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From the Forest to the River: Citizens' Views of Stakeholder Engagement

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Abstract

Since the early 1990s collaboration and consensus processes have become associated with success in the environmental policy and natural resource policy arenas. Interest in collaboration and consensus processes have emerged, in part, out of a frustration with more conventional efforts used to involve stakeholders, to work through conflicts, and to make decisions in the environmental and natural resource policy arenas. Collaboration and consensus processes, when designed well and applied appropriately, provide opportunities for meaningful stakeholder engagement.

This essay features aspects of two government-led or agency-based (Koontz et al. 2004; Moore and Koontz 2003) planning efforts that consider collaboration and citizens/stakeholder engagement. Both projects, a forest management plan revision on the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, and a regional sediment management planning effort at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest, have considered a Collaborative Learning (CL) approach (Daniels and Walker 2001) for stakeholder involvement. As part of these CL applications, citizens/stakeholders have been asked for their views of the kind of participation processes they value and how they prefer to be involved. This essay presents a summary of citizens' ideas. In doing so, it

addresses the question: How do stakeholders want to be engaged in agency-led planning efforts? Data reveal that stakeholders prefer active engagement, access to information and events, and clearly defined decision space. Prior to presenting the project data germane to this question, the paper highlights the trinity of voice and Collaborative Learning.

Keywords: collaborative processes, Collaborative Learning, stakeholder involvement

Introduction

Since the early 1990s collaboration and consensus processes have become associated with success in the environmental policy and natural resource policy arenas. Collaboration and consensus advocates can point to the rise of community-oriented, place-based groups such as the Applegate Partnership in Oregon, the Catron County Citizens Group in New Mexico, the Downeast Lakes Forestry Partnership in Maine, the Swan Valley Citizens Coalition in Montana, the Gulf Coastal Plain Ecosystem Partnership, and the Chicago Wilderness Coalition in Illinois. They might note how consensus has become the decision standard for watershed councils in the United States (Sabatier et al. 2005; Webler et al. 2003; Leach and Pelkey 2001). Furthermore, publications,

such as *Making Collaboration Work* (Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000) *Across the Great Divide* (Brick et al. 2001), *Collaborative Environmental Management* (Koontz et al. 2004), *Adaptive Governance and Water Conflict* (Scholz and Stiftel 2005), and *Faces and Places of Cooperative Conservation* (Hess and Michaels 2005), have featured successful stories of collaboration and consensus efforts.

Government agencies have joined the collaboration chorus. For example, policies such as the National Fire Plan (U.S. Departments of Agriculture and Interior) and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Environmental Justice Initiative require collaboration among agencies and with stakeholders and communities. During the Clinton presidential administration, Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, led the call for consensus and collaboration. Current Secretary of Health and Human Services, Mike Leavitt, brings to the Bush Administration his idea of "Enlibra," a term he coined while Governor of Utah to mean "coming together." Similarly, former Secretary of Interior, Gail Norton, has talked often of the "4 C's:" communication, consultation, cooperation, all in the service of conservation (Norton 2005).

Interest in collaboration and consensus processes has emerged, in part, out of a frustration with more conventional efforts used to involve stakeholders, to work through conflicts, and to make decisions in the environmental and natural resource policy arenas. Conventional processes for public involvement, for example, have emphasized agency-centric, command and control activities such as structured consultation, public hearings, lobbying, and letter writing (Walker 2004). Conventional approaches have done little to open up decision space, share power, and involve citizens meaningfully.

For many stakeholders, a strategy of appeals and litigation or a strategy of "call the Senator" may seem to be the most viable options to tolerating what they have regarded as poor decisions. These actions attempt to assert power outside of a conventional public involvement effort that limits stakeholder engagement to passive consultation activities, such as writing a letter during a public comment period (Walker 2004; Walker 2000).

Collaboration and consensus-building processes, when designed well and applied appropriately, offer opportunities for meaningful stakeholder engagement. As Senecah (2000, 2004) has observed, collaboration and consensus-oriented practices can provide stakeholders with a trinity of voice.

