# IT TAKES A VILLAGE:
## Growing Communities of Practice in BC

*A field tour with the BC Community Forest Association in Mackenzie.* Photo credit: Silviculture Innovation Program.

**A community of practice describes a group of people who engage** in collective learning around a common issue or topic with the purpose of growing their practice or craft.[1] Members of a community of practice gather to problem-solve, collaborate, and deepen their understanding in an area of interest — sharing knowledge, skills, new approaches, and insights gained from personal and professional experience.

Communities of practice can be found in many places, from the workplace to the everyday. They can be formal, like dedicated working groups that regularly meet to co-create a resource on an issue faced by practitioners, or informal, like meeting with the same group of colleagues at conferences and exchanging insights and brainstorming solutions over dinner.

The term was first coined in 1991[2] by anthropologists who were studying how people learn through apprenticeships. In fact, they found that apprentices learned more from their peers and more advanced apprentices than from their mentors.[2] They used the term "community of practice" to describe this particular social learning system — one that emphasized the role and impact of a strong social network in driving learning from the knowledge and experiences of peers to improve one's own skills and practice.

There are many communities of practice in BC that support forest stewardship with topics ranging from wildfire resilience to commercial thinning. Growing interest in innovative silviculture was accelerated by the Old Growth Strategic Review (2020), which called for a silviculture innovation program to develop harvesting alternatives. The Silviculture Innovation

Program (SIP) was created three years later with the goal of enhancing knowledge of innovative silviculture through research and extension. Recognizing the urgent need for knowledge exchange, the SIP sought to better understand the role of communities of practice in supporting innovative silviculture. Here, we present key takeaways from a survey on the topic and provide general insight and recommendations for all forestry-centered communities of practice.

**About Communities of Practice for Innovative Silviculture**

In the summer of 2024, the SIP surveyed forest practitioners on how their existing communities of practice were supporting, or not supporting, the use of innovative silviculture. The SIP defines innovative silviculture, sometimes also called alternative silviculture, as systems for harvesting, growing, and tending of forests where the primary objective is to achieve holistic stewardship of the land base. Innovative silviculture systems are driven by an appreciation of ecological, social, cultural, and economic values of forests, where stewardship is focused on maintaining the continuity of dynamic ecosystem processes and functions. The online survey was distributed through forestry association networks with a total of 564 participants.

The survey found there was a broad network of communities of practice that were important to innovative silviculture. Some practitioners described regional silviculture committees or topic-specific working groups, while others described the impact of

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large province-wide professional associations, which afforded opportunities to learn about each other's experiences at a much broader scale than more grassroots communities of practice. We describe these communities of practice on a spectrum from "participatory" to "informational" *(Figure 1)*.

Participatory and informational communities of practice differ in two key ways: knowledge flow and intentionality. Knowledge flow describes the directions in which knowledge is transferred or exchanged, from two-way co-creation of knowledge by members (participatory), to one-way dissemination of knowledge to members (informational). Intentionality describes the purpose of the gathering by the members, whether it is intentionally designed to facilitate knowledge exchange on the subject (participatory), or if it is an incidental benefit of another activity (informational).

FIGURE 1. *A framework for the different types of communities of practice (CoPs) that differ by their intentionality and knowledge flow. Communities of practice with high intentionality and two-way knowledge flow are "participatory," while those that are opportunistic and one-way knowledge dissemination are "informational." Those with a mixture of intentionality and knowledge flow are "hybrid" communities of practice.*



**Looking for a community of practice that supports innovative silviculture? Try checking out:**

- FPBC Wildland Fire and Fuel Community of Practice, *fpbc.ca/professional-development/communities-of-practice*
- Southern Interior Silviculture Committee, *siscobc.com*
- Northern Silviculture Committee, *www.nsc-bc.org*
- Coastal Silviculture Committee, *www.coastalsilviculturecommittee.com*

Find a full list at *sipexchangebc.com/find*.

## What do Practitioners Want from their Communities of Practice?

Overall, the survey results found that practitioners are generally satisfied with their communities of practice. Roughly seven out of 10 practitioners felt supported by existing communities of practice to carry out innovative silviculture *(Figure 2)*. Practitioners described benefits such as knowledge sharing and exchange; learning about practical applications and real-world examples; and gaining access to in-field learnings, training, and workshops. Practitioners valued communities of practice for supporting opportunities to directly connect, socialize, and share knowledge at a peer-to-peer level.

FIGURE 2. *Seven out of 10 practitioners feel supported by their communities of practice to implement innovative silviculture.*
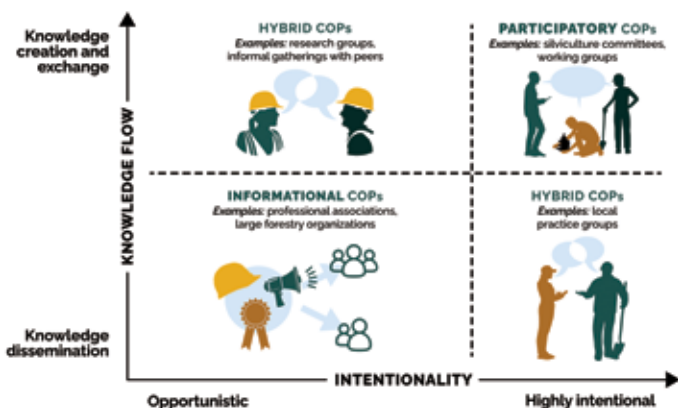


There was also a clear desire for communities of practice that could provide more practical in-field learning opportunities. For example, field tours were the single most popular extension resource used by practitioners *(Figure 3)*. More than 70 per cent of respondents said they used a field tour in the last year to inform their work in innovative silviculture. Field tours present practical in-forest knowledge and allow for more participatory engagement, such as discussions with knowledge holders, knowledge exchange across sectors and backgrounds, and the ability to build on an issue or topic at the next workshop.

