Results from Rockbridge County Community Survey on Forest Needs

The purpose of this survey was to get a broad sense of the surrounding community's priorities. It received a total of **147 responses**.

Q1. Understanding relationship to Rockbridge county and local forests. Select all that apply.

136 total responses.

Respondents were asked to describe their relationship to the county and its forests, and instructed to select all options that apply. The options were:

- I live in Rockbridge county
- I don't live in Rockbridge County, but:
    - I own forests in the county
    - My family lives or owns forest in the county
    - I have an ancestral connection to the forests in the county
    - I regularly do recreational activities in the county
    - I work (paid or volunteer) in the county
    - None apply *[this option ended the survey]*

An analysis of the data showed no significant difference in responses based on user group.

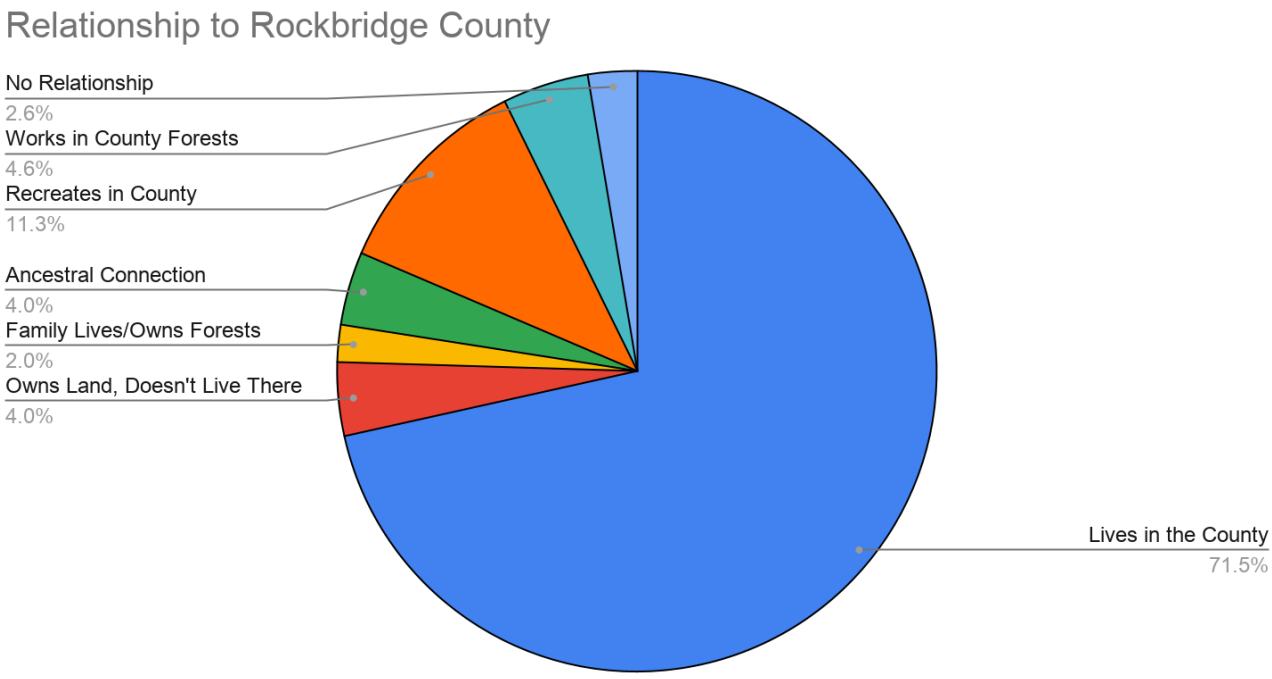

Figure 1. The pie chart above shows the percentage of respondents based on their self-described relationship to the county. Respondents were able to select multiple options.

Q2. Ranking 6 categories of forest needs.

100 total responses

Respondents were given descriptions of 6 categories of forest needs and asked to rank how they would prioritize them, with 1 being the most important and 6 being the least important.

