

A SUMMARY HISTORY OF
THE NEW YORK FOREST OWNERS ASSOCIATION

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Founding

The New York Forest Owners Association, Inc. (NYFOA) was formally organized with 212 members on April 27, 1963, and incorporated under the laws of New York State on August 12, 1963. [Dr. Svend Heiberg](#), Dean of the College of Forestry at the State University of New York at Syracuse University (now SUNY ESF), is credited with the initial proposal to establish an Association of Forest Landowners in New York State. Originally from Denmark, Dr. Heiberg was internationally known for his work in silvaculture, and his insight and first-hand observation of successful forest owner associations in Scandinavia sparked the movement. He and several other forestry leaders in New York discussed the need for an organization of forest owners to give forestry in New York the organized strength, clarification of objectives, and unity of purpose that are shown in agriculture by Farm Bureau, the Grange and Dairymen's league.

At the College, Dr. Heiberg headed up a faculty committee on Forest Landowners which led to two forest landowner forums, on November 9, 1961 and October 9, 1962, which were sponsored by the College of Forestry as well as the Forest Practices Board, with backing from New York State Conservation Department (now DEC) and Cornell University College of Agriculture. Out of those forums, came the organization of NYFOA in April 1963, and the first issue of the *New York Forest Owner* magazine was published that July. Numerous well-known names in New York forestry have graced the leadership and Board of Directors of the Association. Today membership is approximately 1700, and is supported by over fifty years of service to New York woodland owners.

NYFOA's first president, Theodore Buckley, stated in 1963, "With over 250,000 forest land owners in New York State and half of the State's 30 million acres consisting of forest land, our Association has an outstanding opportunity to help develop more wood wealth, job opportunities and recreational appeal as the people of New York State become aware of the vast tree growing resource. We invite those interested to join us in making New York State truly proud of this great forest potential. Better managed forest land can bring additional benefits to numerous communities where forest land is the most important single natural resource." The main points in that statement are still true today.

Purpose

The purposes of NYFOA include:

1. Encourage forest land owners to identify their individual objectives, to use natural resource professionals in developing management plans with practices to help achieve those objectives, and to support owners in their implementation activities;
2. Promote public understanding of the benefits derived through sound forest stewardship, including

cleaner water, improved wildlife habitat, continued recreation opportunities, and the wood products essential to meet society's every day needs;

3. Support economically sound use of privately owned forest lands through studies and education to allow enjoyment of forest benefits today without compromising the ability of future generations to also meet their needs;

4. Provide resources and information to the public to increase their understanding of the concepts and importance of sound principles of forest management;

5. Foster communication and cooperation with other organizations and agencies with similar purposes and among and between all participants in the forest product cycle, such as: landowners; harvesters; sawmills and processors; pulp mills and manufacturers; wildlife, recreation and other natural resource interests; industrial, commercial and domestic consumers; and others.

Through local chapter and statewide activities such as woods walks and tours, the bi-monthly *New York Forest Owner* magazine and other publications, and affiliation with other organizations with similar objectives, NYFOA helps woodland owners to achieve their management objectives for their properties and encourages the appreciation of the qualities and importance of New York's forests.

Membership

By October 1963, there were 302 members. The newly formed Board of Directors posed the question, what is the optimal growth rate of NYFOA, a question that has been pondered many times since. Within that first year, membership doubled and by January 1965 there were 561 members. The organization continued to grow to 734 members by 1966. Two meetings were held each year; the winter meeting held at SUNY ESF and a fall meeting rotating around the State. By 1967 there were 805 members. Membership rose and fell and 13 years later, in 1980, there were still only 664 members.

Woods Walks

NYFOA initiated the idea of "Woods Walks" to demonstrate the benefits of good forest management practices and to encourage sharing of information among and between private woodland owners and forestry professionals. The first one was held on Saturday May 27, 1967 at Henry Kernan's property in South Worcester, Otsego County. These early woods walks were set up and run by the state NYFOA Board, since there were no chapters at that time. However, in 1973 it was proposed to divide the State into districts and having a woods walk chairman in each district who would set up and coordinate woods walks in his district, including notifying local news etc. of the locations and dates of walks as well as other information about NYFOA.