Furthermore, practitioners consulted a wide range of extension resources, demonstrating the importance of cultivating a variety of resources for learning and knowledge exchange. We suggest that the desire for more active engagement in problem-solving that is focused on applications of innovative silviculture describes the needs for more participatory communities of practice.

## How Can I Build a Community of Practice?

While our survey focused on innovative silviculture, many of the learnings are applicable to all kinds of communities of practice. If you are interested in creating a community of practice or taking an existing one in a more participatory direction, you are not alone. Adams et al.[3] propose a five-step process for creating a community of practice, which we've adapted to the forestry context.

1) **Envision the Community:** Set your purpose and identify the resource(s) you'd like to collectively build. The purpose should be decided by the members through a needs assessment. The SIP survey[4] on communities of practice may be a helpful starting point, as it summarizes knowledge gaps, new areas of focus and topics of interest identified by forest practitioners.

2) **Design the Community:** Run the community of practice and focus on ways to foster peer-to-peer learning, supporting both knowledge sharing and creation. For example, collectively brainstorm and engage members in co-creation by asking members to share how a potential decision support tool might be applied in their situation and what might be missing or require important considerations.

3) **Build the Community:** Find ways to empower participation by all members — making space for diverse perspectives and identities. Consider multiple checkpoints during resource development where members can provide feedback. For example, a member might be responsible for bringing a draft resource to an organization and gathering feedback, while another member takes on working with an illustrator on an infographic, and a core team implements edits and refines the content of the resource with an expert.

4) **Check in with the Community:** Evaluate the structure and experience of the community of practice, as well as evaluate the impact of the work being created. Is the community of practice meeting the members' needs?

5) **Sustain the Community:** After checking in, identify if the community of practice will: a) continue its current work, b) shift focus to a new purpose or topic of focus, or c) disperse. Has the initial purpose of the community of practice been met and there are no new needs identified? Congratulations, your community of practice has fulfilled its purpose! It is perfectly reasonable for a community of practice to retire when it is no longer needed.

## A Community of Practice Checklist

It can sometimes be challenging to know if a community of practice is operating effectively or not. Some signs a community of practice is functioning to its highest potential can include:

- A clear purpose that is agreed upon by its members.
- A membership that is diverse in perspectives, professional experience, and expertise.
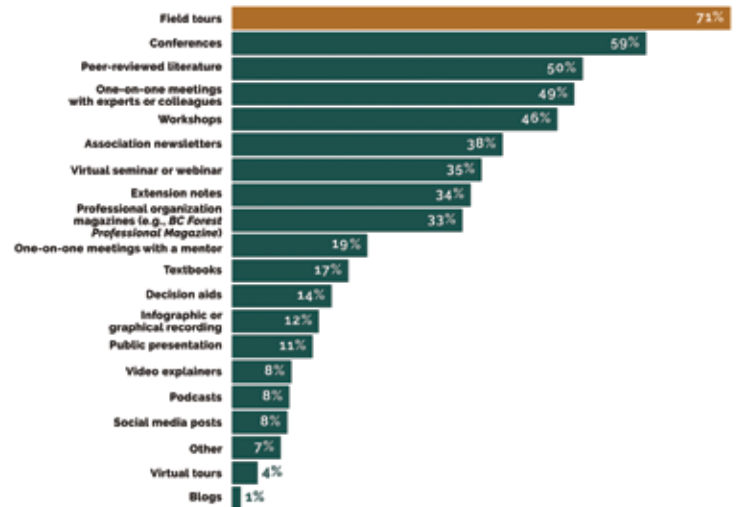


FIGURE 3. *Activities and resources that practitioners used in the past year to inform their innovative silviculture work, which may be features or outputs of communities of practice.*

- A thoughtful structure that maximizes engagement and finds roles for all members, including a focus on moving new members into more core roles.
- A meeting facilitator.
- A person or group of people that are accountable to guiding, maintaining, and sustaining the activities of the community of practice.
- Processes that enable self-evaluation of the community of practice to ensure needs are continually being met.
- An online "home" for members — like an inventory of resources that have been curated or created by the community of practice — that is available to all members.
- Opportunities for in-person gatherings and online engagement.
- A culture of flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness to shift activities, goals, and objectives as membership interests change or emergent ideas take shape.

## Conclusion

Communities of practice are key to growing and deepening forest stewardship and innovative silviculture. Overall, practitioners feel generally supported by their communities of practice; however, practitioners are also hungry for more participatory opportunities that foster practical learnings and more direct connections with colleagues who can share experiences, insights, and recommendations. With an intentional design and thoughtful process, we are confident that forest practitioners can continue to build a powerful network of communities of practice to support innovative silviculture. ⊗

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