These were the category descriptions:

- **Cultural:** This need centers on protecting places and species that are culturally-important to people.
- **Habitat:** This need centers on protecting specific habitats like very old forests or supporting the habitat needs of specific species like migrating birds.
- **Recreation:** This need centers on providing opportunities for recreational activities such ATVing, hiking, biking, and bird watching.
- **Resilience:** This need centers on ensuring forests are resilient to stress or damage caused by insect infestations and extreme weather.
- **Resources:** This need centers on harvesting forest resources for personal use or profit such wood products, wild edible plants, and game species.
- **Services:** This need centers on ensuring forests can provide important "ecosystem services" such as filtering water and air, reducing soil erosion, and providing a quiet retreat.

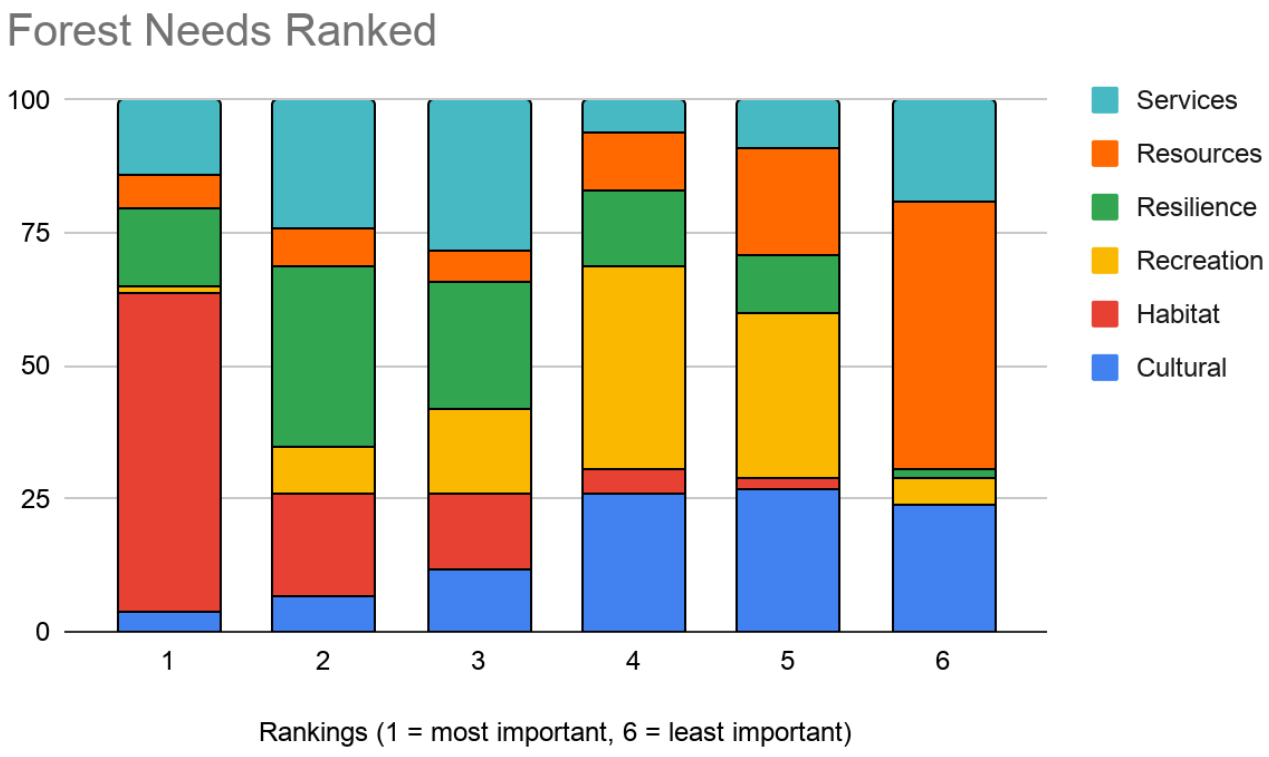

Figure 2. This graph shows how the six forest needs were ranked. The distribution highlights differences in perceived importance across the categories.

