

PREPARING FOR THE NEXT FOREST OWNER

Exercise

1. Schedule three, hour-long meetings with your spouse or partner. The goals of the meetings are:

First – Identify the attributes of your forests that are important to each of you – even if you don’t agree. The list should be as long as necessary and include both tangible and intangible benefits that you want available for future generations. This discussion is fairly easy, provided spouses are supportive of one another and respectful.

Second – Make a list of prospective heirs. Candidly discuss the ability and willingness of each to assume responsibility for the family forest. This is a very tough discussion for some families because the most qualified candidate(s) may not be the eldest, smartest or most charming. Prospective candidates are good listeners, they have a sense of fairness and, above all, understand the workings of diplomacy. And they are willing to engage other family members in decision-making. This can be an extremely difficult discussion since parents don’t often share their true feelings about children (My wife and I usually never make it past 5 minutes into this discussion before giving up; so be prepared for hard-going, and don’t give up!)

Third – What is the purpose of the family forest? Why do any sort of special planning, and what should happen if a generation comes along that has no interest in the forest? This is the very heart of what you’re doing, so make sure the family has clear, easily-articulated motives.

2. Schedule a family meeting (excluding spouses of children, a request that may prove difficult

to execute) for the purposes of discussing the disposition of family forest land, mostly from the ‘first’ and ‘third’ items above. This is your opportunity to listen, so let them talk and you take notes, or better yet tape the conversation. Try to identify instances where someone was telling you what he or she thought you wanted to hear (as opposed to what he or she really thinks), and try to pinpoint any barriers to open and frank communication (for example, the presence of a big brother may intimidate one of his sisters). **What was the biggest surprise in these conversations?**

3. **With your spouse, try to identify squabbles among prospective heirs that may arise.** Are any of these disagreements likely to get in the way of your plans? Are you willing to consider someone from outside the family to provide leadership? A consulting forester? Yes, it may be necessary to locate leadership outside of the family.
4. **What advice would you give to others faced with the same circumstances?** In other words, now that you have had a chance to complete the exercise, do you have any pointers to share with other forest-owning families given the same challenge? You’ll be amazed at how closely others will listen to your observations.