Coalition for Unified Recreation in the Eastern Sierra (CURES)

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Case Description

The Eastern Sierra, a 300-mile long area along the eastern side of California, includes a diversity of landscapes and recreational opportunities, from Mammoth Mountain ski area to the John Muir and Ansel Adams Wildernesses and Mono Lake. As an indication of its diversity, the area includes both the highest and lowest spot in the continental U.S. It has long been a destination for a range of different recreation interests. In 1991, a group of Forest Service officials from the Inyo and Toiyabe National Forest brought together state and local officials and private interest groups to discuss recreation management in the region. This meeting spawned the formation of the Coalition for Unified Recreation in the Eastern Sierra (CURES).

Bill Bramlette, who was District Ranger at the time for the Inyo National Forest’s Mono Lake Ranger District, initiated this dialogue, believing that viable recreation plans would best be conceived by the various recreation providers in the area. He had seen the value of partnerships through earlier coalition-building successes in the Mono Basin. He recognized the need for a focused recreation planning process, given the importance of recreation to the area’s economy underscored by the losses sustained by local businesses because of the protracted drought. In early 1991, Bramlette approached Nancy Upham, who was then Manager of the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, about assisting him in developing this idea. Bramlette sought Upham’s participation because of both their close working relationship in the past and her strong background in organizing and facilitating workshops. Bramlette also sought and received support from Inyo National Forest Supervisor Dennis Martin, an advocate of working with communities in joint problem-solving. In May 1991, the infant group convened for the first time and included representatives of Bishop and Mono County Chambers of Commerce, Mammoth Tourist Bureau, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, and California Department of Fish and Game. Their purpose was to begin development of a comprehensive recreation plan for the area that reflected the interests of the involved parties.

The principal focus of the initial May meeting was to plan a workshop to discuss recreation in the region as well as the potential of creating a formal coalition dedicated to the issue. Representatives from the meeting worked through the summer to develop and organize the event, which was held in October. Approximately 200 people came to the public workshop, about half of which represented public agencies, and about half of which represented chambers of commerce, private businesses, and environmental organizations. On the second and final day of the workshop, the group brainstormed the type of projects that a hypothetical coalition might undertake. A long list of ideas emerged. Upham asserted that there was strong support for a formal coalition; “lots of people were saying ‘we are committed’.” Participants agreed that the Eastern Sierra’s “drawing
card” is its natural beauty; “what people are coming for is wide open space,” and its protection was seen as critical.

Initially, the target members of CURES were recreation providers – primarily federal, state, and local land managers. The organizers of CURES had not originally thought to include representatives of environmental groups. However, representatives from the Mono Lake Committee lobbied successfully to get on the CURES steering committee and sought to ensure that environmental protection was stressed as a Coalition priority. During the ensuing six months, newly formed task groups met monthly to develop a range of issues from resource-planning to marketing and information strategy. Each group had at least one representative from each of the following interest groups: private recreation providers, local business, chambers of commerce, elected officials, public agencies, and environmentalists. General meetings comprising the entire group were also held twice during this time period. By spring 1992, the coalition had evolved a formal structure and mission; according to the coalition’s mission statement, “CURES is dedicated to preserving the Eastern Sierra’s natural, cultural, and economic resources and enriching the experiences of visitors and residents.”

In mid-1992, CURES undertook a futuring process with the goal of developing a vision statement describing what recreation in the Eastern Sierra should look like in the year 2010. This process had its share of tension and conflict. Environmentalists (primarily representatives from Mono Lake Committee, Sierra Club, and Audubon Society) were wary of CURES’ motives, fearing increased tourism and development. They had become involved to ensure that environmental protection was stressed as a Coalition priority. Alternately, the region’s tourism industry was driven to fill as many beds as possible, to increase tourist attraction to the area. Upham, who facilitated the initial meetings, sought middle ground, arguing that the goal of CURES must be “a sustainable environment and a sustainable economy.” She asserted that the region’s carrying capacity should not be exceeded, and the group discussed the concept of marketing and demarketing; the latter was considered for areas that had exceeded carrying capacity for tourists. When the process became adversarial, Upham emphasized the common interests of the participants, urging them to, as she said, “get off of their positions and onto interests.” Humor was very important at these intervals. As the result of this Herculean and protracted effort, Upham said that there is “true ownership in the final product by divergent groups who may have never agreed on anything ever before.” In August 1993, CURES celebrated the completion of its vision statement; “there were people there who never thought they’d party together,” Upham recalled.

In the eleven years since its conception, CURES has continued to build upon its successes and its members have increasingly relied upon the Coalition to address recreation issues in the Eastern Sierra. Some of the many achievements of CURES have been the publication of an annual
interpretive guide for visitor centers in the region, the publication of a tri-lingual activities map, the completion of a recreation tourism survey, and a “Be Bear Aware” campaign designed to educate residents and visitors on bear management issues.