The trinity of voice embodies three interdependent markers of access, civic standing, and influence. If any are missing or severely out of balance with the other two, tensions may develop, effectiveness will be limited, parties may act to demand the missing elements, and conflict will likely escalate.

Access

Access refers to having access to a process that offers opportunity and safety as well as the potential for being heard. Conventional public involvement methods often generate contentious, adversarial action. Public policy decision making escalates towards a sense of pervasive animosity, even hostility driven by distrust, frustrations, skepticism, and entrenched stakeholders' positions and motivations. This access of voice must put people into a place where real opportunity exists for their ideas and opinions being accorded civic standing.

Standing

Standing is closely connected to access. It is an articulated demonstration of and assurance that stakeholder contributions are valued, respected, and honored; that they are "heard." How does a process support standing? A guiding principle from a classic in dispute resolution (Fisher et al. 1991) advocates focusing on interests rather than positions, but Senecah (2004) proposes going a step further to understand what fears and aspirations are driving the interests. Engagement becomes cynicism when stakeholders fear is that they do not count, that they lack legitimacy and civic standing. When frustrated or fearful to a breaking point, good people denied access or standing will create ways to claim it that leads to escalation and distrust.

Influence

Without access and standing there can be little influence other than through contentiousness and unilateral action. Influence does not necessarily mean that every stakeholder gets what s/he wants, nor does it mean that agencies can abdicate their authority over a decision. Influence is about stakeholders' meaningful participation in processes where their ideas matter. Processes that value influence provide opportunities for affecting outcomes; for learning, developing improvements, and achieving mutual goals before a project is completed or a decision made.

As Senecah (2004) explains, the trinity of voice — access, standing, and influence — offers a template for (1) evaluating the efficacy of individual cases of stakeholder engagement, (2) designing of collaborative processes, and (3) diagnosing and treating troubled processes or escalated disputes. As a template, it can be characterized to fit a case's unique context and resources. Senecah's trinity suggests the importance of citizen/stakeholder empowerment: that meaningful participation requires public processes through which citizens gain voice and legitimacy, and opportunities to influence other parties in the situation and the decision authority.

Implementing Senecah's voice trinity seems particularly challenging when federal agencies hold considerable deci-

sion making power. Koontz et al. (2004) note that when government (e.g., an agency) serves as leader in a collaborative effort, stakeholders may be skeptical about the commitment to open, shared decision making.

This essay presents stakeholder views on civic engagement drawn from two government-led or agency-based planning efforts (Moore and Koontz 2003). Both projects, forest management plan revision on the Allegheny National Forest in Pennsylvania, and regional sediment management planning at the mouth of the Columbia River in the Pacific Northwest, have considered a Collaborative Learning (CL) approach (Daniels and Walker 2001) for stakeholder involvement. As part of these CL applications, citizens/stakeholders have been asked for their views regarding the kind of participation processes they value and how they prefer to be involved. This essay highlights citizens' ideas regarding meaningful engagement. In doing so, it examines the extent to which stakeholders' views correspond to the trinity of voice. Prior to discussing the project data, the paper offers a brief discussion of Collaborative Learning and power.

The Collaborative Learning Approach: A Brief Synopsis

Collaborative Learning is an approach appropriate for natural resource, environmental, and community conflict and decision making situations with two fundamental attributes: complexity and controversy. Complexity refers to the following features: multiple parties, deeply held values, cultural differences, multiple issues, scientific and technical uncertainty, and legal and jurisdictional constraints. Controversy may include strong emotional attachments, competitive frames, varied tensions and incompatibilities (e.g., history, jurisdiction, culture), and significant symbolic and personal issues (e.g., identity). CL emphasizes activities that encourage systems thinking, joint learning, open communication, constructive conflict management, and a focus on appropriate change.

To address complexity, Collaborative Learning draws upon work in systems thinking, particularly soft systems methodology (Checkland and Scholes 1990; Wilson and Morren 1990). To deal with controversy, CL incorporates ideas from the alternative dispute resolution areas of conflict resolution, mediation and negotiation (e.g., Moore 1996; Deutsch 1973). Systems thinking and conflict resolution practices are integrated through experiential, adult learning (Kolb 1986; Senge 1990). This active learning approach emphasizes five fundamental principles with the mnemonic of FAITH: fairness, access, inclusion, transparency, and honesty (Walker et al. 2005).