Chapters

By 1982, the NYFOA bylaws contained a clause that any county having 10 or more members could organize a county chapter and elect its chairman, vice chairman, and secretary. The 1984 bylaws contained a section on regional affiliates allowing the Board of Directors to designate any appropriate group in New York as a regional affiliate. In 1985 the first chapter was formed in Cayuga County. In 1986, the Southern Tier chapter was formed, and that same year two regional affiliates were recognized, THRIFT (Tug Hill Resources-Investment For Tomorrow) and the Catskill Forestry Association. These two actions brought NYFOA membership above 1,000. Other chapters were soon formed and by 1991, the present chapter structure was in place and membership had grown to 1600. This growth is attributed to the formation of local chapters and increasing the profile of NYFOA by connecting with the broader forestry community.

Advocacy

The stated objective of NYFOA in the original founding documents strongly suggests that the organization will study and evaluate various public policy and legislative issues. NYFOA provides a voice for private woodland owners in New York State. Over the years, NYFOA has informed its membership on various public policy and legislative issues of interest to woodland owners, including forest property taxation, timber theft laws, right to practice forestry bills, and forester licensing. NYFOA worked with legislators and DEC to enact stronger timber theft laws and was very instrumental in the passage of section 480-a of the Real Property Tax code, which gives qualified forest owners property tax relief. Although there may not always be consensus among NYFOA's members on a particular issue or legislation, NYFOA informs its members on the pros and cons of those issues and legislation and how they will affect private woodland owners.

In the late 1980's NYFOA took on more legislative involvement by using the Empire State Forest Products Association bill tracking and legislative help and by reinstating the Legislative Committee, which had been part of the original committee structure set up in 1965. NYFOA participates in Forestry Awareness Day held each year in Albany to help inform legislators of issues of importance to private woodland owners, and is a member of the Council of Forest Resource Organizations which plans Forestry Awareness Day and other legislative activities.

Becoming a Non-Profit Organization

Financial issues were not of great concern during the early years, but in the more recent decades as NYFOA increased efforts to reach out and attract more members, the need for financial resources increased. By the mid 1990's fiscal issues led to further discussions by the Board as to type of non-profit organization NYFOA should become. In 1997 New York Woodland Stewards was set up as an independent tax exempt organization to raise money for educational purposes for NYFOA. It was mildly successful, but having two organizations was confusing and created some tensions among its two boards. Consequently, in 2006 the two groups merged, resulting in full non-profit 501(c)(3) status for NYFOA.

Since its inception, questions of staff and leadership for NYFOA have come up. From 1991 to 1995, John Marchant served, as a volunteer, as NYFOA's first Executive Director. He worked hard to increase membership, monitor legislative matters, and keep in touch with other forestry related groups. He was enthusiastic in his work and did much to establish NYFOA's presence with other groups. With the hiring of a paid half-time Executive Director from 2002 to 2010, some additional activities were possible. Grants were pursued and a few obtained. However, carrying out these grants entailed additional work by the staff, hence little direct attention was given to reaching out or increasing membership. In addition, more responsibility was put on the Board to provide guidance and direction to the Executive Director. No further action has happened on this front.

Outreach and Education

Since the beginning of the organization in 1963, the annual spring meeting had been held at the College of Forestry (SUNY ESF) and included educational presentations on various issues of interest to NYFOA's members. However, over time attendance was dropping in spite of increasing membership, perhaps due to the establishment of local chapters which provided educational opportunities more locally. In the late 1990's, the Central New York chapter began conducting seminars and had an exhibit at the New York Farm Show at the New York State Fairgrounds in Syracuse. In 2003, the annual membership meeting was moved to the State Fairgrounds in conjunction with the Farm Show. In addition to having an exhibit booth, NYFOA put on a series of seminars on forestry-related topics during the three day run of the show and has continued to do so in recent years.

In 2013, NYFOA launched the **Restore New York Woodlands** (RNYW) initiative to bring forest health issues and solutions to the attention of all forest stakeholders and the general public. Without timely and comprehensive action, many of the environmental and economic benefits of our forests will be denied to future generations.

Where We Are Today

NYFOA was founded in 1963 with 212 members, with the objective of helping private woodland owners in New York improve the management and productivity of their forest resource. Membership has risen and fallen over the years, rising to 1400 in 1990 and peaking at 2100 in 2003. For the last 20 years membership has averaged about 1900. Challenging economic conditions in New York's rural economy, the aging demographic of private woodland owners and the parcelization of private woodlands into smaller parcels that make forest management less efficient have all had an impact on membership. New York's woodlands face more challenges today than 50 years ago. NYFOA's mission of educating its membership on wise management of their forest resource and educating the public on the importance of that forest resource to all of society remains relevant today. Much work remains to be done.