

Building Bridges, Not Fences: Effective Communication for Private Lands Biologists





The “Why”

- The core of private lands conservation is voluntary action.
- Our success is directly tied to our ability to connect with landowners.
- Communication is not just a tool; it's the foundation of trust.



The Landowner





Who are we talking to?

- Landowners are diverse: farmers, ranchers, timberland owners, hunters, recreationalists, families.
- Their motivations vary: legacy, income, recreation, personal values.
- Our job is to understand their "why" before we present our "how."



Common Landowner Concerns

- Financial risk/cost of projects.
- Perceived loss of control over their land.
- Skepticism of government or "outside" agencies.
- Fear of regulations or future restrictions.





The "Golden Rule" of Engagement

- It's not about what *we* want; it's about what *they* need.
- Frame conservation in terms of their goals: healthy timber, increased quail populations, improved soil health, a beautiful family legacy, better harvest opportunity.





The Communication "Toolbox"





The First Contact

- Be respectful and professional from the start.
- Phone calls vs. emails: a personal call is often more effective.
- Clearly state your purpose: "I'm calling about the potential for X on your land, which I noticed while driving by. Would you be open to a brief chat?" or "This is Michelle Furr, I am returning your call about your interest in wild turkey habitat on your property."
- Schedule a time that is convenient for *them*.



Active Listening

- This is the most critical skill!
- Ask open-ended questions: "Tell me about your history with this land," "What are your biggest challenges here?"
- Let them do the talking. Listen for their values, priorities, and concerns.
- Paraphrase what you hear to show you're listening: "So, if I understand correctly, your main goal is to improve the deer habitat while maintaining timber income."



The Power of On-Site Visits

- Meeting on their land is a game-changer.
- It shows you respect their territory and their expertise.
- Use their language and their landmarks ("Down by the old oak tree," "In the south pasture").
- Walk the land with them. This builds rapport and provides context.
- New biologist: important to meet with landowners that have been worked with in the past.



Site Visit Scenario: Mr. Jones and the Fallow Field

- **Scenario:** You, a new private lands biologist, are meeting Mr. Jones, a landowner who has 50 acres of fallow ground he wants to "do something with." He's a retired farmer and is skeptical of government programs and new management ideas. He views the fallow field as a "waste of land" and is convinced it needs to be sprayed and planted with a non-native crop to be productive.



Site Visit Scenario: Mr. Jones and the Fallow Field

- **Your Goal:** To listen to his concerns, build rapport, and introduce the idea of managing for native pollinators and wildlife without immediately contradicting his long-held beliefs.





Site Visit Scenario: Mr. Jones and the Fallow Field

- The Conversation
- You: "Good morning, Mr. Jones. Thanks for taking the time to show me your land. This is a beautiful spot you have here."
 - **Communication Strategy:** Start with a positive, respectful tone. Acknowledge him and his property first. This builds rapport and shows you value his perspective.



Site Visit Scenario: Mr. Jones and the Fallow Field

- **Mr. Jones:** "It was, back when we were farming it. Now it's just full of weeds. Seems like a shame to let it go to waste."
- **You:** "I can appreciate that. You've clearly spent a lot of time on this land over the years. Before we talk about what to do with it, I'd love to hear more about the history of this field and what you've seen here over the years."
- **Communication Strategy:** Use open-ended questions to encourage him to talk. This demonstrates that you're there to listen, not just to dictate a plan. Validate his feelings ("I can appreciate that") and his experience.



Site Visit Scenario: Mr. Jones and the Fallow Field

- **Mr. Jones:** "Well, we used to run cattle on it, and before that it was corn. But that was a long time ago. These days, I just see a bunch of weeds, and not many birds or bunnies like there used to be."
- **You:** "That's a very common observation. You know, you mentioned seeing fewer birds, and that's exactly what our work is all about. The 'weeds' you see are actually a very important habitat for them. For example, some of these plants, like this common ragweed, are like a superfood for things like quail and deer. They're full of protein."
- **Communication Strategy:** Turn his negative perception of "weeds" into a positive. Connect your work directly to his concern (the lack of wildlife). Use a familiar and understandable analogy like "superfood" to explain the plant's value. This is a subtle introduction to the idea that his land already has value, just not in the way he's used to seeing it.