Collaborative Learning operates on three levels: (1) as a **philosophy** or orientation, (2) as a **framework**, and (3) as a

set of **tactics or techniques**. The following characteristics of CL pertain to all three levels:

- Re-defining the task away from solving a problem to one of **improving a situation**.
- Viewing the situation as a set of **interrelated systems**.
- Defining improvement as **desirable and feasible change**.
- Recognition that **considerable learning** — about science, issues, and value differences — will have to occur before implementable improvements are possible.

As a public participation or planning team decision making approach, Collaborative Learning encourages people to learn actively, to think systemically, and to learn from one another about a particular problem situation. The first stages of a CL workshop project, for example, emphasize common understanding. Activities might include information exchange, imagining best and worst possible futures, and visual representations of the situation, perhaps through the use of "situation maps." In middle stages, CL participants focus on concerns and interests regarding the specific situation, and how those concerns relate to other concerns. Out of these concerns, CL parties identify possible changes that could be made: "situation improvements." In latter stages, the participants debate these improvements, addressing whether or not they represent desirable and feasible changes in the present situation. Sets of improvements may be organized as action plans.

Throughout the CL process, participants talk with and learn from one another in groups of various sizes. For example, a CL community workshop process may use a "1-2-6" approach to discussing situation improvements. After each CL participant has developed an improvement, she or he discusses that improvement with one other person. Those two join four others and talk about each person's improvements. Within these discussions, active listening, questioning, and arguing are respected. People clarify and refine their improvements through dialogue. Collaborative Learning emphasizes "talking with" rather than "talking at."

Collaborative Learning asks the relevant decision authority and convening organization(s) to participate, not as the facilitator or intermediary, but as a major player. For example, an agency may be the decision-maker in the problem situation, but, within a CL process, does not function simply as an arbitrator. Agency leaders clarify to both internal and external constituents the nature and scope of the decision space. Agency personnel participate in CL activities as citizens and as representatives of the agency. Agency participants, just like others in the CL process, share their knowledge and expertise about the situation, ask questions, listen, and debate. Doing so does not compromise the agency's decision authority, but does allow agency personnel to speak from their val-

ues and beliefs both as employees and as citizens. While this form of agency engagement may not be typical (Ryan 2001), it has been evident in CL projects (Daniels and Walker 2001; Blatner et al. 2001; Daniels and Walker 1996).

An organization may use Collaborative Learning processes internally, within its organization, or externally, with other organizations and interested citizens. The organization may convene and sponsor Collaborative Learning activities for partnership development or public involvement. When using CL with the public, facilitators must not also be players. CL typically works best when those who direct the process are impartial about the concerns expressed and the improvements proposed.

Collaborative Learning presumes that situations are dynamic, systemic, and changing. CL is a framework that can be adapted to a particular situation to generate:

- **Dialogue** between diverse communities: scientific, public, administrative;
- **Improved understanding** of the specific problem situation;
- **Integration of technical and traditional/public knowledge** about the problem situation;
- **Increased rapport**, respect, and trust among participants;
- Clearly articulated **systems-based concerns** about the problem situation; and
- **Tangible improvements** in the problem situation.

Collaborative Learning, while beneficial within a complex and controversial policy situation, is no panacea or “silver bullet.” It is one of possibly many frameworks that can involve people in meaningful learning and discussion about challenging management and decision situations. It values emergent consensus, but is not consensus-driven. It does stress learning, understanding, and the development of improvements in the situation. CL does not foster the development of a group “mentality” or “recommendations.” Rather, CL encourages parties to make progress on improving the situation as they work through issues, values, and concerns.

Like collaboration methods, Collaborative Learning differs substantially from conventional public involvement (PI) approaches. Conventional public involvement privileges technical knowledge; CL honors traditional (local, indigenous) as well. Conventional PI activities view learning as “inform and educate;” CL emphasizes shared, mutual learning (a community of learners). Conventional PI regulates and controls communication; CL features discursive interaction (see Walker 2004 and Daniels and Cheng 2004 for more extensive discussions of these comparisons).