In addition, CURES received a grant to sponsor three educational seminars for local businesses on marketing techniques. More than 200 people attended the seminars, and the State of Tourism awarded CURES its annual “Good Host” award for sponsoring the seminars. CURES also got a grant to carry out a marketing conversion study to determine how many people who requested information on the Eastern Sierra actually visited, which is expected to help local businesses improve future marketing efforts. Much of CURES energy over the last several years has been focused on the establishment of Highway 395 as a “Scenic Byway” and the development of interpretive kiosks at rest sites and informative guides to accompany visitors while they tour the scenic corridor. Hailed as an extreme success, CURES secured over $1.5 million to complete this project and extended their collaborative approach by including all communities through the 395 corridor in the planning and development of the Scenic Byway project. CURES is now preparing to begin a project that will seek to develop a “Recreation and Resource Inventory and Resource Guide” intended to help local governments, businesses, environmentalists, and federal agencies work together in assessing recreation development and planning in the Eastern Sierra. Upham attributes the group’s remarkable record of obtaining grant funding for its projects to the group’s coalition-based approach. Upham noted, “One of the things that speaks so well for a coalition like this [is] when we apply for grants, we usually get them, because the support for CURES is so broad based.”

CURES has made a deliberate effort to avoid addressing issues that are highly controversial and/or political. They have instead focused on problems and projects that have potential to bring people together, raise awareness, and help establish a “sense of place.” There have been ample opportunities for the Coalition to engage in controversial recreation issues, such as Senator Barbara Boxer’s bill to expand wilderness designations in the Eastern Sierra. As Upham explained, “CURES is not ready to take on divisive issues. We are still trying to build upon common ground.” As a result, some of the issues that CURES set out to address in their visioning process, such as marketing vs. demarketing areas, have been delayed. Upham says she has not had much success in selling the concept of demarketing to local chambers of commerce involved with CURES, yet she continues to work on it. She feels confident of ultimate success; “priorities have already been established and we have our work cut out for us. We’ll continue to work in the task groups—on the grassroots level—to develop support for these ideas.” Miller feels that the process needs more time for her to be convinced of its ultimate success. While the coalition process provides an arena where “you are able to lay down your weapons,” as she put it, and while she feels the group has been able
to come to consensus on the “mutually beneficial, innocuous projects” such as visitor center guides, she “can only hope” that the group is able to concur on bigger, more controversial issues, such as the development of a ski area at June Lake, a tremendously contentious issue for environmentalists.

As of November 2002, CURES was going strong; approximately 150 people attended the last steering committee meeting. Chairmanship of CURES has rotated among several of the Coalition’s most active members and, as of 2000, Nancy Upham had taken over as Chairperson once again. The Coalition continues to operate with a Steering Council (comprised of 60+ voting members), a Coordinating Committee, and several functional task groups, currently concentrating on topics such as marketing, interpretation and education, and recreation resource inventorying and planning. CURES has recently established a relationship with the Sierra Business Council (SBC), a nonprofit association working to secure the economic and environmental health of the Sierra Nevada region. SBC has been assisting CURES with the promotion of regional planning initiatives and has been helping CURES research the feasibility of becoming a 501(c)(3) organization.

In addition to the specific projects CURES has undertaken, the Coalition has served as a model for effective collaboration. While several neighboring counties passed “Home Rule” resolutions mandating what federal agencies can and cannot do within county borders, the Mono County Supervisors passed a resolution calling for collaborative planning between federal agencies and the county government after hearing testimony about CURES and its successes. In addition, through the coalition-building process, a greater “trust and willingness to listen” have been achieved among participants. For example, businesses and other local entities that promote the development of the area have been able to talk to environmentalists, who wish to slow development. Relationships have developed between seemingly opposing interests. While participants do not see eye to eye on many issues, Sally Miller of the Mono Lake Committee notes that they are able to “agree to disagree without attacking each other.” Coalition meetings have also provided an excellent forum for dialogue; Miller asserted that, whereas in the past opposing interests would often “fight it out through the newspaper, “they now have the opportunity to speak directly to one another. In this way, understanding and relationships between environmental groups and the larger community have been strengthened. As Upham put it, “the process is the product.”

CURES is predicated on the concept that “a collaborative effort (recreation providers working together) is considerably more responsible and effective than individual efforts (recreation providers working independently).” It represents an innovative and successful attempt to consider recreation planning in a comprehensive fashion, and at a geographically manageable level. Through this partnership approach, a good network of communication has been established among participants that has yielded more information-sharing and consequently, fewer duplicated efforts such as the publication of educational materials. Because of enhanced communication among
According to environmentalists, one of the biggest successes of the process is the fact that business and environmental interests are beginning to communicate, even if guardedly. In this way, relationships between environmental groups and the larger community have been strengthened. According to Miller, the tourism industry in the area is “admitting that a sustainable economy is dependent on a sustainable environment.”

What is fostering progress?

There are a number of reasons why CURES has been successful. From conception through development, the Coalition enjoyed the full support of the Inyo National Forest Supervisor, a strong advocate of partnership approaches to problem-solving. He was willing to free up the relatively small amount of money needed for CURES administration, as well as to make it a work priority for relevant Forest Service personnel. Marin’s willingness to support CURES, both philosophically and practically, has been critical to the program’s longevity.

