



# Understanding Communities for Successful Resource Planning

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## What is it?

The term “community” often brings to mind cities, suburbs, villages, or farm towns. A planning area might include all these communities defined by geography. Communities defined in ways other than geography may also be significant in the planning area. For example, in a watershed there may be a community of farmers and a community of nonfarmers, or a community of urbanites and a community of suburbanites.

This fact sheet gives suggestions for learning about the social, cultural, and economic aspects of *geographically-defined* communities. Much of this information, however, is also relevant for other communities of interest in the planning area.

Social, cultural, and economic characteristics of communities concern people and their relationships with each other. They include demographics (age, race, income, etc.), attitudes and values, information networks, how decisions are made and problems resolved, and the availability of resources. Some other community characteristics relate to how people identify themselves and their town, their collective history and how it affects them today, local leadership and social divisions, and how the community manages change.

### What’s the difference between a community’s “culture” and “cultural resources”?

One definition of *community culture* is “A complex learned and shared system of human behavior, including the way people think about things, as well as more overt physical behaviors. The codes, customs, habits, and understandings of one’s own culture is taken for granted and assumed ‘normal.’” (*Social Sciences Institute*)

“*Cultural resources* are all the past activities and accomplishments of people. They include buildings, objects, locations, and structures that have scientific, historic and cultural value. The cultural resources that NRCS deal with most often are known as historic properties. These may be prehistoric or historic districts, sites, buildings, structures, features, or objects.”

For information about identifying cultural resources in a planning area, see the Appendix of the RPG.

## Why is it important?

Understanding communities in a planning area is necessary in order to:

- Evaluate existing resource conditions, causes and impacts (including impacts on people).
- Assess the effects of alternatives, including effects expected if resource concerns remain untreated.

Understanding communities is also critical for a successful planning process. Socio-economics affects the locally-led resource planning process and its outcomes, generally influencing:

- Conflict, cohesion and public involvement during the planning
- Decisions about management alternatives
- Whether and how the plan is implemented

Consider a few fictitious examples of how resource planning is affected by social, economic and cultural community characteristics. Naturally these scenarios don't exemplify all communities, but they do highlight the importance of social, cultural, and economic considerations in resource planning.

- A small town struggles with the locally-led process because their local leadership capacity is limited by population decline and residents who are primarily elderly or very young.
- A wealthy community adopts a resource plan advocating innovative land management practices because its strong local economy supports risk-taking.
- Minority stakeholders in a rural watershed are hesitant to participate on a Planning Committee because in that area they are less involved in community affairs.
- Farmers in an agricultural watershed oppose nonfarmer involvement to address contamination of the town's water supply from agricultural chemicals because they feel it is an agriculturally-related issue.

## **When do we do it?**

Socio-economic and cultural information is collected by technical specialists during Step 3 of Phase One, when resources are inventoried. Also, throughout the entire planning process the Planning Committee uses and enhances their understanding of communities in the planning area.

## **How do we do it?**

"Community Profiles" or "Social Profiles" document the socio-economic and cultural characteristics of communities for resource planning. Community profiles are usually geographically based (e.g., a profile is written for all the municipalities in a watershed) but sometimes profiles are done for specific social groups, such as the landowners in a planning area, or the limited resource farmers in a planning area.

Methods of understanding socio-economics of communities depends on the project, the communities, and the resources available to collect, analyze and interpret the information. Like other inventories, community profiles can take days, weeks or months, depending on resources available and level of detail desired.

Consider two main categories of information about communities:

1. *Primary data*: First-hand interaction with the communities, including interviews with community leaders, review of newspapers, focus groups, and citizen surveys.
2. *Secondary data*: Population, housing, economic, and agricultural census data collected at national, state and local level by various agencies.

The easiest and most effective way to learn about communities is to check the census (secondary data source) and talk with people who live, work and visit there (primary data source).