Lastly, the agency or decision authority in a conventional PI strategy centralizes and controls power. In a CL process, power is dispersed and shared. Selin and Chavez

(1995, 190) emphasize that collaboration involves a joint decision making approach in which power is shared, and stakeholders take collective responsibility for their actions and subsequent outcomes from those actions. Balancing or sharing participatory power is an important feature of the Collaborative Learning approach and its objective of operationalizing a trinity of voice. CL provides stakeholders with the standing necessary to assert influence.

Citizens do not do so, though, independently. CL emphasizes a systems view of a problematic situation, and that no single party or single issue defines the situation. From a systems perspective, issues are connected and parties or stakeholders are interdependent. Voice and influence gain strength from the parties recognizing their interdependence.

CL's interdependence theory of power draws heavily on Bacharach and Lawler's (1981) work, particularly ideas about dependence resulting from alternatives and commitment. For Collaborative Learning to achieve meaningful progress, parties (including conveners and decision authorities) must believe the process is a viable alternative for them. They must be committed to giving the process a reasonable chance to succeed. The more attractive the collaborative alternative, the more likely that parties will make the necessary commitment. Collaborative Learning is dynamic and relies on constructive communication interaction. As parties interact, their perceptions concerning alternatives and commitment — their interdependence — may change (Daniels and Walker 2001).

Collaborative Learning's emphases of mutual learning, shared power, meaningful decision space, constructive communication interaction, and voice suggest a basic question: how do stakeholders want to be involved in agency-led planning efforts? Just as Force and Williams (1989) asked forest planning participants about their preferred public involvement formats almost two decades ago, we have sought to learn from citizens on two recent projects what they value in a collaborative process.

Citizen Views and the Allegheny National Forest Plan Revision Process

In 1986, pursuant to the requirements of the National Forest Management Act, the Allegheny National Forest (ANF) presented its first forest plan. Seventeen years later ANF staff members are preparing a comprehensive revision of that 1986 land management plan. The ANF Leadership and Plan Revision Teams have decided to use Collaborative Learning as the basis for their public participation activities. The authors have been retained to design and implement a comprehensive Collaborative Learning project as part of the plan revision effort.

The Allegheny National Forest

The Allegheny National Forest was established in 1923, after the Pennsylvania Legislature approved and President Calvin Coolidge signed a proclamation for Federal purchase of available private lands for National Forest purposes. Located in the northwestern Pennsylvania counties of Elk, McKean, Forest and Warren, the Allegheny National Forest consists of over 513,000 acres. It is the only National Forest in Pennsylvania and is within two to four hours driving time to Erie and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, Buffalo, New York, and the Youngstown-Akron-Cleveland areas of Ohio. Most of the Forest's users come from these areas.

Allegheny hardwood stands represent the most valuable and widespread timber in the Forest. This type includes black cherry, yellow poplar, white ash, red maple and sugar maple. The exceptional quality of the black cherry found here makes it highly valued throughout the world for fine furniture and veneers. Millions of board feet of timber are harvested from the Allegheny National Forest annually. Approximately one-half of this volume is used for pulpwood.

One of the many features of the Allegheny National Forest is the Allegheny Reservoir. The Kinzua Dam impounds the 12,000 acre, 27 mile long Allegheny Reservoir. The ANF supports numerous recreation activities, including swimming, fishing, boating, water skiing, hiking, camping, dirt biking, ATV use, cross country skiing, mountain biking, and snowmobiling.

The ANF is home to many species of fish, mammals, and birds. More than 300 species of mammals, including raccoon, gray squirrel, snowshoe hare, red and gray fox, river otter, beaver, mink and muskrat as well as game species, such as the white-tailed deer, black bear and wild turkey inhabit the forest. Hundreds of songbirds, along with woodpeckers, hawks, great blue herons and owls frequent the ANF. The forest also includes specially designated areas for wilderness and research.

