



photo courtesy of Jerry Michael

MASTER STEWARDS *of the Woods*

by Gary Goff, Rich Taber and John Razzano
photos by Gary Goff except where noted

With a commitment to wise stewardship borne of owning their own woodlands, Master Forest Owners counsel their peers on how to properly manage their forests to provide plant and wildlife habitat, while at the same time using their forests for recreation, timber and other forest products.

Did you know that more than three-quarters (or approximately 14 million acres) of New York's forest land is privately owned? That's nearly three times the forest holdings of the state government—including the Adirondack and Catskill forest preserves! With so much land privately owned, the stewardship of NY's forests largely lies in the hands of the roughly 650,000 private forest owners.

New York's forests cover nearly 63 percent of the state's landscape and are home to a multitude of plant and animal species, including many irreplaceable native varieties. Activities associated with New York's forests employ tens of thousands of people and annually contribute \$4.6 billion to the state's

economy. Keeping our forests healthy is essential, and something that for most property owners is a daunting task that they can't tackle alone.

Enter the New York Master Forest Owner Program (MFO) run by Sr. Cornell Cooperative Extension Associate and founder Gary Goff. Supervised from Goff's office at Cornell University, the MFO program trains volunteers who help private forest owners with information on everything from properly harvesting timber to reducing real estate taxes. The program draws on experts from government, industry and academia, as well as the New York Forest Owners Association (NYFOA) and sporting groups seeking to preserve game habitat.

Above: Jerry Michael stands in a plantation of sugar maples (wrapped to protect them from deer browsing) at his Tree Farm in Lisle.



Certified volunteers stay up-to-date via many educational events such as this woodwalk.

More than two decades ago, NYFOA member John Marchant approached Goff with the idea of replicating a program he attended that trained forest owners how to teach their peers wise forest management. Using that peer-to-peer program as a model, Goff worked with his colleagues at Cornell, NYFOA and DEC to develop a curriculum to train volunteers. After arranging for instructors and finding sponsors (e.g. the Ruffed Grouse Society), he launched the first New York MFO program in 1991.

Someone interested in becoming a Master Forest Owner volunteer applies for one of 20 slots to attend the four-day program held each September. The program is advertised primarily through county Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) offices and NYFOA chapters, so few applicants are turned away. Goff reviews the applications to determine the candidates' forest management experience, as well as how much time and energy each candidate is willing to devote as a volunteer.



As part of the training, new MFOs visit Wagner Hardwoods sawmill in Cayuta.

Forest Owners Under Pressure

When times are hard and bills pile up, forest owners will sometimes cut all the best trees on their land (called high-grade logging) to sell as a way to pay their real estate taxes. High-grade logging generally leaves only diseased and low-grade timber, severely degrading the property. In other cases, some property owners under financial hard times are forced to sell land that has been in families for generations. If you are a forest owner or know of a forest owner in this situation, contact an MFO volunteer (see sidebar "For More Information"). Volunteers can provide information on tax-saving programs and refer forest owners to experts who can offer advice on how to optimize the economic benefits of their forests so their woodlots can help pay for themselves.

Training takes place at the Arnot Teaching and Research Forest in Van Etten, a 4,200-acre forest about 15 miles south of Cornell. "There's no cell phone reception, which is a good thing," quips Goff. Recruits don't need any distractions during their intense training schedule. Trainees arrive on a Wednesday afternoon. After checking in, they enjoy dinner, introductions and socializing before retiring to rustic cabins where they rest up for the busy days ahead.

Thursday through Saturday are packed with activities and information, starting with breakfast at 7:00 a.m., followed by indoor classes. Topics range from forest ecology and wildlife biology, to effectively communicating with landowners and managing real estate taxes. After lunch, trainees gather notebooks and other materials and head into the woods for fieldwork.

Outdoor lessons involve everything from identifying trees and estimating “stumpage” (timber) values, to finding and posting property boundaries. Trainees discuss the day’s lessons at dinner and then have downtime before heading back for a 7:00 p.m. class. A visit to nearby Wagner Hardwoods sawmill (where trainees see how timber becomes lumber), an evening owl prowl, quiet fishing on one of Arnot’s ponds, and other fun activities are program favorites.

Sunday is “wrap-up time” and the pace slows. After three hours of program review and an exercise on getting started as MFO volunteers, graduates are presented with their Master Forest Owner Volunteer certificates.

Once certified, MFOs are ready to meet with woodlot owners in their communities. They listen to the owner’s concerns and questions, and offer advice on where to get assistance. Friends, neighbors and relatives are usually the first contacts for the new volunteers, but they also receive referrals through county Cornell Cooperative Extension offices or NYFOA chapters. Once MFOs have found or been referred to forest owners who need help, they schedule half-day visits in order to walk their client’s property and evaluate the condition of their woods. With new knowledge gained from the training program and hands-on experience, MFOs now have the confidence they need to put forest owners on the path toward better management of their woodlots.