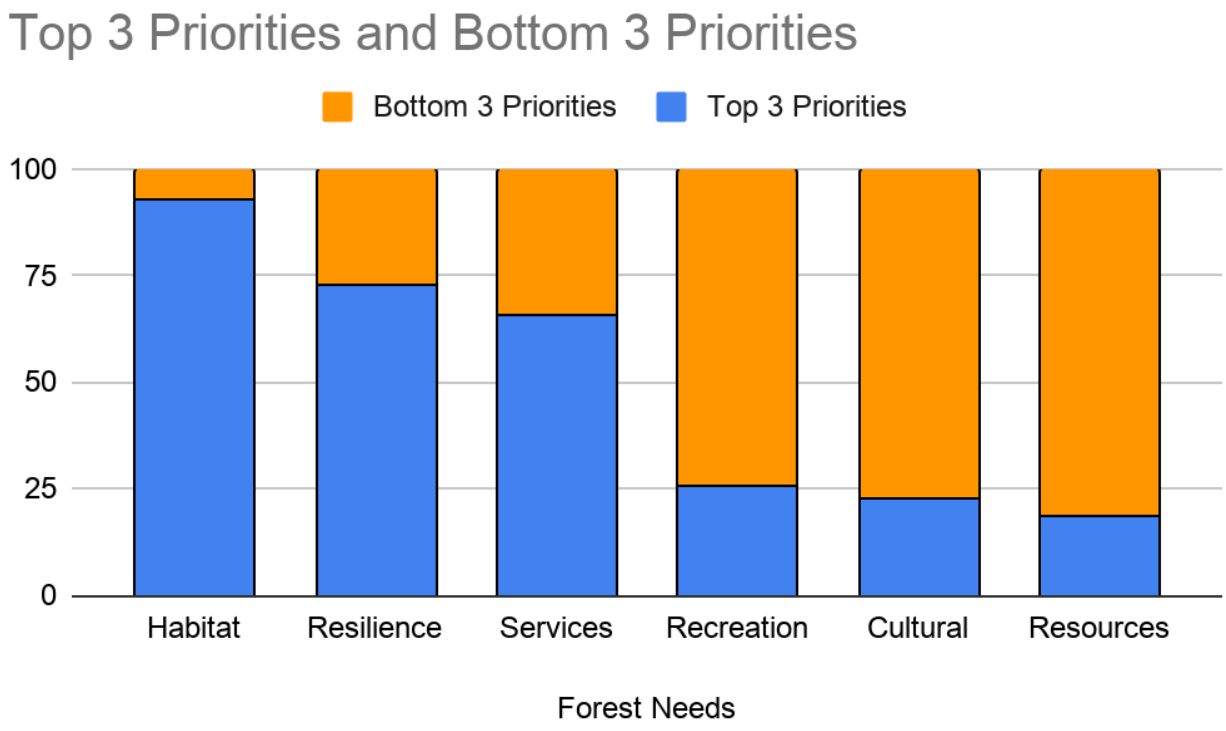

Figure 3. This graph shows how often a forest need was placed in a respondent's top 3 rankings versus their bottom three rankings. This highlights which needs were most consistently prioritized, and which were frequently considered a lower priority.

Q3. Explanations for Rankings

100 total responses.

After ranking the forest needs, respondents were asked to explain their rankings. We organized their responses into common themes. The below table provides the name of the response theme and number of responses that fit within this theme, a description of the theme, and some example quotes. Note that some themes were mentioned more than others; number of respondents for each theme is provide five themes roughly overlap with the five priority categories as follow:

- Habitat and Wildlife Protection ~ Habitat
- Environmental/Ecological Health First ~ Resilience
- Long-term Resilience and Sustainability ~ Resilience
- Human Benefit through Stewardship ~ Services
- Forest Industry and Resources ~ Resources

One theme is more cross-cutting: Interconnected Priorities.