Citizen Views of the ANF Public Participation Process

The data presented here come from public meetings held in May and October 2003. The May meetings were full-day Collaborative Learning Citizen Workshops directed by Walker, Senecah, and Daniels. The October meetings, designed and directed by Senecah, were CL-based open houses, with a significant workshop component.

These events were part of a forest plan revision strategy to involve citizens early in the planning effort. The May workshops took place as the planning work got underway. Goals for the workshops included learning about citizen values, concerns, and interests; gathering ideas from citizens on how the ANF could be better managed; and explaining the plan revision process and the stakeholders' role in it. Partici-

pants listened to short presentations but spent most of their time generating and refining ideas in small group discussions.

The October open house/workshops took place shortly after the ANF published its notice of intent (NOI) in accordance with planning requirements under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and National Forest Management Act. Objectives for these events included explaining and clarifying the NOI and planning effort, fostering agency-stakeholder interaction, and getting citizen feedback on the planning work done so far.

An important additional goal of both the May and October events was learning from citizens how public involvement could be best implemented to address their needs and concerns. Consequently, at both the May and October meetings, citizens were asked for ideas about the public participation process. Citizens who attended the May meetings in Dubois or Bradford, Pennsylvania received 5" x 8" index cards and were invited to identify concerns they had about the forest plan revision public participation process and/or recommended actions. Twenty two of 60 Dubois workshop participants submitted process cards. Twenty seven of the 58 participants at the Bradford meeting turned in cards at the end of the day.

From the 49 cards, the following ideas were most common. We have organized them as they correspond to the three dimensions of the trinity of voice.

The Access Dimension

- Broaden public participation; get more people involved
- Hold meetings in different communities and larger population centers in Pennsylvania and adjacent states
- Make the meetings and the process accessible
- It's good to have duplicate meetings, one on a weekday and one on a Saturday
- Publicize the meeting better, widely, and earlier
- Provide shorter meetings (e.g., half-day or evening)
- Sponsor field trips

The Standing Dimension

- Provide significant advanced notice of meetings, workshops, activities
- Use outside facilitators
- Explain how citizen ideas are used and considered
- Maintain a public comment period
- Post concerns and improvement forms on the web
- Target specific groups and get information from them

The Influence Dimension

- Seek the participation of diverse stakeholders
- Encourage people to mix better in groups; require diverse groups

- Emphasize learning from people different from you
- Conduct activities that will increase public involvement

Organizing the comments according to the trinity of voice reveals that many citizen ideas relate to more than one dimension. For example, “explain how citizen ideas are used and considered” implies the importance of both standing and influence.

The ANF plan revision team and the authors used many of the citizen ideas when designing and facilitating the second and third rounds of citizen meetings (Senecah and Walker guided the second round meetings in August). Discussion groups were more diverse than at the initial workshops and meetings were held in off-forest communities, such as Erie and State College, Pennsylvania. The ANF leadership personnel have demonstrated through their process design actions that they valued citizen contributions regarding public participation. At second round meetings, a number of citizens commented that they appreciated that these meetings were held in communities different from the first round of workshops.

In October 2003, after the ANF released its NOI and the NEPA process was initiated, Senecah and a doctoral student designed and facilitated meetings that combined open house and workshop activities. As part of the workshop portion of these meetings, citizens were asked on worksheets to provide their ideas about meetings and group interactions, including what type of public events they preferred, and about sources and techniques for communicating plan revision information.

Citizens’ responses to these worksheet items appear in Tables 1 and 2. On the Table 1 worksheet, open house participants noted a preference for one or two types of public events. On Worksheet 2, citizens could check all the information channels and techniques they found useful and add their own to an “other” box.