Upham’s prior skill with facilitation and focus on common interests of the participants throughout the process was also important to successful coalition-building. She assisted in guiding the group through more acrimonious debates, reminding participants of their common goals. She continues to facilitate many of the meetings and spends approximately fifty percent of her time on CURES administration and associated projects.

The coalition has also benefited from efforts to retain adequate representation of key stakeholders. Chris Plakos, a representative from the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the current chair of CURES, noted, “We named positions we wanted filled…If someone leaves, we find someone else to represent that constituency.” He also observed that “you can’t have everyone – we didn’t want to get to the point that we were so huge and cumbersome that we couldn’t get anything done – but you can get good cross representation.”

In addition to funding for administration, CURES has been successful at procuring project funds. One source has been rural development funds allocated through the National Farm Bill. Some forests include counties that qualify for these funds; in many cases, these funds have been channeled through CURES. CURES has also been able to secure project-specific grant funding from agencies such as CALTRANS (California Department of Transportation). As noted above, agencies have responded favorably to funding projects that involve partnerships among different participants, recreation providers and land managers have been able to present a consistent message to the public.
entities. This funding has allowed CURES to complete a number of projects, which Plakos notes has helped the group work together, because “people like to see things happen.”

One way the group has helped address the differences between environmental representatives and local business representatives is to create a special “Balancing Task Force,” charged with looking at the broad economic and environmental issues facing the Eastern Sierra. Upham noted that the task force sponsors forums to “get people together to learn about issues and be able to discuss them in a non-combative sort of way.”

One overall reason that CURES may be successful is that all the parties involved have incentives to work together. Chris Plakos, the current chair of CURES notes that the Eastern Sierra area is “an extremely isolated community…tied together by one two-lane highway. Because of this isolation, we have to work together, even when there are competing interests.” CURES has provided many of the participants a mechanism for working together to ensure that their interests are met. Shrinking budgets have provided federal agencies with incentives to participate, since CURES allows agencies to share costs and obtain grant funding. Upham noted, “With downsizing comes recognition that we’ve got to pool our resources, not duplicate efforts, and share whatever we can.” Especially when CURES first formed, local businesses saw it as an important way to repair the economic damage caused by a protracted drought. Environmental groups sought to participate to have a voice shaping the future development of the area. In short, as Upham put it, when the Forest Service approached local groups to seek their involvement, “these groups saw it as vital to their interests to participate.”

What challenges were faced and how were they overcome?

Many individuals, both within and outside of the Forest Service, were concerned about CURES’ motives and intentions. Environmentalists, especially, saw CURES as a thinly veiled attempt by pro-development and pro-tourism interests to lure greater numbers of people to the Eastern Sierra. They were concerned that the Coalition would cater to businesses and chambers of commerce in the region. Some Forest Service employees also shared these apprehensions. These fears, though still present, have been alleviated by the work of Upham and other CURES participants to stress concepts such as sustainability and carrying capacities as priorities on CURES’ agenda. Upham, and others active in the process, have been vigilant to ensure that no participant’s concerns get lost in the dialogue. By taking on and completing smaller, less controversial projects, the Coalition has managed to build a track record of success that overshadows the areas of disagreement.
A “fear of taking risks” within the Forest Service and a lack of policies of allowing non-agency entities to be central in the planning process, proved an initial barrier to the success of CURES. CURES represents a new approach to problem-solving and, as such, was unknown and threatening. Drawing other parties into a process that has traditionally been controlled solely by the Forest Service was uncomfortable to many personnel; as Upham said, “we may feel that we are giving away power or authority.” The success of CURES has served to dispel some of these concerns.

Finally, involvement in CURES requires a time commitment that is difficult to fulfill given existing workloads. Increasingly, CURES is being identified as the main forum for recreation projects and issues. Within the USFS, there is resistance to this additional time demand. Upham mentioned the common sentiment among Forest Service personnel: “how can we take on something new—the other work doesn’t go away.” Representatives of environmental organizations and local businesses face this same time problem, but like the Forest Service, have thus far remained committed to the process. Upham noted, “Everyone has more meetings and less time, but we seem to have gotten around that.”

What lessons can be drawn?

The CURES case offers several lessons for other bridging efforts. Upham believes that an important lesson is that collaboration takes time and effort, particularly at the beginning. Given this, it is important to have a member whose job it is to keep the process going when it falters. Upham and others helped to move the group through more difficult issues and prevented the process from stalemating in conflict. As a result, participants emerged with a new respect for one another and a sense that the Coalition had a sturdy foundation. The Coalition no longer seems dependent on the individuals involved; Upham feels that as Coalition members move on and are replaced, the group and process will not dissolve.

From the Forest Service’s perspective, one of the principal strengths of CURES is that it has forged better relationships between the agency and local communities; the important thing, according to Upham, is to “be a neighbor and a partner to communities we live and work with.” These partnerships have been created from acknowledging common interests and working towards common goals. “You gain confidence when you find out that it really does work and that there are tremendous benefits derived by having strong relationships with external entities. With that confidence, you can go forward and try to build more linkages.”
For further information

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