique. Although CBOs broadly defined have been an important object of study in many fields (e.g., urban economic development, poverty reduction, health), little research attention has been paid to the roles of CBOs in natural resource management and rural development. In this article, we discuss how CBOs function and what they do for the rural communities that they serve. This summary is based on research conducted across the West between 2012 and 2015 by the Ecosystem Workforce Program at the University of Oregon.

METHODS

This research project analyzed how CBOs foster change in the wake of the rural social and economic shocks of the late twentieth century. In particular, we sought to understand how these small, local organizations could accomplish significant change given their limited resources and in light of the substantial challenges confronting traditionally forest-dependent communities. Here we report key findings gathered from research so far, primarily from four case studies of CBOs operating across the greater Northwestern United States: the Watershed Research and Training Center (Hayfork, California), Wallowa Resources (Enterprise, Oregon), Mount Adams Resource Stewards (Glenwood, Washington), and Framing our Community (Elk City, Idaho). For each of these case studies, we interviewed executive directors and staff of each organization as well as staff of other NGOs, business leaders, local elected officials, and other community partners. We used these interviews along with other primary and secondary data to analyze the activities, impacts, and networks of each CBO.

KEY CASE STUDY FINDINGS

First, we found that given the diverse challenges that rural communities face, CBOs necessarily undertook diverse activities beyond what might be expected of small nonprofit organizations. In particular, we found

that although CBOs are nonprofit organizations, they often played roles more typical of government or private sector organizations. For example, a CBO working in a place with extensive federal forestland but few government staff to manage it may conduct environmental analyses required for landscape management projects that an agency such as the U.S. Forest Service would normally perform. The same CBO may also play a “private firm” role if there is little local business capacity by forming a for-profit subsidiary to launch an innovative new business that is needed locally, or by acting as a contractor performing restoration work that provides local employment opportunities. In addition, CBOs still provide many services traditionally found in the nonprofit sector, such as workforce training, facilitating collaborative dialogue, or offering educational programs for area youth.

We concluded that CBOs are a flexible and unique type of nonprofit organization that would strategically “shape-shift” as needed to fill gaps where a key actor or resource was currently missing. However, we found that CBOs’ filling of these gaps was not merely replication. CBOs would step into a role and perform it in line with their vision of interrelated ecological, economic, and social objectives. For example, when working on federal environmental planning processes, CBOs typically looked to incorporate management activities that would be sustainable while providing opportunities for local workers and businesses. Or, when helping start up new local businesses, CBOs tended to emphasize local ownership and the businesses’ contributions to the community in addition to traditional business development concerns.

Second, we found that CBOs did not confine their work to their local areas. Because many of the policy and economic changes that affect their communities originated far from the communities, CBOs’ pragmatic, problem-solving orientation led them to work at scales from the local to the national in pursuit of community solutions. Locally, CBOs were often instrumental in experimenting with new management and contracting procedures for nearby public forestlands that might increase economic

benefits for their local community and demonstrate good stewardship. At the same time, CBOs have organized to push for the institutionalization of successful innovations at higher scales. For example, the Rural Voices for Conservation Coalition (RVCC) was formed as a network of CBOs, environmental organizations, rural small businesses, and NGOs across the West that aggregates rural leaders to ensure policymakers and agency administrators will hear their needs. The RVCC focuses on national-level policy for public and private lands, ecosystem services, agency performance measures, and budgeting. Many of the most important recent public lands policy innovations, such as stewardship contracting authority, the creation of Resource Advisory Committees, the inclusion of community wildfire protection planning in the Healthy Forests Restoration Act of 2003, and the Collaborative Forest Landscape Restoration Program were a direct or indirect outcome of CBOs' local innovations and the work of the RVCC in communicating successful outcomes to policymakers at higher scales.

Finally, we found that while CBOs were achieving outsized accomplishments, significant barriers to their goals remained. For example, even as the important federal policy tools described above came to fruition, U.S. Forest Service budgets continued to be heavily allocated to fire suppression, and resources for implementing new innovations were constrained. Locally, CBOs could not readily change the physical factors that hindered their communities, such as distance from markets and transportation routes. This suggests that there are certain realities and limits to the environment in which CBOs operate; but wherever there are opportunities or

openings, CBOs seek to effect as much change as possible.

CONCLUSION

Although rural forest communities in the West continue to face daunting challenges, many are also benefiting from the efforts of CBOs to develop new resource management models that explicitly support economic development. CBOs work to bring about interrelated economic, ecological, and social outcomes by being opportunistic, eager to fill gaps, and able to network to collectively promote policies that will support their goals in restoration, stewardship, and local community benefits. They combine a mission to improve their home communities with an awareness of the extra-local changes and challenges that have buffeted much of rural America.

Our research suggests that CBOs may be able to accomplish what they do for several reasons, including the nimbleness that their small size affords, their flexibility as nonprofit organizations able to access diverse public and private resources, and the strength and charisma of their leaders. They are effective at using networks in various ways to support their efforts, including serving as "nodes" to connect otherwise isolated communities and selectively working at locations in the network that are best suited for transformative change. Further, they look for openings and places where it is possible to act, all while trying to push against larger and less moveable barriers. Our research suggests that CBOs in the U.S. West are a unique and possibly overlooked organizational model for the challenging pursuit of rural development in resource-dependent communities. ●



PICTURED: Framing Our Community case study in Elk City, Idaho County, Idaho/EJ. Davis