Table 1. Meetings and Group Interactions

Item	n=23
CL Workshops (asked in Warren only)	4
Forums	12
Public Meetings	8
Open Houses	4
Sounding Boards	1
Field Trips	6
Seminars	2
Other - Meetings with User Groups	1
Other - Organization host a meeting	1
Other - Public Hearings	1

Table 2. Information (channels and techniques)

Item	n=23
Media coverage	11
Slide shows - on cable channel	5
Intermittent briefing papers	8
Web site and info. requests by phone	14
Brochures, flyers	6
Presentations to groups	7
Newsletter	11
Video and displays at public buildings	2
Information phone line	2
Other - Photos	1
Other - Articles and press releases	1
Other - Collaboration with other groups	1

As this information indicates, people prefer forums to open houses. This is consistent with Force and Williams’ (1989, 36) finding that citizens prefer open public meetings to other forms of public participation. Regarding information channels, citizen responses favor websites and newsletters to other forms of information dissemination. This indicates the importance of access to information.

Regional Sediment Management

Similar to the ANF project, the regional sediment management (RSM) initiative for the mouth of the Columbia River is a comprehensive application of Collaborative Learning. Both projects include assessment work, training, design and facilitation of meetings, and evaluation. The RSM project differs from the ANF in emphasis, with most work invested in assessment and training.

The Regional Sediment Management Demonstration Initiative

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) manages the U.S. waterways, including sediment or sand management. USACE has typically focused on managing sand at coastal projects on a project-by-project basis. This approach to sand management has not always adequately considered the cumulative impacts of individual projects on down drift projects. In response to this concern, the USACE has initiated efforts to assess the benefits of managing sediment resources as a regional scale resource rather than a localized project resource. The concept of Regional Sediment Management (RSM) grew out of a May 1998 meeting of the Coastal Engineering Research Board. As a management method, RSM includes the entire environment, from the watershed to the sea. RSM should account for the effect of human activities on

sediment erosion as well as its transport in streams, lakes, bays, and oceans. In the last four years, USACE headquarters staff members have identified ten project areas for RSM demonstration initiatives, including sites in the Jacksonville, Mobile, Los Angeles, Detroit, Vicksburg, and Portland Districts. The Portland District site is the mouth of the Columbia River.

A goal of the demonstration program is to change the paradigm of project specific management to focusing on a regional approach in which the USACE as well as state and local agencies stop managing projects and begin “managing the sand.” Specific objectives of the demonstration program are:

- Implement regional sediment management practices.
- Improve efficiencies by linking projects.
- Apply new technologies.
- Identify and work through bureaucratic obstacles to RSM.
- Manage in concert with the environment.
- Incorporate a multi-stakeholder process for strategic planning and project coordination.

Citizens’ Views Regarding RSM Stakeholder Involvement

The USACE Portland and Seattle Districts have added an additional objective for the RSM project at the mouth of the Columbia: innovative and ongoing stakeholder engagement. Pacific Northwest USACE leadership and staff want to use the RSM project as an opportunity to build better relationships with stakeholders in order to change their paradigm of public involvement.

The first two activities in the RSM project were stakeholder conversations and training activities. The 71 stakeholder conversations informed the training design. A two-day CL training was conducted for USACE staff from throughout the Pacific Northwest. As part of the training component, citizens/stakeholders were invited to participate in a one-day Collaborative Learning training workshop. Participants included people from local communities, other agencies (state, federal, local), port authorities, NGOs, community groups, and universities. Two identical workshops were held, one inland and one on the Southwest Washington coast. About 35 people participated in one of the training days.

As part of the CL training, participants were asked to voice concerns and/or improvements regarding the RSM stakeholder involvement process. Via a worksheet, training workshop participants were asked “what are your concerns about the RSM stakeholder involvement process?” and “how can the RSM stakeholder process be improved?” Key responses are presented below. We have organized them according to a number of factors that are important in a Col-

laborative Learning effort (including trinity of voice dimensions), such as clear decision space and stakeholder standing.

