



ON THE LOOKOUT

From the
National Chairman
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BUILDING ON OUR STRENGTHS

Last quarter I asked if we were "Chasing an Impossible Dream?" Maybe we are, but it a dream well worth chasing! This came on the heels of the very sad and possibly unnecessary loss of one of the most historic lookouts in New England, Bigelow Mountain on the Appalachian Trail in Maine. What was painful is that it was burned by State Park rangers after the staff had tried for years to figure out what to do about it. FFLA was not involved in the discussions, mostly because our static membership is spread too thin. Even with their history of successful lookout restorations Maine, this one got away.

Successful associations do a good job of identifying a worthy goal, recruiting members and promoting new leadership. We have done the first moderately well, but neither membership nor leadership growth is occurring in FFLA. It is reassuring that our members seem to feel that FFLA is a successful organization. The decline in membership is only gradual. We remain financially sound.

LOOKING DEEPER FOR OUR STRENGTHS:

When the founders met at Hopewell Fire Tower in southeastern Pennsylvania in 1990 they considered themselves to be "lookout enthusiasts." They knew they loved lookouts. In fact, most of them either staffed lookouts, or had at one time. They were a special group of people concerned that the use of lookouts for fire detection was declining, and that the vacant structures were often targets of vandals and frequently had to be removed. They joined in a common cause, not knowing exactly how to proceed, but determination to move forward.

And move forward they did. Within a few years we had settled on a name: the Forest Fire Lookout Association. Regular meetings were held around New England and the mid-Atlantic. The association was incorporated and bylaws were drafted. January was chosen for the annual business meeting, since it was a time when those directors who staffed lookouts would be able to attend. Next came a Xeroxed

newsletter (which later evolved into the wonderful Lookout Network Magazine) followed by an Internet web site. A good foundation was built. That is Strength # 1.

As word of the initiative spread, people joined in from as far south as Florida and throughout the west. Often they were designated "directors" with the purpose of forming a state chapter. Many of those directors, both the founders and those who were soon to follow, continue to serve on the FFLA Board. In fact, many of our Board of Directors have two decades of service to FFLA. This is Strength # 2: Committed Leadership

Strength # 3, a Well Defined Mission, has proven to be a greater challenge. Although everyone loves lookouts, the lookout culture varies greatly across the U.S. In the west lookouts are often remote and with appealing 14'x14' "live-in" facilities. In the east the smaller 7'x7' cab is common, except in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Many of the lookout observers lived close enough to go home in the evening. Naturally our directors reflect what is known to them based on their own experience with lookouts. Finding agreement on a national agenda became more difficult than imagined. A period followed that can be loosely described as "state's rights." The state chapters wanted to be assured of the freedom to chart their own programs and leadership styles. Some were more successful than others. If a state chapter declined, that was deemed to be their choice, and not seen as a national concern.

The founding principle of one chapter per state did not work so well in the west with the great distances and many lookouts. There was resistance to creating additional chapters within a large state, each with its own director. Part of that can be traced to fear of dilution of the voting power. Additional concern arose over the creation of local chapters to focus restoration projects as well as recruit new members (even though no additional directors are involved). While both were eventually approved by the Board of Directors, resistance to the nationwide objectives for FFLA was becoming clear. There was talk of splitting up FFLA and forming new organizations.

Normally, Strength #3 would be: Diversity of the Organization, with the ability to work effectively under a set of broader national goals. This essential strength needs work. It certainly can be achieved however by those willing to step up to the plate. Several chapter directors, with obvious commitment to lookouts and leadership talent, have declined to take on national leadership positions. There are good reasons for this: time constraints, comfort with being a Director, along with the valid concern over the expense of traveling to meetings. Actions to offset the money issue have not been sufficient. Without excitement and belief in the mission nationwide, the power of the association falters.

We cannot seem to escape a powerful reality: "lookout enthusiasts" tend to be most enthusiastic about their own lookouts! -----To be continued-----

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