

CHAPTER 6: BLACKFOOT CHALLENGE

Blackfoot River, Montana

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The Blackfoot Challenge is a highly visible resource management partnership initiated to coordinate land stewardship efforts in the Blackfoot Valley in South Central Montana. The largest effort of its kind in Montana, the Blackfoot Challenge provides a robust example of a collaborative group that has been well received by local residents and has been instrumental in staving off threats to the valley's ecological integrity and rural way of life. Primary threats to the valley include unsustainable land use practices and commercial and private development. Through efforts such as hands-on projects, community involvement and empowerment, the Blackfoot Challenge has served as a model for other collaborative groups in Montana and across the United States.

Interviews:

Becky Garland, Business owner, former President-Big Blackfoot TU Chapter, (2/28/99)

Gary Sullivan, Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (11/03/98)

George Hirschenberger, Bureau of Land Management, (2/27/99)

Greg Neudecker, Wildlife Biologist, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (1/29/99)

Hank Goetz, Manager of the Lubrecht Forest, University of Montana, (2/23/99)

Jack Thomas, Acting Executive Director-Blackfoot Challenge, (4/6/99)

Jim Stone, Rancher, Chairman-Blackfoot Challenge, (2/25/99)

Land Lindbergh, Landowner/former rancher co-founder of the Challenge, (2/17/99)

Rich Clough, Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks, former participant, (2/22/99)

PART I: BACKGROUND

Origins and Issues

Montana's Blackfoot River Valley is home to the Blackfoot River and a 1.5 million-acre watershed located in Western Central Montana near the town of Missoula. The river and its tributaries extend from the top of the Continental Divide in the Bob Marshall Wilderness westward for approximately 132 miles. The Valley is a mountainous area that boasts 10,000 foot peaks that give way to timbered slopes at lower elevations (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997). Prairie grasslands, sagebrush steppe, coniferous forest, and extensive wetland and riparian areas contain more than 600 species of vascular plants. The valley is also home to 21 species of wildlife, including waterfowl and other water birds such as peregrine falcons, grizzly bears, bald eagles, and bull trout (The Blackfoot Challenge informational pamphlet). Roughly 50% of the watershed is federally owned, 7% is state owned, 20% is corporate timber holdings, and the remaining 23% are privately

owned ranches and land holdings (Lindbergh, 1999). Fifth generation cowboys run many of these ranches. This tranquil rustic valley which has sustained a rural lifestyle for more than a century has also attracted newcomers tired of the congestion and pace of life in the east and California.

The Blackfoot Valley, however, is not without its own problems. Although the Blackfoot River is seemingly beautiful on the surface, poor mining, grazing, and logging practices have resulted in water quality, water supply issues, sedimentation, and a declining fishery. (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997). Valley residents also share a number of pressing problems such as invasive noxious weeds, damage on private lands as a result of elk migration, and disputes over instream flow rights. These same residents are also concerned over the loss of rural character of the valley as an increasing number of large family ranches are being sold off and split up for development in the form of golf courses, summer homesites, and commercial sites (Neudecker, 1999). Mounting concern about these problems triggered a dialogue between agencies, landowners and key community leaders as far back as twenty years ago but finally became more formalized with the formation of the Blackfoot Challenge in 1991.¹ In the words of Challenge participant and Lubrecht Forest manager at the University of Montana, Hank Goetz, "We knew that we could do a lot more together than we could do individually."

Early Stages

Relationships, dialogue, and trust needed to be established before this community felt comfortable embarking on a multiparty process like the Blackfoot Challenge. Recognition of the benefits of participation by landowners such as Bill Potter, directly contributed to the forward momentum of the group. In his words, "We realized that if you do not make the rules, someone is going to make them for you. It is a lot easier to follow your own rules." Agencies, particularly the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), spent time developing stronger ties with local landowners in an informal manner that they describe as "across the kitchen table" (Sullivan, 1998). Agency staff worked with local landowners on specific on-the-ground projects under the USFWS Partners for Wildlife Program that allocates federal dollars and agency expertise for resource protection on private land.² Specific low risk projects included installation of artificial nesting structures for Canadian geese. These initial projects helped the USFWS to develop the landowner's trust. The projects eventually grew in size supplementing the short term projects and included wetland, stream, and riparian restoration, as well as development of grazing systems that all served to improve water quality in the valley. Other long-term projects such as conservation easements helped to protect important habitat on private land.