Concerns Related To Process

- Honesty is essential
- All parties must commit to the process
- Encourage innovation but balance with realism
- Foster and maintain good communication

Concerns Related To Inclusiveness and Standing

- Need to include the political actors, e.g., legislators
- Safeguard against a stakeholder who comes in at the last minute and disrupts the process
- USACE staff need to participate rather than stand at the back of the room
- What/who is a stakeholder? This needs to be defined
- Business and industry need to be valued
- Be inclusive

Concerns Related To Objectives

- What is the product? A process is no good without a product
- Be clear about the ultimate goal
- What are the boundaries of the process?
- What are the criteria for success?
- People need to see direct results of their time and efforts

Improvements Related To Process

- Issues should be clearly framed
- Use the best science
- Sessions should be recorded
- Build trust
- Follow the training sessions and community workshops with a formal “agreement to collaborate”

Improvements Related To Access, Inclusiveness, and Standing

- Include a broad and diverse set of stakeholders
- Include the Tribes
- Include upriver stakeholders
- Bring in partners

Improvements Related To Decision Space and Objectives

- Decision factors must be defined early and clearly
- Establish issues; set a substantive agenda
- Provide necessary technical information
- Present early and clearly any “givens” or “sideboards”
- Develop a shared problem statement
- Develop clear objectives and principles
- Increase the RSM geographic area

Improvements Related To Communication And Outreach

- Develop a framework for stakeholder interaction and get them all together
- Organize a technical committee
- Create a glossary
- Publish a newsletter and develop a website
- Get media coverage

As these ideas have indicated, citizens wanted RSM clearly defined, both in substance and in procedure. Of all these points, the need for clear decision space was voiced most often. While they saw potential in the RSM effort, stakeholders wanted to know the significance of their standing and influence; where their ideas would matter and what decisions would emerge. As one training workshop participant and prominent stakeholder wrote:

Overall, I believe that the [RSM-CL] process has great potential of breaking through the lack of trust barrier — if the key parties commit to the process . . . [It] will help break the logjam and provide solutions not previously understood or addressed. [It must be] a very inclusive process that is facilitated.

Just as ANF workshop process comments revealed, RSM training participants' concerns and improvements often implied the importance of voice. In both projects, stakeholders wanted to be engaged meaningfully and actively. Their comments affirmed the use of Collaborative Learning as a method for learning and asserting influence.

There were obvious limitations to the data we have presented from the two projects. The data sought helped agency planning team members and consultants with their decisions about how to engage stakeholders. Responses were not collected by independent researchers nor asked as part of a formal study. Rather, information was gathered as part of an ongoing learning process consistent with Collaborative Learning principles and practices.

Conclusion

The RSM training participants' remarks display the optimism and realism that citizens often articulated at the Allegheny and RSM workshops. In a manner consistent with Senecah's trinity, citizens in Pennsylvania and the Pacific Northwest have communicated meaningful ideas about public participation and stakeholder engagement. Admittedly, the ANF and RSM projects involve more than the events described in this essay and the data presented here are rather limited. Still, the citizen views demonstrate that citizens can gain standing, display legitimacy, enact voice, and influence decisions about public participation process.

The views of citizens in both projects also shed light on the dynamic nature of collaborative potential (Walker and Daniels 2005). Any party, whether a decision authority (e.g., a government agency like the Allegheny National Forest or the Portland District of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers), a key stakeholder, or a citizens' group, that seeks to implement an innovative public participation and decision making strategy will likely perceive some collaborative potential (CP). Collaborative potential refers to the degree to which parties can work together assertively in order to make meaningful progress in the management of a controversial, complex, and conflict-laden policy situation. This perception is based on three factors. First, the party determines that the nature of the situation exhibits a high or compelling need for collaboration. Second, the party believes that there is a possibility for meaningful, respectful communication interaction between the disputants. Third, the party surmises that a mutual gain or integrative outcome is possible, that is, that the fundamental structure of the conflict or decision situation offers the potential for both or all sides to achieve more of their objectives than would be likely in some other venue (Lewicki et al. 2003). Implicit in these three factors is a commitment from all parties to share power within the parameters of the law.

As we have noted elsewhere (Daniels and Walker 2001; Walker 2004), as a public participation strategy, collaboration differs considerably from the traditional model of open houses, public hearings, and comment periods. Some key aspects of collaboration that clarify these differences are: (1) It is less competitive, (2) it features mutual learning and fact-finding; (3) it allows underlying value differences to be explored, (4) it resembles principled negotiation, focusing on interests rather than positions, (5) it allocates the responsibility for implementation across many parties, (6) its conclusions are generated by participants through an interactive, iterative, and reflexive process, (7) it is often an ongoing process, and (8) it has the potential to build individual and community capacity in such areas as conflict management, leadership, decision-making, and communication (Daniels and Walker 2001).

