



From Classroom to Forest: How Forestry Work Experience Shapes Future Foresters

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Learning Forestry Beyond the Four Walls

Forestry is not a profession that can be learned entirely from textbooks and lecture halls. A student may study forest ecology, silviculture, wildlife management, forest mensuration, social forestry and forest administration in the classroom, but the real understanding of forestry begins when those concepts are encountered in the field. Forests are complex systems. They are not only collections of trees; they are living landscapes connected with wildlife, water, soil, climate and, importantly, people. Millions of people depend directly or indirectly on forests for their livelihoods and resources. Therefore, a professional forester needs more than academic knowledge. A forester must be able to understand field situations, communicate with communities, work with institutions, make decisions and respond to practical problems. Recognizing this need, practical training has become an important component of forestry education. The Forestry Work Experience (FOWE) programme provides students with an opportunity to move beyond classroom learning and experience the realities of forestry. A recent study conducted at the College of Forestry, Sirsi, examined how students perceive this programme and what characteristics they bring to their field-learning experience. The study involved 62 final-year forestry students selected through proportionate random sampling. The findings offer an interesting insight into the transition from student to professional forester.

Why Practical Forestry Education Matters

Forests provide a wide range of ecological and economic services. They support biodiversity, contribute to carbon storage, provide renewable resources and play an important role in human well-being. The report emphasizes that forests provide products and services essential to society while supporting habitats and removing carbon from the atmosphere. Because forestry involves such diverse responsibilities, education in this field cannot remain purely theoretical. The report explains that forestry education in State Agricultural Universities began in India in 1985, followed by efforts to develop a more uniform curriculum. The Fifth Deans' Committee further strengthened practical exposure by introducing the Forestry Work Experience component as part of the undergraduate curriculum. The idea behind FOWE is simple but powerful: learn forestry by experiencing forestry. Students are exposed to real situations rather than only theoretical examples. They can observe how forests are managed, interact with forest personnel and communities, and understand the challenges involved in applying scientific principles in the field.

The programme includes several components such as:

- Orientation

- Watershed and village attachment
- Urban forestry attachment
- Forest range attachment
- Wildlife attachment
- Industrial attachment

Such exposure can help students understand that forestry is a multidisciplinary profession requiring scientific knowledge as well as social, managerial and communication skills.

More Than Field Visits

It is easy to think of practical training simply as visiting a forest or observing forestry operations. FOWE, however, is intended to provide a much broader learning experience. The report points out that theoretical knowledge provides the foundation, while practical training helps students apply that knowledge to real situations. Practical programmes can also strengthen leadership, coordination, problem-solving and interdisciplinary learning. Imagine a student standing in a forest range and being asked to understand a management problem. The answer may not be found on a single textbook page. The student may need to consider ecological conditions, local communities, forest regulations, available resources and practical limitations. This is where field experience becomes valuable. The student begins to understand that forestry decisions often require balancing different interests. A technically correct solution may not always be practical unless it is communicated properly and accepted by the people involved. Thus, FOWE can help transform students from passive receivers of information into active problem-solvers.

Who Were the Students in the Study?

To understand students' perceptions of FOWE, the study first examined their personal and socio-economic characteristics. The study involved 62 students. The majority were in the younger age groups, with the largest group falling within the 22–23-year range according to the report. Most students were male, while female students formed a smaller proportion of the respondents. Academic performance was another important characteristic. A large proportion of students were reported to have an OGPA in the middle performance category. One particularly interesting finding was the students' family background. About 73.33 per cent of the students came from rural backgrounds, while 26.67 per cent came from urban backgrounds. Similarly, a large proportion of students belonged to farming families. About 66.67 per cent came from farming families, followed by students from service and business backgrounds. At first, one might assume that students from rural or farming families would automatically possess extensive knowledge of forestry and rural life. However, the report's review of earlier studies points out that even students from rural backgrounds may have limited exposure to actual rural situations. This highlights the importance of structured field-based learning. In other words, living in a rural area and understanding rural forestry situations are not necessarily the same thing.

Building Leaders in the Forest

Forestry is also about people. A forester may have excellent technical knowledge, but professional success often depends on the ability to work with colleagues, communities and other institutions. For this reason, the study examined students' leadership ability. The results showed that 70.67 per cent of students had medium-level leadership ability, while 17.33 per cent had low and 12 per cent had high leadership ability. This finding is important because leadership is not necessarily something students learn from a textbook. It develops through experience. During group activities, students may have to divide responsibilities, coordinate tasks, support one another and make decisions. Some situations require students to lead, while others require them to follow and cooperate. The questionnaire used in the study included statements relating to adjusting with group members, helping others, accepting responsibility, appreciating good work and taking additional responsibility for the group.

These are not merely academic skills. They are professional skills. A forester working in the field may often have to coordinate with forest guards, officers, local communities, researchers, non-governmental organizations and other departments. Therefore, learning to work effectively with people is as important as learning to measure a tree or identify a species.