¹ The Blackfoot Challenge will be intermittently referred to as the Challenge throughout the text.

² The USFWS Partners for Wildlife program has helped the Blackfoot Challenge make its project ideas a reality through both financial assistance and expertise. USFWS and the Challenge partners realized early on that the majority of habitat with which they were concerned, was located on private lands. The USFWS Partners for Wildlife program has three goals of partnership building through sharing an interest to conserve private lands, habitat restoration on private lands, and providing landowners assistance for improved land management, which served as the mechanism by which trust was built between landowners and the USFWS and eventually other state and federal government agencies. This has been at no cost to landowners and has noticeably enhanced habitat protection in the valley. These efforts by the USFWS were taking place before the inception of the Blackfoot Challenge.

All of the projects experienced the high degree of success because none compromised the landowner's agricultural operations and all proved highly educational for some valley residents. Reflecting on the utility of the projects, Blackfoot Challenge Chairman and valley rancher, Jim Stone, states: "We have not eliminated cows from streamside grazing in all cases but now it is done properly. It is that whole educational wheel that I have jumped on and it is incredible. These projects affect ranchers in a positive way. It saves us money. Everyone is happy and we are putting more pounds of beef on the hoof because we are managing our ground better."

The Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited (TU) sponsored the first meeting with the objective of creating a new organization as a conduit for information sharing in the valley. It was entirely open to the public. Agencies, industry representatives, organizations, and landowners met to talk about possible solutions for managing the recreational interests, environmental concerns, and commercial uses of the valley (USFWS, 1999). TU realized that the scope of the issues in the valley was outgrowing their organization's more narrow focus on fish and water issues and that current problems required a broader set of interests in order to be effectively addressed. According to Becky Garland, local business owner and former vice-president of the Big Blackfoot Chapter of TU: "People were dying for information...to do the right thing. They were trying to make their wrongs right." The initial meeting was well received and a follow-up meeting was held in the Missoula and formalized the effort and creating the organization's framework (University of Colorado Natural Resources Law Center, 1996).

Organization and Process

In January 1993, the Blackfoot Challenge had decided upon a mission statement, goals, and the general organizational structure of the group (USFWS, 1999). In 1994, the Challenge hired its first Executive Director and established itself as a nonprofit 501(c3). In the words of Blackfoot Challenge co-founder, Land Lindbergh: "Before there was no forum by which to handle both the direct and indirect impacts to the river. With the influx of new ideas and people to the valley coupled with the different agendas of all of the agencies, it was time to get in front of the potential issues and try to deal with them." To this day, the Blackfoot Challenge, viewing itself as a forum for information exchange and communication, will not take a position on issues. Land Lindbergh offers a poignant image: "We are like a roundhouse on a railroad line where issues come in on various tracks and are presented to the Board and then a response is set out on another track to bring together the issue and the individual or agency that can best handle that issue."

Members of the Blackfoot Challenge authored the following mission statement:³

"To enhance, conserve, and protect the natural resources and rural lifestyle of the Blackfoot River Valley for present and future generations."

³ Mission and goals were taken from the Blackfoot Challenge informational packet.

The Blackfoot Challenge has put forth the following goals. The executive committee works at providing more specific goals when different issues arise:

- Provide a forum for the timely distribution of technical and topical information from public and private sources;
- Foster communication between public and private interests to avoid duplication of efforts and capitalize on opportunities;
- Recognize and work with diverse interests in the Blackfoot Valley to avoid confrontation;
- Examine the cumulative effects of land management decisions and promote actions that will lessen their adverse impacts in the Blackfoot Valley; and
- Provide a forum of public and private resources to resolve issues.

