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CHALLENGES

Facing Resource Management and Research

Update from the People and Natural Resources RD & A Program
Pacific Northwest Research Station, USDA Forest Service

1996

No. 12

What Does Successful Public Participation Look Like? Identifying Common Attributes¹

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Persistent questions among agency managers responsible for implementing adaptive management areas include the difficult issues of public participation. How do we involve the public in forest management decisions? What do we want from the public? What do they expect from us? *How do we do public participation?* What would a successful public participation process look like?

These questions confronted the implementation team of the Central Cascades Adaptive Management Area. One place to look for answers was in the not-so-distant past, [by examining those public participation efforts that exist within recent memory]. We consulted with Forest Service personnel and local citizens to systematically compare past projects undertaken on various parts of the Willamette National Forest. We were able to learn from previous agency/public interactions and make this knowledge available for implementing adaptive management strategies.

¹For further information about the *Challenges* series contact: People and Natural Resources RD & A Program, Seattle Forestry Sciences Lab, 4043 Roosevelt Way NE, Seattle WA 98105, Ph: (206) 553-7817, Fax: (206) 553-7709.

Comparative analysis

An often-cited problem with learning how to conduct public participation processes is that every community and each situation is different. Some things that work under certain conditions may not be relevant in other situations. We looked for common elements that stood out across settings. As social scientists, we sought to understand what sorts of factors contribute to positive interactions and how to recognize "successful" public participation experiences when we see them. The study compared five different public participation processes that had been convened between 1989 and 1994 to assist the Willamette National Forest in project planning: the Section 318 Advisory Board, the Fruitful Discussions Group, the Warner Creek Fire Recovery Plan, the Delta Showcase Project, and the Mt. Jefferson, Mt. Washington, Three Sisters Wilderness Plan. Forest Service personnel and citizen participants were interviewed and asked for their best recollections of what happened in these groups. We noted obstacles and frustrations, but were particularly interested in those attributes that contributed to successful interactions or outcomes. Within each project we found elements that were consistently identified as engendering success, while other elements were almost always cited as counterproductive.

This summary highlights eight attributes of success identified by project participants.

- *Groups where members were selected by the agency for their understanding of the issues and a willingness to commit to a group process were more effective.*

This form of selection is in contrast to membership based on interest group affiliation where individuals tend to be more interested in representing positions. Selectively hand-picking participants is not always a realistic option, but in several cases group organizers used a creative strategy in which members were chosen through a criteria-based application process conducted by the interest groups themselves. Important considerations were knowledge of the relevant issues, willingness to actively participate, and a commitment to the process. This helped to achieve what one agency staffer called a "representative, committed group with balance and fairness." It also helped with consistency and meant working with familiar faces who cared equally about the job to be done.

• Projects in which the group's purpose was defined and an end product identified at the outset were inherently more successful.

Citizens who volunteer are largely task oriented, but many find it hard connecting with traditional agency public involvement processes. One Forest Service participant recognized success as "knowing what your objectives are when starting the process, knowing why you are involving people and using their (free) time, and being able to see at the end that your objectives were met." Success was initiated with a common focus and realistic objectives, "then measured by actually seeing results of group efforts on the ground."

• Meetings structured to promote full group interaction rather than simple information sharing and feedback sessions were much more productive.

Concerns over meaningful involvement have long been on the minds of potential meeting participants. One citizen no doubt spoke for many when he commented "I am not interested in attending a never-ending series of meetings if they are just supposed to make me feel better because I was involved." When people are included in management activities in new and different ways, the potential exists to broaden everyone's understanding of the issues (Wondolleck and Yaffee 1994). The message is clear: agencies must define and articulate their reasons for involving the public, and make good on their commitment.

• Working with current and reliable information added considerably to a credible process.

Having sound scientific data that informs the decisionmaking is not a new idea. That managers and citizens were able to analyze information together to form alternatives may be a more groundbreaking notion. In addition, "it provided the agency with an opportunity to really learn about its own data." Credible social assessment research provides another form of public input (participation) and, when used effectively, can take some of the pressure off individual decisionmakers.

• Projects where interest group agendas and/or agency land allocation guidelines are under debate nationally, are challenging, even exhausting public participation efforts at the local level.

In cases where the local issues have become high profile and positions polarized among national groups, community-based management becomes problematic. Natural resource agencies may need something other than consensus based public participation design. In adaptive management areas, both concerns and knowledge derive from citizens with long histories of involvement with these sites. It is essential that their ideas and concerns be assigned a level of legitimacy that ensures serious consideration.

• Members of groups in which the decisionmaker had a regular presence felt as if their contributions were taken seriously by the agency.

For many participants, the presence of the decisionmaker was an important indicator of the value of their work. In fact, some citizens would not participate unless the Forest Supervisor also played an active role. It is not likely that citizens will participate in the planning process if they realize they will have no influence on the final decision (Cogan, et al. 1986).

• The "care and feeding" of group participants was an important factor in accomplishing work.

Common courtesies often can be overlooked, but they mean a great deal to volunteers. Simple things like advanced distribution of meeting notes and

written materials, questions answered promptly and directly by staff, and even provision of snacks at lengthy meetings were uniformly praised.

- *In most every case, group members recognized that the experience of getting to know "the other side" was beneficial to outcomes.*

This final attribute is intangible, but certainly one that accrues dividends over time. Participants repeatedly emphasized how their positions softened as they got to know others at the table and realized that their personal concerns were often common concerns. One individual even described the sole success of his group as "building relationships."

Conclusion

These eight attributes represent a rather straightforward, almost intuitive, set of sensible guidelines for citizen involvement. But in the heat of public decisionmaking, many participants acknowledged it was easy to get distracted and forego important steps. From a learning standpoint we should not miss the common messages that come from those close to the process: basic organizational skills, attention to detail, commitment to constituents, and good leadership – things people expect from resource agencies – often make the difference between success and frustration.

This paper is based on research conducted by Shindler and Neburka and documented in the report "Citizen Participation on the Willamette National Forest, 1989-1994." For a detailed copy of this research, contact Bruce Shindler, Department of Forest Resources, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331.