Visual Aids and Simple Language

Acronyms

- BOGO: Buy one, Get one
- WIP: Work in Progress
- MOU: Memorandum of Understanding
- POTUS: President of the United States
- URL: Uniform Resource Locator
- IBM: International Business Machines
- GM: General Motors



Visual Aids and Simple Language

Jargon or Slang

- Hit the road: Leave
- Break a leg: Good luck
- Drill down: digging deeper into a topic
- bubbler: fountain drink
- High cotton: state of being successful
- That dog won't hunt: saying an idea is not going to work
- Stick to your ribs: food that is filling



Visual Aids and Simple Language

- Avoid technical jargon and acronyms (e.g., NRCS, CIP, Prescribed Fire vs. "planned burning").
- Use maps, photos, and simple diagrams.
- Show them examples of successful projects on nearby properties.
- Demonstrate the "before" and "after" to make the concept tangible.



Digital Communication Etiquette (Texting)

- When to Text: quick check-ins, confirming meeting times, or sharing a photo.
- "Hi Mr. Smith, just confirming our meeting for Tuesday at 2 p.m. at your place. See you then!" or "hey mr smith c u tuesday @ 2."
- Emojis or punctuation: Mirror landowner or when in doubt, leave it out.
- Clarity is Key
- Respect their time





Case Study 1: The Reluctant Farmer

- **Challenge:** A farmer was skeptical of a stream bank restoration project, concerned about losing valuable cropland.
- **Strategy:** Instead of pushing the project, I listened to her concerns about soil erosion and loss of topsoil. I framed the stream bank project not as a loss, but as a long-term investment that would protect her most valuable asset: her land.
- **Result:** She agreed to contact the stream team biologist and later committed to a small-scale pilot project and, seeing the results, later expanded it.



Case Study 2: The Family Timberland

- **Challenge:** A multi-generational family owned a large timber tract but was divided on management goals (income, wildlife, legacy).
- **Strategy:** I facilitated a meeting with the entire family, allowing each member to voice their goals (income, wildlife, leaving a legacy). I helped them see how sustainable forestry could achieve all of these goals.
- **Result:** We developed a long-term forest management plan that balanced their diverse needs, and they implemented it.



Case Study 3: The Food Plot Landowner

- **Challenge:** A new landowner, whom we'll call Mark, acquired 500 acres of land in a rural area. His primary and sole goal was to consistently harvest mature bucks. His management strategy was simple: plant several large food plots with a mix of clovers and winter wheat, and use automatic feeders to dispense corn year-round. He was not interested in managing for other wildlife and believed that the key to a healthy deer herd was providing an unlimited supply of high-carbohydrate food. He was also skeptical of land management techniques like prescribed fire, fearing it would harm the land and scare off the deer.



Case Study 3: The Food plot Landowner

- **Strategy:**

1. Demonstrate the Nutritional Limitations of Food Plots
2. Introduce the Power of Native Plants
3. Explain the Role of Doe Harvest
4. Introduce Prescribed Fire as a Tool





Case Study 3: The Food Plot Landowner

- **Results:** Mark agreed to a trial. He reduced the size of his food plots, let native vegetation naturally grow, removed the corn feeders, and allowed a forty-acre section of his property to be burned in late winter. He also committed to harvesting five does that season.
1. Increased Forage Quality
 2. Improved Buck Quality
 3. Reduced Costs
 4. Improved habitat for more wildlife





Setting Boundaries

- Define Your Role
- No Late-Night Communication
- Avoid Making Promises
- Redirect to the Project Goal
- Know When to Walk Away





Discussion