Blackfoot Chairman and valley rancher Jim Stone adds: “The Challenge and eventually the valley is dead if we do not keep the family ranches going. If there is a primary goal for the Challenge, it is to try to keep the landownership pattern in a state of where we are still having ownership of these older families.”

Participants

The Blackfoot Challenge is represented by the following diverse representatives: the Montana Trout Unlimited, ranchers, business owners, recreational interests, The Nature Conservancy, Plum Creek Timber Company, National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, North Powell Conservation District, US Forest Service, the US Bureau of Land Management, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks, Montana Water Quality Bureau, US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Montana Land Reliance (University of Colorado Natural Resources Law Center, 1996).

Organizational Structure

The Blackfoot Challenge has an open membership. Anyone who so desires is encouraged to participate at any time. Membership has grown to include more than 100 private landowners and representatives from twenty-seven state, federal, and non-governmental organizations. The group has had both an executive committee and steering committee. Presently, only the Executive Committee serves as a functioning entity. The five individuals on the Executive Committee are also officers on the Board of Directors and are voted on by the general membership. They set the policies for the group and currently serve one-year terms although they are currently considering going back to the original two-year terms. The executive committee meets once a month. Annually there is a larger meeting that brings together all participants. All decisions are made by consensus only (Neudecker).

While there is a strong relationship between state and federal agencies and the Challenge, agency participants have taken somewhat of a backseat approach and have let the citizen participants lead discussions and prioritize projects. Gary Sullivan of the USFWS coins this approach as "leading

from behind." He prefers the tactic of offering advice when necessary but not setting the agenda. Richard Clough of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks points out that a number of representatives from the various agencies have considerable expertise in group process and have been an asset in helping with the interpersonal dynamics of the group as well as being in the more traditional position of offering purely scientific expertise.

Funding

The Blackfoot Challenge receives its funding from a number of sources and is constantly struggling to secure more. Agencies such as the USFWS through their Partners in Wildlife Program, BLM, Trout Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited, and Pheasants Forever, as well as private donors have all contributed funding (University of Colorado Natural Resources Law Center, 1996). Darrell Sall, former area manager of the Bureau of Land Management, was also instrumental in helping the Blackfoot Challenge gain momentum once initiated. He was able to obtain money from the BLM for administrative support, temporary help, an executive director, and a computer and really set a positive tone for agency/citizen relations (Neudecker, 1999). Nonetheless, the group finds it difficult to secure funding for administrative needs. Presently the group is trying to secure funding to bring in an Executive Director. In August of 1998, primarily due to a lack of funds allocated for administrative purposes, the previous executive director, Jack Thomas, was let go. He currently serves as acting director helping out when needed (Thomas, 1999). Those interviewed believe that the Challenge needs a person who is consistently involved in the process and is out in the Valley trying to assess people's priorities for resource protection. In order to hire a new Executive Director, however, they must seek out private donors in the valley and educate them about the virtues of the Challenge.

Outcomes

Many participants of the Blackfoot Challenge readily voice what they believe are some of the most important outcomes of the Blackfoot Challenge. These outcomes range from the development of trust to implementation of concrete projects:

- Darrell Sall indicates that, "It has built a lot of trust with all the people of the valley. It has taught us to work together and collaborate for the improvement of the land" (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997).
- Rich Clough adds: "The Challenge has provided the opportunity to meet and keep in touch with lots of people, coordinate with other agencies some of the efforts necessary to maintain what we have in the valley."
- One representative from Plum Creek Timber Company shares his opinion of the group: "The Blackfoot Challenge is an opportunity for Plum Creek to remain in contact with its neighbors, its adjoining landowners to work with them on projects that protect the environment, wildlife, and water resources" (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997).

The Blackfoot Challenge has also been involved in a range of projects. Two such projects that have received the greatest amount of attention are the noxious weed control program and Project Wet, an environmental education program that focuses on water issues in schools.

