

**Donoghue**

## **CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF COMMUNITIES**

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Increasing public interest in the sustainability of forests and forest-based communities has policymakers, federal land managers, and scientists looking to bioregional assessment and monitoring projects to understand the effects of forest management practices on forest health and community well-being. But, what do we mean by community? The purpose of this presentation is to describe the evolution of definitions associated with communities that have had connections to natural resource management, and to identify some of the challenges and opportunities for defining communities and monitoring community socioeconomic change.

The past two decades have seen an evolution of terms used to depict communities that have distinct connections to forest resources. These terms include community stability, forest dependence, forest based, community capacity, community resiliency, and most recently with the emphasis on sustainable forest management through the Montréal Process (Montréal Process Working Group 1998), community viability and adaptability. This evolution of terms shows a growing emphasis on the complex, dynamic, and interrelated aspects of rural communities and the natural resources that surround them. The earliest terms dealt with the limits between forest management and stable communities achieved through stable employment in the forest sector. By the late 1980s, however, the notion of community stability as reflecting sustained-yield timber management was being called into question (Schallau 1989, Lee 1990). Although the use of the term stability continued to endure in policy debates, concern was raised about the lack of a clear definition of stability and how it might be measured (Machlis and Force 1988, Fortmann et al. 1989, Lee 1989, Richardson 1996). Seeking alternative terms, some researchers began looking beyond employment indicators to other aspects of community life to assess community well-being (Kusel and Fortmann 1991, Doak and Kusel 1996). In addition to economic measures, indicators for poverty, education, crime, and other sociodemographic measures have been used to assess conditions in communities.

Concurrent with discussions about stability and well-being were discussions about the terms “forest dependence,” which also was initially defined in terms of commodity production. Research has suggested, however, that communities are more complex than traditional measures of timber dependency would imply (Haynes et al. 1996). Most communities have mixed economies, and their vitality is often linked to other factors besides commodity production. Some communities thought of as timber dependent have been confronted with economically significant challenges, such as mill closures, and displayed resilient behavior as they have dealt with change. The term forest dependence has since evolved in recognition that some economic ties that communities have to forests are not wood-product based, but result from recreation and other amenities. The term has evolved to reflect noneconomic connections to forests, such as the symbolic living traditions that people have with the forested places in which they live – the sense of place (Hiss 1990; Tuan 1993, Stedman 2003). Although commonly used, the word dependence may not sufficiently reflect all connections between communities and forests, suggesting that the term forest dependence may not be appropriate. Forest dependence is often used to suggest a unidirectional relation – a community depends on a forest – but does not reflect ways that forests depend on human settlements, choices, behaviors, and values. Thus, the term “forest-based” community is increasingly being accepted as reflecting the complex, multidimensional, and multidirectional connections between communities and forests. This evolution of terms is more than an extensive exercise in semantics; it reflects the evolution and development of theory and understanding.

The discussion about what we mean by community is also an important part of the research and monitoring process. In order to operationalize research questions associated with large-scale social assessments, such as the Northwest Forest Plan socioeconomic monitoring report, the community unit of analysis is defined, and indicators, measures, and analytical processes are developed to address the research or monitoring questions.

The scale of bioregional community assessments and monitoring projects is a key source of many challenges associated with defining community. Researchers often must assign thousands, sometimes millions, of people to identifiable geographic places that they would call their “community”. Researchers run the risk of potentially ignoring sizeable populations or aggregating populations to a scale that is not meaningful to local residents.

A related issue is that monitoring policy directives often emphasize communities of place, rather than communities of interest, such as people who belong to a national environmental association, or mobile communities, such as migrant workers who follow the work in the woods. Specific attention to communities of interest has been missing from most large-scale community social assessments in the western United States.

Defining the community is further complicated by the need of large-scale assessments to draw links across several scales of analysis, from the community down to the household level, or up to the regional or ecosystem level. In many ways, the definition of community sets the stage for methodological choices made throughout assessment process. For instance, the availability and workability of secondary data are important factors in deciding what demographics, and sociological processes and structures to focus on in monitoring projects. If researchers choose to use secondary data to develop proxies for some social processes, they will likely be challenged by whether or not the data coincide with the geographic boundary of the communities they defined. Commonalities across geographic boundaries, data sources, and data availability can be elusive, further limiting the ways that secondary data can be used to reflect sociological constructs, such as community resiliency or community well-being. In short, delimiting the community (in terms of geographic space) and defining the community (in terms of social characteristics and attributes) is a dual process for which each methodological choice influences the next. The findings and interpretations of large-scale socioeconomic assessments are influenced by a series of methodological decisions pertaining to the definition of the community-level unit of analysis.

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