Citizen views in both the ANF and RSM situations indicate potential for collaboration. ANF citizens want to get more people involved, include diverse stakeholders, experience learning, and understand how their ideas will be considered and used. They prefer workshops, forums, and field trips to more conventional public involvement activities. They want to participate in events that are accessible and through which they can influence decisions.

Many of the RSM stakeholders' concerns and improvements relate to decision space, a key component of collaborative potential. Power sharing, mutual learning, and participatory access and inclusiveness are indicators of "decision space." The greater the decision space, the greater the poten-

tial for meaningful public participation. Decision space is an important element that differentiates limited or conventional participation from more innovative and interactive participation, such as Collaborative Learning (Walker 2004).

Decision space stems from decision authority. In order for collaborative interaction to be a meaningful part of the ANF and RSM planning efforts, the agencies with decision authority must clarify how much of the decision process and outcome they can share with other parties. The extent to which a decision authority can open up and share its decision making process defines the decision space.

Sharing decision space involves sharing a form of power and voice. While the deciding agency retains its authority by law to make the decision (e.g., under NEPA a forest supervisor signs a record of decision), citizens can participate actively in the construction of that decision. Meaningful decision space is critical to a meaningful and innovative public participation process. Conventional public participation and decision making processes do not necessarily include any shared decision space. Any agency can consult with the public (e.g., invite comments in writing or at a hearing) without any assurance of how those comments might be part of the decision process. A traditional public participation model may embody a decision space façade (Walker 2004).

RSM participants want to know what the RSM product will be, and urge the USACE to be clear about the ultimate goal of RSM. They are concerned about the boundaries of the RSM effort and the criteria for measuring success. They recommend that the nature of the task and decision factors be determined and clarified early.

Citizen comments in both the ANF and RSM situations demonstrate a recognition of interdependence, the importance of voice, and a willingness to participate in a collaborative effort. Correspondingly, the ANF and USACE have enacted, through a Collaborative Learning approach, an interdependent form of power as voice/influence. If decision authorities and convening organizations, such as the ANF and USACE, act independently and deny voice, citizens may withdraw their commitment to collaborate. They may then choose a unilateral course of action, pursuing self-interest at the expense of mutual interest, and the potential for future stakeholder collaboration may disappear.

A Postscript

The project events highlighted in this essay took place in the Spring and Fall of 2003. Work on these projects has continued since then. Despite turnover in key staff positions, the Allegheny National Forest remains committed to engaging stakeholders collaboratively in the forest plan revision effort. To this end, the ANF sponsored Collaborative Learning

workshops in September 2004 and May 2005. Both workshops focused on the development of management alternatives. The ANF plans to release a draft of the revised forest plan (a Draft Environmental Impact Statement) by Summer 2006, to be followed by another set of workshops. As the ANF website reports, “over the course of our revision effort (timetable), eight rounds of CL workshops will be led by independent facilitators at critical junctures; these will be in addition to — not instead of — the traditional written comment periods, public meetings, and related formal procedures” (Allegheny National Forest 2006). Five rounds of CL events have been held to date. Products from all of these workshops have been posted on the ANF website, including explanations of how the citizen contributions from these workshops have been analyzed and used.

The mouth of the Columbia River Regional Sediment Management effort also continues. Progress has been slowed by other Army Corps of Engineers priorities (e.g., Hurricane Katrina, the Iraq war). The project has offered one Collaborative Learning workshop and a science conference. The 40 participants at the CL workshop proposed a number of improvements/actions as part of the RSM effort. One improvement recommended that the project be guided by an existing multi-stakeholder group, the Lower Columbia Solutions Group. That organization has taken up some of the issues (such as near shore sediment disposal to stabilize jetties) that fall within a regional sediment management approach.

Endnotes

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