- In the formative stages of the Blackfoot Challenge, the group took on the grandiose task of noxious weed control with the help of agency representatives. It has been something that has united the group more than any other project so far (Stone, 1999). According to Land Lindbergh, "Weed control got the group into the minds and hearts of landowners because it was easy for landowners to see the critical importance of a coordinated approach in tackling this problem."
- Through the educational tool, Project Wet, and the assistance of Becky Garland, great success has been made to educate teachers and children in the valley about their watershed. By conveying a message to the children that the watershed is a place to be taken care of and explaining ways that they might have a positive impact on it, Garland has also been pleased with the effect that it has on the both the children and the teachers. "Last year we put together a week long water education workshop for teachers. It has changed their lives in the way that they now look at their valley and how they will teach their children about the valley's watershed." Greg Neudecker of USFWS feels that "Project Wet efforts have been the best thing in which the Challenge has been involved in the last 2-3 years."

Additional outcomes:

- Establishment of a Noxious Weed Program which has resulted in the:
 - ◆ Formation of a weed task group
 - ◆ Coordinated effort with landowners
 - ◆ Success in controlling spread of noxious weeds through chemical treatments and introduction of insects that feed on the noxious weeds (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997)
- Sponsorship of educational workshops and tours throughout the year to encourage local involvement and ownership in resolving resource problems in the watershed.
- Establishment of the Blackfoot River Corridor Project. Started more than twenty years ago, this project is a good example of landowners agency coordination. Thirty-mile corridor 85% privately owned. Landowners allowed access to their land as long as the Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks agreed to look after the recreationists. It has Resulted in more control of recreational activity and a greater recreationist appreciation knowledge of land ownership patterns and need for management of private lands (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997).
- Stream restoration projects such as the Dick Creek Project, Elk Creek Project, Rock Spring Creek Project, and the Nevada Creek Project including:
 - ◆ Skidding logs to the stream for overhead fish cover

- ◆ Fencing stream banks to reduce erosion
- ◆ Cutting and planting willow shoots for bank stabilization
- ◆ Placing rocks to protect irrigation structures from erosion
- ◆ Removal of fish passage barriers and replaced with bridges
- ◆ Reduction of stream sediments from county road (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997)

Resulted in:

- ◆ Improved aquatic habitat and fish population
- ◆ Reduction in sediment in the rivers/improved water quality

PART II: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Why Collaboration?

Members of the Blackfoot Challenge pursue collaboration as a means for enhancing the Blackfoot Valley for a number of reasons. Agency representatives, landowners and business owners alike offered the following reasons for why they chose to collaborate:

- Future of natural resource management
- Increasing land-use conflicts
- Natural way to manage resources
- Duplicative agency efforts
- Tired of working for the state

Future of natural resource management

Both Greg Neudecker and Jim Stone see the virtues of collaboration. Greg Neudecker, through his work with the USFWS as a wildlife biologist, has experienced first hand the obstacles of not including the local population in management decisions. He offered his reason for becoming part of the Blackfoot Challenge: "It is the future of natural resource management... We need to get away from managing for one piece of property and start managing from a watershed approach. The only way we are going to start solving fish, wildlife, and natural resource issues is by looking at the whole landscape and unless you get the local people involved, you may win your battles but you ultimately lose your war."

Similarly, Jim Stone, rancher and Challenge Chairman, has seen what he refers to as "the hateful flavor" that has derailed collaborative efforts in Eastern side of the Montana mountains and the negative impact that a lack of collaboration can have on the changing face of communities. He offered his rancher's point of view. "In the ranching community, collaboration has not always been a good thing to do. We tend to have our heads in the sand. Slowly but surely more and more [ranchers] are jumping on board as they see the positive projects that have come out of the Challenge. We look over the fence and see what our neighbor is doing and often it is not what you

are doing...so we grapple with these differences. But this valley has (historically) proven that working together was really the only option."