Response Theme	Theme Description	Example Quotes from Survey
Interconnected priorities **N= 21**	A healthy forest was viewed as a foundation that would provide	"I want a healthy forest that helps promote a healthy

	all other benefits; biodiversity, resilience, access for recreation, etc. While services and cultural needs were often ranked lower, they also tended to be folded into other categories or ranked lower because they would be implicitly met by first meeting the other needs.	ecosystem for all the plants, animals and people that enjoy the forest. It's hard to rank these needs as they're all important and valuable." "Forests must be thriving in order to provide recreation and resources." "I thought about them. Each of the first three are equally important. The last three are what we get out of taking care of the first three." "A forest can only provide for humans if it is first resilient and has well-conserved habitats. I think a cultural connection to the forest is an important way to relate to it before focusing on the material resources or services it provides for people. Those things are important but are only really available when we focus on forest health first."
Habitat and Wildlife Protection N= 32	Habitat loss and declining biodiversity were commonly seen as major concerns. Many respondents felt that the other categories of forest needs were secondary compared to the urgency of addressing habitat loss.	"If we lose the habitats especially by lack of resilience, the rest don't matter." "once old forests and birds are gone they are gone forever" "I want to protect the creatures and biodiversity FIRST and foremost. As a mountain biker, I also think it is important for people's mental health to recreate in nature as I do. It gives us a greater appreciation for nature and makes us happier people more likely to uplift others."

Environmental/Ecological Health First **N= 21**	Responses under this theme tended to have a broader focus. Rather than just protecting habitat or wildlife, they focused on overall ecosystem function. They saw this as the guiding principle for a management plan.	"Ecological integrity is at a premium, given losses in forest cover and the degradation of ecological systems and function on a broad scale over the past century. Wherever possible, ecological integrity should be prioritized." "I feel that environmental and ecological impact of forests are the most important, compared to recreation and cultural impact." "This ranking reflects what I believe are the top priorities for forest management. The focus should be on the overall health of the forest then how the forest can best support other life. Human use should be given the lowest priority."
Long-term Resilience and Sustainability **N= 16**	These responses often cited fears around climate change and the need to protect forests for future generations to enjoy. Several responses touched on additional needs, such as habitat, but tied those themes back to resiliency as a necessary precursor to addressing them.	"We must protect the forests for future generations, including people and animals." "My fundamental concern is climate change and the catastrophes we are and will be facing as a result." "Resilience must come first to ensure the others." "Habitat for all benefits all if the habitat is resilient enough to sustain life in spite of human activities that dump pollution indiscriminately, force climate change and mismanage wild habitat through greed and/ or ignorance."
Human benefit through Stewardship **N= 10**	Many of the responses under this theme specifically focused on the human experience as an integral part of nature. They	"I love forests, believe humanity and planet's long term well-being requires good stewardship of forests."

	emphasize that connection with nature is important for wellbeing. Recreation and cultural connection are viewed as tools to gain support for conservation.	“Forest & other natural habitats are scarce and dwindling. We need to protect what's left. Recreation helps people to realize the value of forests.” “Critical habitat in limited supply must be protected above all else. Same for unique cultural sites. Otherwise, nearby/accessible forest for recreation is very important for local quality of life. Humans are part of nature and should be able to return to and be part of it. The national forests are good for this, but are likely to be less accessible to many people (distance traveled, rougher terrain). And, hiking trails alone are a poor substitute for all the possible recreational uses of a forest.”
Forest Industry and Resource Use **N= 9**	There was conditional support for resource extraction among many of the responses. While some responses were opposed to any form of timber harvest, others mentioned the importance for the local economy. Several responses were open to timber harvest as long as it would be done sustainably.	“I do not think that forests can be sustained for other uses in rural VA unless they can provide some economic productivity.” “We need the habitat to be resilient in order to be available for wildlife and recreational use. If they are maintained in a sustainable manner they will be able to provide the listed services. The forests should be harvested only if it can be done in sustainable manner.” “Our forests need protection from harvesting. Forests are life supports for many diverse species and ourselves. It is important to make sure the survive for generations.”

		"Numbers 1 and 2, because species, especially birds, are being killed in record numbers. **Logging is number one cause of all forest species loss.** Numbers 3 thru 6 are important, but protecting species is probably less than 1, 2, Controlled burns was not mentioned, but should fit into #3"

Q4. Other Considerations

64 total responses.

Respondents were asked to share any other thoughts they had about what should be included in a management plan. We again organized their responses into common themes. The below table provides the name of the response theme and number of responses that fit within this theme, a description of the theme, and some example quotes.