Jerry Michael and Dean Faklis are two excellent examples of successful MFO volunteers. Jerry is a program veteran, working since 1995 as an MFO from his home in Binghamton. Over those 17 years, he has made more than 125 visits to private forests, making him one of the program’s most prolific volunteers. Jerry picks up the story from here:

“Many of my visits in recent years have been to forested properties recently purchased by folks from the greater New



Participants learn how to properly use a compass.

York City area. Generally, they are inexperienced with forest management issues but are well-educated and accustomed to seeking out the resources they need to make good stewardship decisions.

“Two properties I visited in 2009 are cases in point. Both woodlots had been severely degraded by ‘high-grade’ logging (cutting only the most valuable trees), which left mostly diseased beech and low-value trees. I pointed out that poor past management had severely compromised the sawtimber and wildlife productivity of their woodlots, and fixing that would require intensive management for many years, potentially at considerable cost.

“Fortunately, both forest owners had the means to pay for forest stand improvement, and they agreed that restoration of their forests was a high priority. I gave them the list of cooperating foresters maintained by DEC, so they could pick a forester to work with them on developing and implementing a management plan. I left feeling energized by their enthusiasm and commitment to follow through.”

Dean Faklis is a rising star, beginning his MFO career only three years ago. He lives in Springwater, south of Hemlock Lake in the Finger Lakes region. Dean has demonstrated a gift for “thinking out of the box” about how to help forest owners and the wider community through his work as an MFO. He explains:

“Springwater is blessed with pristine waterways, abundant wildlife, and majestic forests. But we have long, cold winters, which make the cost of home heating a challenge. Fortunately, it is possible to manage our forests responsibly and provide clean-burning wood heat at a relatively low cost. But for seniors with limited ability to harvest enough wood, purchasing firewood or heating fuel is the only option. With firewood nearing \$250 per full cord and fuel oil headed back to more than \$4 per gallon, for some folks it comes down to a choice between ‘heating or eating.’ There are government assistance programs to help now, but we can’t rely entirely on them forever.



The MFO program holds regional, annual “refresher workshops” for volunteers. Here MFOs visit a bog on Diane Church’s property in St. Lawrence County.

“In response to this problem, the Springwater Wood Bank, organized and staffed by volunteers, was started as a free supplemental fuel assistance program. They work with the Livingston County Office for the Aging and Catholic Charities of Livingston County to help people in need. While they can’t build a power plant or eliminate the need for buying heating fuel, the neighbors at the wood bank make timber stand improvements to their woodlots and donate some of the harvested wood as firewood to help seniors in need. Only some of the trees are removed (much like weeding a garden) and put to good use as a home-grown source of heat for our folks.

“The wood bank started in 2010 and the supply of free firewood was limited to heat emergencies. They hope to expand the free firewood effort as supply and demand

become better understood. Firewood suppliers also receive free information on woodland improvement and free site visits under Cornell’s MFO program.

“There’s an old saying, ‘Firewood warms you twice: once when you cut it and once when you burn it.’ When you help your neighbor through a program like the wood bank, it warms you a third time. Lending a hand to people and forests, now that’s good stewardship!”

The MFO program is now entering its 22nd year of providing private forest owners with the information and encouragement they need to manage their woodlots for years to come. Since 1991, nearly 400 certified MFO volunteers have visited more than 3,000 private forest owners who collectively own about 190,000 acres of woodlands.

That’s impressive, but there’s still a lot of work to do, especially considering that the number of private forest owners in New York increased by almost 200,000 between 1994 and 2006! The good news is that there are many educational programs and technical services available through non-profit, government and industry organizations.

Looking back over the last two decades, Gary Goff is grateful and hopeful, saying “We’re very fortunate to have the sponsorship of the Robert H. Wentorf Jr. Foundation, the USDA Renewable Resources Extension Program, the NY Forest Owners Association, and Cornell Cooperative Extension. And of course, the close support of DEC forestry staff has been invaluable.”

“In 2008,” continues Goff, “we surveyed forest owners who had been visited by an MFO volunteer. The survey results showed that the knowledge, dedication and community spirit of the volunteers delivered via the MFO Program over the past 20 years has accomplished a lot. Almost all the surveyed forest owners would recommend a MFO visit to other forest owners, and many found that working with MFO volunteers benefitted their bottom lines—either through sales of timber and non-timber forest products, or enrollment in a tax-saving program. We’ve laid a good foundation that will carry the program well into the future.”

Gary Goff is a senior extension associate in Cornell University’s Department of Natural Resources. **Rich Taber** is a program assistant with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Chenango County and also a MFO volunteer. **John Razzano** is a contributing editor to the *Conservationist*.



For More Information

Visit the New York Master Forest Owner Program website at www.cornellmfo.info for more information about the program and a listing of volunteers in your area. Applications are available on the website if you’re interested in becoming an MFO volunteer. To view a list of cooperating foresters, go to www.dec.ny.gov/lands/46800.html on DEC’s website. Visit the New York Forest Owners Association website at <http://nyfoa.org> to learn more about that organization, their members and how they can help woodlot owners.