Increasing land-use conflicts

Land Lindbergh pointed out that he and others began to see in the early seventies that there were conflicts as a result of changes in the valley that were not being addressed and that were making local residents increasingly uncomfortable. He noted the increase in recreational use, influx of new people as well as local, county, and state agencies bringing in their own agendas but without communicating very well among themselves. He knew that there needed to be a forum that got people in the same room dealing with specific issues to avoid duplication or conflict dealing with those issues and, ultimately, to avoid litigation.

Natural way to manage resources

Hank Goetz, Director of the Lubrecht Forest at the University of Montana's School of Forestry and Jim Stone, Challenge chairman, feel that collaboration comes naturally. Goetz states that he had been involved in other collaborative efforts at a smaller scale and that the initiation of a group like the Blackfoot Challenge was, for him, the natural mode.

Duplicative agency efforts

Richard Clough, representative of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, speaks to the challenge of avoiding agency duplicative efforts. "In this case, my agency was bidding against another agency for a conservation easement yet it was not until late in the game that the two agencies became aware that this was going on. It was at that point that I realized that there needed to be more collaborative approaches in dealing with these issues."

Tired of working for the state

Finally Jack Thomas, acting Executive Director for the Blackfoot Challenge, offered his reason for choosing to collaborate: "For me, I had been working for the state for 14 years and had been involved in starting watershed based activities in Montana. I got tired of working for the state."

Alternatives

At the time of the Blackfoot Challenge, people in the valley were hungry for information. Many landowners had a desire to change their current practices but were at a loss as to where to get the necessary information. Except for a few people skeptical of federal government who saw the Challenge as an environmental ploy to get access to their properties, most interviewees felt that positive natural resource decisions would have been made in the valley, but that they would have been performed on an individual basis. Moreover, these efforts would not have matched what has been achieved through diverse input/advice and understanding on the part of all stakeholders involved.

Those interviewed offered a range of different thoughts about what would have likely occurred in the Blackfoot Valley without the Blackfoot Challenge. Main themes include:

- Loss of rural character
- Uncoordinated efforts
- Agency duplication

Loss of rural character

Jim Stone, rancher and Challenge Chairman, feels that the future of the ranching business would have been at stake without the Challenge and that agriculture may have had considerably less influence without the formation of the group. He states: "Although ranchers are the most impressive environmentalists, they are also the most passive. Without the Challenge we would just be out there all by ourselves trying to make a living. We would never have utilized the resources available like agency expertise. We would have also gotten into the regulatory part of agriculture, which I believe is not a part of agriculture" (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997). Indeed, while the Challenge has been a means for landowners to exchange information, it remains difficult for people involved in the agricultural business to let down their guard and ask for help. Without the Challenge, however, Jim Stone feels that many of the existing ranches would not be around in ten years. He does not think his ranch would have been.

Uncoordinated efforts

In addition to ranchers, 99% of the valley residents indicate that they want to maintain a rural lifestyle, agriculture, a timber base, and to keep industry moving while trying to make a viable living. As Hirschenberger commented, "Many people tend to forget this and get tunnel vision about what they are trying to do. Without a forum like the Challenge, this tunnel vision was looking to spiral out of control." Saving the valley, coupled with a view that agriculture was a benefit to the valley, and topped off by the fact that the challenge is a grassroots citizen initiated organization, provided the necessary recipe for resource improvements in the valley. In the words of one rancher referring directly to the benefits of conservation easements, states: "The alternatives here are subdivisions. For the agricultural way of life, they just are not very compatible. We do not have many valleys like this left" (Blackfoot Challenge video, 1997).

Agency duplication

Duplicative efforts on the part of agencies were also expressed as an inevitable outcome without the forum for information exchange that the Challenge has provided. This concern is amplified by the fact that no particular agency has primary jurisdiction over the land in the Blackfoot Valley and that each agency has bought into the process at varying levels. George Hirschenberger of the BLM highlights this dichotomy: "The USFWS has embraced the process and has a strong private land component as a result of their Partners for Wildlife Program. Managers of the BLM find it a stretch both organizationally and legally, while the Forest Service generally operates within their boundaries and often finds it difficult to see the benefits of contribution." There is also a dichotomy between state agencies. The Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, for instance, is more aggressive with the collaborative approach while the Montana Department of Natural Resources tends to follow the lead of others.

