CHALLENGES OF EVALUATION

Why is evaluation so challenging?

➢ Problems with objective setting
  • Objectives are rarely clear &/or agreed upon
  • Objectives may be too vague to measure
  • Project objectives may conflict with each other
  • Few absolutely “correct” directions

➢ Natural and social systems are complex
  • Ecological processes are not well understood
  • Systems and strategies operate at multiple scales – time and geographic
  • Change is difficult to interpret
  • Hard to demonstrate causality

➢ Projects at different stages cannot be held to the same standards

➢ Projects may have neither motivation nor capacity to evaluate progress
  • Evaluation is uncomfortable/judgmental
  • Evaluation can lead to the need to change direction, which is hard
  • Limited time and human power: Better to do, than think about doing.

➢ As a result, our tendency is to …
  • Measure success of strategies/activities
  • Use process improvements as proxies for environmental improvements
  • Measure what is easiest to measure
  • Focus on data collection, not decision making
  • View evaluation as a process that is external to a collaboration (and conducted by others)
  • Avoid evaluation, or do it poorly
How do you deal with these challenges?

- Integrate evaluation into the process of managing the collaboration
- Consider the motivation and capacity of project members
  - Keep it simple
  - Ensure that evaluation produces recognizable benefits to the project
    - Link evaluation to decision making
    - Celebrate learning
  - Build capacity; Access area resources
- Tailor evaluation to your needs
  - Target measures to phases of the project
  - Focus evaluation and data collection on specific questions that are relevant to your project’s decision making
    - Understand the system/situation components and interconnections
    - Clarify objectives
    - Frame specific measures of success and comparisons
- Use multiple measures of success
  - Ecological, social, process
  - Ultimate outcomes, near term outcomes, strategy implementation
  - Subjective, objective; Coarse, fine
- Be strategic in choice of indicators
  - Look for keystone/integrative indicators
- Overcome data problems
  - Take advantage of existing data
  - Coordinate others’ monitoring activities
  - Partner with area colleges or NGOs with data collection or analysis expertise
  - Seek long term funding for monitoring from EPA or a state agency in order to sustain the effort