Response Theme	Description	Example Quotes from Survey
Climate resilience **N= 9**	Plan for warming temperatures, drought, fire risk, and extreme weather.	"What does the plan need to include if our temperatures are like Georgia's now in 30 years?"
Habitat protection, biodiversity, and connectivity **N= 16**	Prioritize conservation of intact forests, old growth, and ecologically important areas. Create and maintain wildlife corridors, early successional habitat. Reduce light pollution.	"Yes! I think that identifying and promoting preservation of particularly important areas of forest that can promote/protect ecosystem health would be critical. We should be looking to promote the protection of wildlife corridors. And our plan should include easy to understand rationale for using BMPs on privately and publicly held forest land as well as educational resources to help landowners ensure the health of their forest land." "Connections to create safe corridors for wildlife"

Water quality and watershed protection **N= 7**	Protect riparian buffers, streams, and wetlands. Reduce erosion and runoff.	“Riparian Buffers and stormwater management. There is a constant need for planting and maintaining forested buffers along streams to filter runoff and prevent erosion.” “Yeah. Stop poisoning Woods Creek.”
Invasive species and ecosystem health **N= 8**	Actively manage invasive plants and pests, address deer overabundance, and support native tree plantings.	“The spread of non-native species like Tree of Heaven (which hosts the Spotted Lanternfly) and Autumn Olive can choke out native hardwoods. A plan that includes specific funding or assistance for private landowners to manage these should be a top priority.”
Landowner support and incentives **N= 12**	Provide financial and technical assistance, align tax policies and incentives. Respect private property rights.	“Unfortunately everyone who owns forestland in Rockbridge is not independently wealthy, and (mis)using the forest for financial gain is not uncommon. At least for private landowner cooperation you must consider the possibility of paying the landowner to do with her/his land what you think is best instead of what she/he might believe they must do to make ends meet.” “I hope that this 'plan' would result in educating landowners, land managers, governmental bodies and forest industry folks about the pluses and minuses of various management practices / programs.”
Tailored, actionable management **N= 5**	Avoid a one-size-fits-all approach. Adapt strategies based on parcel size, features, and ownership goals. Develop clear, practical actions that are feasible to implement.	“A forest management plan should consider critical aspects of any parcel and not be one massive "one size fits all" strategy. Parcels with streams on them should be addressed

		different;y than those that do not. Parcel size is also critical. What might be appropriate for 50-100 acre parcel would be significantly different than a parcel only 1-5 acres in size."
Recreation, public access, and human wellbeing **N= 5**	Balance conservation with recreation, maintain access to public lands. Recognize forests as drivers of tourism, mental health, and community wellbeing.	"High consideration should be given for recreation as the beauty of Rockbridge county has long been , and still is ,an economic driver for this region." "Local public lands, like Brushy Hills, should place recreation as a highest priority, as it may be the most accessible to all. Maintaining a pristine "nature preserve" with limited city resources is bad policy."
Education, outreach, and community engagement **N= 5**	Provide opportunities for public participation, workshops, and outreach. Improve awareness of best management practices, invasive species, and stewardship. Provide transparency around the project and opportunity for ongoing community input.	"Without more information, it's hard to be succinct, so I look forward to the chance to have more input on the forest management plan in future iterations. I strongly encourage RC to hold public forums to allow proper community input." "Events that get people interested and involved like foraging outings or forestry workshops"
Urban and community forestry **N= 1**	Increase tree cover in towns, protect heritage trees, provide examples from other cities.	"Increase urban forest cover. Re-establish the American Chestnut. Provide Lexington and Buena Vista with model Heritage Tree ordinances that they can use as a basis for instituting their own. Support ivy removal on mature trees, especially in Lexington and Buena Vista. Support the Blue Ridge Garden Club's heritage tree walk project."

Fire management and emergency preparedness **N= 1**	Incorporate prescribed fire. Improve wildfire preparedness and communication systems for residents in forested areas.	“Emergency response notification to residents of forest areas, especially existing fire and smoke information.” “With changing weather patterns, controlled burns (prescribed fire) are becoming a more important tool in Virginia to prevent catastrophic wildfires and promote the growth of fire-dependent species like Table Mountain Pine.”

Q5. Interest in learning more and/or getting involved with the project

47 respondents provided an email address to be kept informed about opportunities to learn more or even participate in the Forests for Birds and People project.