Richard Clough of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks offers another agency perspective: "We would have probably still moved ahead trying to coordinate with federal state and local governments regardless. We all had something to gain by doing that. You weren't bidding against each other, but we were all feeling budget constraints so this effort helped to avoid duplicative efforts. That was my main intent- to avoid duplicative efforts and to get things done more effectively." Another participant adds: "Without a formal organization to handle these natural resource issues, there would have been more potential for issues to blow up whereas the Challenge attempted to handle these issues on an ongoing basis before they became contentious." Indeed, people of the valley feel they have evaded a crisis situation as and a situation where others would have made decisions for them because they have pooled and coordinated their resources. In sum, Hank Goetz states: "We were not happy with just sitting back and letting nature take its course."

And George Hirschenberger of the BLM points out: "Without the forum, projects such as conservation easements, for instance, would have been helter sketler- before there was no unified agency approach."

Advice

Those interviewed offered several suggestions for others considering whether and how to initiate a collaborative process. Advice includes encouraging discipline, flexibility, and starting off slowly:

- Becky Garland speaks to need for human discipline: "Never point a finger at any member of the group, never get on the defensive, understand your individual needs and, always remember the commonality of all being human. Together as humans we all want a good quality of life. That is why we chose to be in the Blackfoot Valley. "She feels that there will always be a level of compromise but if you are compromising the very fiber of your being you have gone too far. Watershed groups should never attack the very fiber of group members. The mountain that keeps from eroding is the very fiber of the folks. Never compromise the fiber."
- Finally Jim Stone offers his suggestions for how to effectively enhance communication and trust between locals and agency representatives: "You have got to drop the baggage. If you can first drop the issue and look at the individual, it helps...They [agency representatives] are no different than you and I. They may wear funny coats...and drive nice cars but I can go to the local pub and it is just like having a beer with anyone else."
- The advice offered by Hank Goetz speaks to the benefit of building trust: "Take the time to sit down and build up trust. Find common overriding interests, then focus on what unites the group rather than what separates them. In our instance, it was the protection of the river. Then comes tolerance-having enough tolerance to let other things go by the wayside while concentrating on those things in which there is agreement. Agree to disagree on other things."

Agency Advice

Agency participants offered insights for their agency counterparts entering into collaborative processes:

- Some highlighted the importance of finding the elders or opinion leaders in the community, getting to know them, and being in tune with their priorities. According to Greg Neudecker: "Not only do the ideas have to come from people in the community, they have to come from people who are well respected in the valley. If Jim Stone thinks that it is a good idea, then it must be. Sometimes it takes a long time to figure out who are the elders in the community, but once you do, they will take the whole project and run with it."
- George Hirschenberger of the BLM advocates a certain level of respect for landowners: "Appreciate the amount of risk that landowners are taking and place emphasis on the needs of the private landowners. Agency projects and priorities come and go but the landowners are staying put. Moreover, for them, this is live or die stuff whereas for us if we make a mistake we do not, for instance, lose our ranch. There is not a solid system in place for the private landowner in making decisions for assembling resources and getting sound advice. Supporting efforts like the Challenge is, therefore, a good idea."

Ensuring Sufficient Representation

The Challenge has not been overtly criticized for lack of proper representation of participants. When the Blackfoot Challenge established itself as a formal organization, participants made every effort to include all stakeholders in the Blackfoot Valley who were potentially affected by the changes in the valley and to educate valley residents of the implications that those changes had on the community's resource base. Challenges do exist however and fall under the following two themes:

Challenges

- Getting certain parties to the table
- Reducing local confusion about the mission of the Blackfoot Challenge

