

Communication from the Information Sharing Working Group: Agreement for Data Sharing Among Caribbean Foresters

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Abstract - We presented a new information-sharing platform at the 16th Caribbean Foresters Meeting in August 2013 to facilitate and promote collaboration among Caribbean foresters. The platform can be accessed through the Caribbean Foresters website where information and data on forest research sites can be shared. There is a special focus on identifying potential collaborations and sharing data from permanent forest-sample plots in the Caribbean region. This short communication from the Information-Sharing Working Group that convened at the August 2013 meeting presents the first agreement for information and data sharing among Caribbean Foresters based on the draft that was circulated among all meeting participants and presented at the meeting.

Introduction

Information sharing among Caribbean Foresters members is vital to promoting the objectives of their regional meetings. The Caribbean Foresters convene to meet 4 primary objectives: to 1) bring together the region's practitioners and researchers in forestry and natural-resource sectors to better address common problems; 2) identify and establish training programs for young foresters; 3) share data regarding the effects of disturbances on forests and watersheds, as well as report on subsequent regeneration; and 4) develop a system of communication, information sharing, and data processing for the region. Although the Caribbean Foresters have been meeting since 1982, a formalized platform for communication, information sharing, and data processing had not been developed to address these objectives. Data sharing in general, and specifically in forestry, serves various functions—it improves accountability, facilitates taxonomic identification, informs land-management decisions, can aid the development of practice-based training opportunities, and serves to benefit both practitioners and society (Costello 2009, Ruslandi et al. 2014, South and Duke 2010).

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In a recent review of data-sharing systems in tropical forestry, the authors suggested that all participants in a data-sharing agreement should be able to participate equally in the development of analyses and reports generated from the contributed data and information (Ruslandi et al. 2014). Training and capacity building are fundamental components of equitable information-sharing agreement goals. Although the ultimate goal of the Caribbean Foresters information-sharing agreement is to develop a greater understanding of Caribbean forest dynamics and the unique aspects of Caribbean ecosystems, there are various short-term and longer-term goals in this context. Increasing communication among forestry practitioners, promoting regional capacity-building opportunities, identifying training needs, and facilitating the development of various types of non-academic research products that include plot-level and forest-site descriptions and analyses are the ways to ensure equitable and broad participation in the production of regional-level syntheses and analyses.

This working group report presents the first agreement by participants of the Caribbean Foresters Meeting that covers the expectations and common objectives of this group for a newly developed information-sharing platform. The Caribbean Forester Information-Sharing Platform (CFISP) is available through the Caribbean Foresters website (www.CaribbeanForesters.org). The goals for the use of the CFISP are to: promote and facilitate the secure exchange of information among forest officers, managers, researchers, and other members of the Caribbean Foresters community at large; identify forest types with long-term permanent forest plots; identify potential themes for regional synthesis; and determine the forest types for which we are lacking information. The type of information being gathered through the CFISP therefore includes knowledge of which islands have permanent forest-sample plots established, who is the contact person or is responsible for the data, what information has been collected from these plots, and which experimental management practices or other environmental data have been described for these sites. This platform is similar to another recent effort to identify and share data among forestry researchers of managed tropical forests that is driven by the need to better understand the dynamics of logged forests in the tropics (Sist et al. 2015). In contrast to the Tropical Managed Forests Observatory (TmFO) concept presented by Sist et al. (2015), the CFISP is the first regional formalized initiative to identify and promote communication among foresters and forest researchers working with permanent forest plots (both managed and unmanaged) in the Caribbean region, including plots that are usually smaller in area than those established in continental sites. Various capacity-building and training needs in the region that have also been identified and communicated in other working group reports (presented elsewhere in this issue: Lugo 2016, Marcano Vega et al. 2016, and Vallés and Carrington 2016) will guide the development of future activities by the Caribbean Foresters Meeting member-formed Information-Sharing Working Group. In the process of identifying by whom, where, and when forests have been and are currently studied in the Caribbean, and determining the present needs and limitations identified by regional practitioners, efforts to train, build capacity, and collaborate can lead the way to achieve the ultimate goal of understanding Caribbean Forest dynamics.

