

Public Opinion and Bioenergy: Local Communities

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Research Approach

Southern Research Station (SRS), Forest Service:

- Forest Operations Research, Auburn, AL.
- Integrating Social and Ecological Systems, Athens, GA.

Culture models research:

- Cultural models as shared sets of beliefs and values in relation to forests.
- People have multiple cultural models with varying degrees of compartmentalization and integration.
- Influenced by larger social imaginaries and discourses.
- Varying in motivating force.

Projects (with Pete Brosius and Sarah Hitchner, Center for Integrative Conservation, UGA):

- Social and Cultural Dimensions of Climate Change Adaptation: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches to Social Vulnerability and Biofuels in the U.S. South. Forest Service SRS-funded. 2011-16. (exploratory).
- Social Acceptability of Bioenergy in the U.S. South. USDA-NIFA-AFRI. 2012-2016. (focus on liquid fuels).

Research Findings

Wood-based bioenergy development as a sociotechnical imaginary: Future energy and economic interests to be met with homegrown resources to address social issues such as dependence on foreign and domestic fossil fuel, energy security, climate change, forest health, and rural development needs (Eaton et al. 2014).

Dominant bioenergy imaginary and cultural models of people in communities with bioenergy plants:

- Support for energy independence and reduced dependence on foreign oil.
- Support for rural development and increased wood markets.
- Belief that the above had not occurred, and bioenergy was a scam involving wasteful government spending to benefit elites.
- Forestry as inherently sustainable, but questioning of both climate change and bioenergy's ability to contribute; landowner opposition to certification (outside interference, political agenda).
- Forestry is important, but pine plantations as more than raw materials (wildlife, aesthetics, health, families).

Environmentalism imaginaries:

- Work in progress: Local people have no problem with forestry, but share many cultural models with environmentalists:

Research Application

Bioenergy imaginaries are top-down, but would benefit from input from local communities and landowners.

Assumptions about local people's interests can be wrong; interests are complex.

Lack of local support can undermine bioenergy development.

Need for open and collaborative analyses of:

- Types of wood used. (Branches and debris?)
- Economic potential and distribution of costs and benefits. (Who is promoting and who is left out?)
- Forest change expected. (Pulpwood, flex-stands, eucalyptus?)
- Life cycle analysis and carbon. (Who will do, how, trust?)
- Forest sustainability. (What does it mean to different stakeholder groups?)

Importance of collaborative development of a new energy vision and specific components:

- At national and state policy levels.
- At community and landowner levels.

Literature

Eaton, Weston M., Stephen P. Gasteyer, Lawrence Busch. 2014. Bioenergy futures: Framing sociotechnical imaginaries in local places. *Rural Sociology* 79:227-256.

Schelhas, John, Sarah Hitchner, and J. Peter Brosius. 2018. Envisioning and implementing wood-based bioenergy systems in the Southern United States: Imaginaries in everyday talk. Special issue on “Energy and the Future.” *Energy Research and Social Science*. 35:182-192.

Hitchner, Sarah, John Schelhas, and J. Peter Brosius. 2017. “Even our Dairy Queen shut down”: Risk and resiliency in bioenergy development in forest-dependent communities in the U.S. South. *Economic Anthropology* 4:186-199

Hitchner, Sarah, John Schelhas, J. Peter Brosius. 2016. Snake oil, silver buckshot, and people who hate us: Metaphors and conventional discourses of wood-based bioenergy in the rural southeastern U.S. *Human Organization* 73(3):204-217.