

DRIVING HOME THE MESSAGE OF SUSTAINABILITY

PRIVATE FOREST LANDOWNERS SOMETIMES HAVE STRUGGLED TO REINFORCE THE ARGUMENT,
BUT IT'S POSSIBLE THROUGH INNOVATION, COLLABORATION, AND COMMUNICATION.

BY JEREMY POIRIER





The ForSite app being used on a smartphone. For a video explanation of ForSite, see <https://youtube/xlWWMF0EHpQI>.

Within the forest products community, we know that sustainably-managed, privately-owned U.S. forestlands (“working forests”) provide ecological, economic, and social benefits, including carbon sequestration, biodiversity, wildlife habitat, clean water, clean air, recreation, and jobs for local communities. However, after decades of pro forestry campaigns, it appears our message is not getting through.

For a large global pulp and paper company like International Paper (IP), proving the benefits of working forests to an environmentally conscious global consumer can be challenging and costly. To compound this challenge, we use a high-emotion resource, a tree, to make a low-emotion product, a box. Add in current global policies that often unjustly link harvesting trees with deforestation, and the challenge seems overwhelming.

However, the stakes are too high to ignore. If the forest sector is perceived as selling unsustainable products, the demand for wood will decrease. Forest landowners will lose markets and likely explore other land use options. If that happens, all the benefits of working forests could be compromised.

Beginning in 2019, IP developed a new strategy based on innovation, collaboration, and communication to address the challenge. This strategy would ultimately guide new ways to “have the conversation” with our internal sales teams and end customers about the benefits of working forests. What we have found is promising, and along the way, it has given us the unique opportunity to highlight the great work private forest landowners are doing to an audience that ultimately drives our demand for wood.

INNOVATION

IP buys most of its wood from the US South where most of the forest land is privately owned. Although many of our customers would prefer that all of the wood we buy come from third-party certified forests (SFI, FSC, or ATF), most of the wood we buy is not third-party certified.

Multiple factors such as cost, unrealized benefits, and limited resources have caused the acres of certified forests in the U.S. to plateau in recent years. IP developed ForSite,® an innovative GIS mapping system that guides our fiber procurement on non-certified forestland to meet our customers’ expectations while still supporting certified forestlands. ForSite,® showcases that lands that are not third-party certified follow similar protective measures to those practiced on certified forestlands when harvesting timber.

The ForSite,® tool allows us to view the precise location of all non-certified wood delivered directly to our mills prior to purchase. These locations are vetted against an environmental

mapping layer to ensure our procurement activities maintain or enhance the ecological value and ensure sustainable forest management practices are used.

ForSite,® gives IP world-class transparency within our industry and a powerful visual demonstration of sustainable forestry and responsible sourcing. In addition, because this information is available to our field personnel on their smart devices, the data is accessible in any setting. So, what does this mean for the private forest landowner? It could result in pre-harvest questions from IP or our wood suppliers about the presence of a possible environmental risk (such as rare plant or animal species) within a given harvest area.

Although the risks are usually mitigated through the documented use of best management practices (BMPs), there have been some instances where private landowners have gone

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above and beyond to help us demonstrate responsible sourcing. IP’s intent has always been cooperative risk mitigation while supporting working forests and private landowners.

The cooperation has been fantastic, and the responses from our customers and other stakeholders have exceeded our expectations. ForSite,® is an excellent way to connect customers with the value of a working forest and a powerful visual spatial demonstration of how we can responsibly and sustainably source wood fiber to make products people depend on every day.

COLLABORATE AND COMMUNICATE

Collaborating with organizations outside of the industry is critical to understanding different perspectives and ensuring the working forest message reaches a broad audience. Furthermore, these organizations often spread the working forest message with us. Our experience suggests that who delivers the message is as important as the content.

Over the last 10 years, IP has collaborated with several



Gina Kent of the Avian Research and Conservation Institute holds a swallow-tailed kite that will be radio tagged and tracked.



Swallow-tailed kites spend their spring and summer months in the Southeastern forests of the U.S. and then migrate to their wintering grounds in South America. (Photo: Courtesy of the American Bird Conservancy.)

conservation organizations to promote conservation work within our supply chain. As these partnerships have matured over time, they have resulted in broader discussions with additional stakeholders about the conservation value of working forests.

For example, in 2005, IP and the American Bird Conservancy (ABC) formalized a multi-year partnership to integrate bird conservation into IP's wood procurement supply chain. Both organizations share a need for sustainably managed forests to meet their missions and support their respective business models.

We also share a belief that forest birds are an essential indicator of forest sustainability and overall ecosystem health. Over the years, IP and ABC have conducted more than 30 field workshops for a wide variety of stakeholders, customers, private forest landowners, consultants, academia, and wildlife professionals. These workshops aim to educate participants on the value of working forests, specifically in the context of birds, and what management practices can enhance the value of those forests for species of conservation concern.

Forest birds are excellent "story tellers" as their presence or absence can tell us a lot about the health and diversity of a given working forest. IP's customers value how wood procurement affects biodiversity. Viewing different species of birds in other forest types has enabled them to understand an inherently complex topic better.

The partnership with ABC has also resulted in notable species-specific conservation work that has received wide recognition. For example, working with the Avian Research and Conservation Institute and the Orleans Audubon Society,

we have captured, radio tagged, and tracked 13 Swallow-tailed kites. Kites are one of North America's most beautiful birds of prey, with distinctive black and white plumage and a long, forked tail. They are also long-distance migrants that spend their spring and summer months in the Southeastern forests of the U.S. and then migrate to their wintering grounds in South America.

The cycle repeats annually with the kites usually returning to the U.S. to the same forested area every spring and sometimes even nesting in the same tree. Viewing kites during forest tours with customers is a highlight of the event and another visual confirmation of the value of working forests. In addition, tracking the tagged kites in ForSite® allows IP and our conservation partners to follow their movements across the landscape so we can further understand their specific habitat needs and target outreach within the most strategic areas.

IP recognizes that conveying the vital message of working forests is complex, and we also realize that the journey never ends. However, we do think our focus on innovation, collaboration, and communication has enabled us to put a few of the puzzle pieces together. Once again, the stakes are high. Without effectively communicating the value of working forests to a skeptical general public, we jeopardize the future of forest products, the livelihoods of private landowners and loggers, forested landscapes, and the wildlife that call these working forests home.

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