Confidence Grows Through Experience

Walking into an unfamiliar village, speaking with local people, participating in field activities or taking responsibility for a group assignment can be challenging for students. That is why self-confidence is another important outcome of practical training. The study found that 56 per cent of students had a medium level of self-confidence, while 26.67 per cent had a low level and 17.33 per cent had a high level. The questionnaire examined aspects such as students' ability to adjust to the FOWE programme, face difficult situations, take decisions and have confidence in their ability to perform assigned work. This is significant because confidence often develops through doing rather than simply knowing. A student may know how a forest operation should theoretically be conducted. But actually participating in the operation, observing field constraints and interacting with people can provide a completely different kind of learning. Repeated exposure to real situations can gradually turn uncertainty into confidence.

The Digital Forest Learner

Modern forestry education is no longer restricted to books, newspapers and classroom lectures. Students now have access to information through the internet and other forms of mass media. The study therefore examined the students' use of mass media during FOWE. The results indicated that 73.33 per cent of students had medium-level mass-media use, while 24 per cent had low use and only 2.67 per cent had high use. The questionnaire included sources such as radio, newspapers, internet and other media. Mass media can complement field learning by helping students remain aware of developments in forestry, agriculture, environmental issues and society. For example, a student studying forest management may encounter a field problem and later use digital resources to explore possible approaches. In this way, technology does not replace field learning; it can strengthen it. The most effective forestry education may therefore involve a combination of classroom knowledge + field experience + digital information.

What Did Students Really Think About FOWE?

The central question of the study was the students' perception of the Forestry Work Experience programme. The results revealed that. About 69.33 per cent of students had a medium level of perception towards FOWE, while 16 per cent had a low perception and 14.67 per cent had a high perception. At first, the dominance of a medium perception might appear less encouraging. However, it also suggests that there is room to make the programme more effective and engaging. The questionnaire explored several reasons students may value FOWE. These included becoming familiar with forest life, understanding forest situations and socio-economic conditions, improving diagnostic skills, receiving practical training in forest management, gaining exposure, developing confidence and leadership, improving communication skills and working with forest institutions. These dimensions show that FOWE is much more than an academic requirement. It is intended to develop a professional identity.

From Forest Knowledge to Forest Wisdom

There is a difference between knowing about a forest and understanding a forest. A textbook can explain forest ecology. A classroom can describe silvicultural systems. A lecture can introduce wildlife management. But field experience can show students how these ideas interact in real situations. For example, a forest is simultaneously an ecological system, a resource, a habitat and a landscape connected to human communities. Students therefore need opportunities to see these relationships for themselves. The report emphasizes that practical

training helps students apply theoretical knowledge to real situations and develop interdisciplinary understanding. This is perhaps the greatest strength of a programme such as FOWE. The student begins with knowledge. The field provides experience and reflection on that experience develops understanding. Repeated application eventually contributes to professional competence.

What Can Be Improved?

The study's findings also provide an opportunity to think about how FOWE can be strengthened. Since most students showed medium levels of leadership, self-confidence and perception, there is scope for increasing opportunities that require students to take responsibility and actively participate in field activities. Rather than students simply observing an activity, they could be encouraged to participate in planning, execution, documentation and evaluation wherever appropriate. Greater interaction with forest officials and local communities could also help students understand the practical and socio-economic dimensions of forestry. Similarly, students could be encouraged to maintain field diaries, document problems encountered during attachments and discuss possible solutions with their teachers and field mentors. The programme could therefore become not simply a period of field exposure but a structured process of observation, participation, reflection and problem-solving. The report itself notes that the findings may be useful to policymakers and administrators in effective implementation and in determining whether restructuring of FOWE is required.

Preparing the Forester of Tomorrow

Forestry is changing. Modern foresters are expected to understand biodiversity conservation, climate change, sustainable forest management, forest-based livelihoods, restoration, technology and community participation. These challenges cannot be addressed through theoretical knowledge alone. Tomorrow's forester must be comfortable both in the classroom and in the field. The FOWE programme provides an important bridge between these two worlds. The students in the Sirsi study were predominantly from rural and farming backgrounds, but the programme provided a structured opportunity to understand forestry situations through professional and practical exposure. The study found medium levels of leadership, self-confidence and mass-media use among most students, while the majority also had a medium perception of FOWE. These findings suggest that the foundation is present, but there is considerable scope to make practical forestry education even more meaningful.

Conclusion: The Forest as a Classroom

A forest can teach lessons that no textbook can fully reproduce. It can teach students how ecological principles work in real landscapes. It can teach them the importance of communication, teamwork and leadership. It can expose them to the realities faced by forest-dependent communities. It can challenge them to make decisions when conditions are not ideal. That is why Forestry Work Experience is more than just another component of a degree programme. It is a transition point between student life and professional forestry. The study at the College of Forestry, Sirsi, provides valuable evidence about how students experience this transition. Most students showed medium levels of leadership ability, self-confidence, mass-media use and perception of the FOWE programme. At the same time, the findings point towards opportunities for strengthening the programme through greater participation, responsibility and field-based problem-solving. Ultimately, the goal of forestry education is not simply to produce graduates who can describe forests. It is to produce professionals who can understand forests, work with people, solve field problems and manage forest resources responsibly. And sometimes, the best place to begin that education is not in a classroom—but under the shade of a tree.