A basic community profile may include some or all of the following information:

INFORMATION	SOME SOURCES
<p>Total population</p> <p>Percent population change in last 10 and 20 years</p> <p>Population over age 65 and under 18</p> <p>Minority populations</p> <p>Female headed households</p> <p>Families below poverty level</p> <p>Attitudes, beliefs, and values</p> <p>Local economy and employment</p> <p>Education</p> <p>Governance, leadership and decision making</p> <p>Infrastructure and public services</p> <p>Public safety and health</p> <p>Information networks</p> <p>Religious and spiritual practices</p> <p>Local arts, history and traditions</p> <p>Local identity</p> <p>Cultural resources</p> <p>Total number of housing units &amp; persons per housing unit</p> <p>Number of units without complete plumbing</p> <p>Number of owner occupied housing units</p> <p>Median rent and median value of owner-occupied units</p> <p>Percent vacant units</p>	<p>Decennial census or other censuses<sup>1</sup></p> <p>Decennial census or other censuses</p> <p>Primary information sources<sup>2</sup></p> <p>Decennial census, other censuses and primary information sources</p> <p>Decennial census, other censuses and primary information sources</p> <p>Primary information sources</p> <p>NRCS Cultural Resources Specialist</p> <p>Decennial census or other censuses</p>
<p><b>Farm data</b></p> <p>Size of farm population</p> <p>Number of farms</p> <p>Types of farms</p> <p>Size of farms</p> <p>Type of farm ownership</p> <p>Absentee owners</p> <p>Demographic characteristics of farmers</p>	<p>Agricultural census</p>
<p>Farmer values, attitudes, values</p>	<p>Primary information sources</p>
<p><sup>1</sup> <i>The U.S. Census is generally preferred because it is conducted nationwide, readily available, and comparable for other areas. The most recent decennial census is the 1990 U.S. Census of Population and Housing, available at libraries and on the Internet. Other censuses include state and local surveys, also available at libraries.</i></p>	
<p><sup>2</sup> <i>Interviews with community leaders, review of local newspapers, focus groups, citizen surveys, etc.</i></p>	

Here are some topics you may want to cover during conversations with people who know about communities in the planning area:



## Sample Questions for Community Leaders



**Demographics.** What are the basic population statistics (size, density, spacial distribution, ethnicity, poverty, employment) in the community? What are the important sub-groups (e.g., ethnic, religious)? How do these groups vary in their values, objectives, and priorities?

**Economic conditions.** How would you describe the economic health of the community (average per capita income, poverty rate, families receiving public assistance, etc.)? Describe the businesses and industries in this community. What sectors of the community's economy is doing better or worse? How has this changed over time? Why?

**Decision-making.** Who are the community leaders? Who do community members trust? How are decisions usually made? Who are the typical decision makers?

**Conflict resolution.** How is conflict usually handled in the community? Are there certain key conflicts that are still important to the community?

**Social divisions.** On what basis are social divisions defined? Who is "in" and who is not? Why?

**Problem-solving experience.** What issues concern the community? Has the community been through other locally-led projects? What partnerships exist and what can they do? What money has been brought in to the community? What cooperative projects has the community undertaken? What referendums have passed and failed? What are existing laws and ordinances significant to the issues.

**Trends.** What population, land use and economic trends is the community experiencing? How are these trends being received by the community? How is the community managing change?

**Values and norms.** What are the dominant values in the community? Especially relevant may be attitudes toward growth and development, natural resource stewardship, agriculture, education, etc. How conservative and risk adverse is the community? How innovative is the community?

**Identity of community.** Is the community identity tied to agriculture? That is, do people think "We're a farm town"? Other community identities may be "a traditional, conservative community," "a family town," a "commuting suburb", etc.

### For more information

Contact the NRCS Sociologist and NRCS Economist. Also refer to sources used to develop this factsheet:

Soil Conservation Service, USDA. Technical Note Sociology No. N3 "Suggested Data Sources for Sociological Analysis," May 1989.

USEPA Office of Sustainable Ecosystems and Communities, "Community Cultural Profiling Guide: Understanding a Community's Sense of Place." Undated.