Information-sharing Roles

For the purposes of this agreement, information is defined as unprocessed products (e.g., notes, observations, techniques, instrument readouts, tables, databases, pictures, videos), final products (e.g., published information, software code/applications, GIS data, maps), and derivative products (e.g., simulations, models, supporting materials). Here, we identify and define 4 roles related to information sharing, management, and use: information contributor, information ambassador, information manager, and user.

- An information contributor is a person who places information on the Caribbean Foresters website. Each contributor guarantees that he/she has the right to distribute the information, all co-owners of the information have been properly identified and acknowledged, and their own institutional metadata guidelines have been followed. Every contributor has an automatic right to co-authorship in any resulting papers or presentations irrespective of their level of involvement in the analysis and writing of the final paper. All contributors should be informed of product development or publication plans well in advance of submission of a product, given an opportunity to review the product, and to decide on their final co-authorship acceptance depending on their willingness to be a part of the proposed publication or product. The level of information-sharing is defined by the information contributor. The contributor designates information as open access or restricted access. An open-access designation allows the information to be viewed and used by any potential user of the Caribbean Foresters website database. With a restricted-access designation, the information contributor must be contacted and permission secured by the information manager before the information is released. This process is described in the section called Process for Requesting Use of the Information below.
- Each region/country for which information is contributed will have an information ambassador who is responsible for uploading information, solving local issues, and ensuring proper information format.
- The information manager manages the information contributed and handles information requests. The person will be designated by the International Institute of Tropical Forestry (IITF) and identified at the Caribbean Foresters Meeting. As of 8 August 2013 and approved during the 16th Caribbean Foresters Meeting, Tamara Heartsill Scalley, Research Ecologist at IITF (theartsill@fs.fed.us), is the designated information manager.
- A user is a person who requests information through the Caribbean Foresters website. The user and the lead author of any product (publication, presentation, guide, policy memo, manual, etc.) using Caribbean Forester information accept the right of every contributor for automatic co-authorship. It is the responsibility of the user and the lead author of any product to communicate the intention of publication to all data contributors. Contributors have the prerogative to decline authorship. It is the responsibility of the user and the lead author of

any product to ensure that all funding sources identified by data contributors are properly acknowledged or disclosed. In addition, they will announce the product on the Caribbean Foresters website.

Process for Requesting Information Use

The process for all information requests begins with a query by a potential user. A potential user will submit a request through the Caribbean Foresters website that includes the specific information requested and a detailed reason for the request. This request will be submitted to the information manager, who will always contact the relevant information ambassadors and information contributors to inform them of the data request. In the case of restricted-access information, a communication will be sent to the appropriate information ambassadors and information contributors to communicate the user request and solicit permission to distribute the requested data. The information manager will provide open-access information for all reasonable requests, but distribution of restricted-access information will be determined on a case-by-case basis by the information contributors and ambassadors. Upon receipt of the information, the user will directly contact the information contributor if there are any questions regarding the data. The information manager will be informed if any metadata or information needs to be updated based on this correspondence. The user will contact all information contributors well before submission of any products prepared with the data to solicit input and to communicate with prospective co-authors. In the case of a conflict among information contributors and users regarding data sharing, the information manager will assess the situation and communicate with all parties involved. Any publications or other products resulting from the use of the information will be announced on the Caribbean Foresters website.

Final Remarks

We propose this agreement as a first step to strengthen and sustain the ongoing networking interactions based on ethical rules of scientific practice with the guiding principles of honesty, reliability, objectivity, and independence, which are contained in the Responsible Code of Conduct in Research, promoted by the Caribbean Forester Meetings. The Caribbean Foresters website and the CFISP intend to promote information-management along with capacity building in the Caribbean region. As of this agreement, only metadata, or data descriptors, are posted on the Caribbean Foresters website—no site-data are displayed. This agreement is open to revision by the Caribbean Forests community members, and it is expected to change to reflect the needs of the community it serves. This agreement and any subsequent modifications will be located on the Caribbean Foresters website.

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