Getting certain parties to the table

Blackfoot Challenge participants have found it difficult to convince representatives from Plum Creek Timber Company as well as various landowners of the virtues of coming to the table. The opportunity and open invitation to attend their meetings exists but Plum Creek and others usually decide against it. Many in the group feel that Plum Creek is merely interested in the bottomline and sees little benefit to collaboration. Moreover, while private landowners are at the table, these dedicated opinion leaders cannot be expected to represent all landowner interests. Richard Clough of Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks speaks to this challenge: "It has been difficult for people to attend meetings if they don't have an interest. It is easy to identify people. We found this with the private sector particularly. Private timber interests rarely show up. That does not help when you have a consensus process you have to have them at the table. We tried to change players when that

did occur. Personalities are key. One representative from Plum Creek never showed up and when he did everyone unloaded which was probably not productive either. By the same token he could have had a lot of input into process itself and hopefully come up with some recommendations."

Hank Goetz expresses his concern that the ranching community is not adequately represented: "It is the ranchers who are traditionally underrepresented-people in general tend not to get involved until something hits them personally. Pocketbook or access issues are examples." He also comments, however, that these ranchers who are doubtful of the process, are "few and far between."

Reducing local confusion about the mission of the Blackfoot Challenge

There is still local confusion of who the Blackfoot Challenge really is. Indeed, there are a number of groups in the Blackfoot Valley that deal with resource issues. Local residents tend to get confused about the difference between groups such as the Blackfoot Legacy, the North Powell Conservation District, the Big Blackfoot Chapter of Trout Unlimited, and the Blackfoot Challenge in terms of their mission but also what sets them apart from each other. According to Challenge co-founder Land Lindbergh, "This confusion keeps them away from participating in the Challenge." And Acting Executive Director, Jack Thomas, points out: "Some of the ranchers still do not know what the Challenge really is but the vast number of people in the valley do."

Strategies

Participants in the Blackfoot Challenge try a variety of strategies for dealing with the challenges of representation, including the following:

- Write letters
- Make information accessible
- Create an open process
- Conduct workshops
- Assign participants to communities

Write letters

In the case of Plum Creek, when a representative consistently failed to show up, the group wrote a letter asking them to come to the table, everyone signed it, and then sent it. Everyone talked to the individual personally as well and expressed their concern that Plum Creek was not actively participating in the process (Neudecker, 1999).

Make information accessible

The group has also made sure that information is readily available to anyone who cares to see or use it. That way if some participants do not attend a meeting, they are still able to learn what was discussed and decided upon and can in turn make an informed decision about what they are and are not going to support. It can be looked upon as an insurance policy.

Create an open process

Another strategy has been to keep the process open while making efforts to encourage participation of the opinion leaders or elders in the valley. Having their strong voice and endorsement of the Challenge has increased local perceptions and trust concerning the motives of government.

Conduct workshops

The Challenge has also held several workshops where they have invited groups or individuals such as the Goldmine Company and biologist and hydrologists. According to Greg Neudecker, "By holding these workshops and not taking sides, we have effectively brought in all sides and have provided to the public information about the watershed so that people can then make educated decisions. We hope that by doing this, entities such as the Goldmine Company and the timber industry will see the Challenge as what we are—a neutral entity."

Assign participants to communities

Another strategy used to empower individuals and try to increase their interest in the Challenge was to put them on committees as representatives. Jack Thomas explains, "We put those who did not want to be there on the Executive Committee. We just made a spot for them." This has been the case with Plum Creek Timber representatives who are used to having things the way they want them and are only there to watch out for the interests of Plum Creek.

Advice

Those interviewed offered several suggestions for others considering the issue of ensuring sufficient representation. Advice included being aware of time constraints, working with opinion leaders, and using enthusiasm to broaden involvement:

- Land Lindbergh advised: "Be aware that people often do not have sufficient time to attend meetings and be involved on a regular basis. There have to be ways for groups to make the community aware of the availability of services of the group in a way that might make residents respond to the issues." Jack Thomas adds: "Make extra effort those people [skeptics] to the table. Contact them and talk to them a little bit. A lot of people, for instance, talked to Plum Creek so even if they still primarily saw it [the Blackfoot Challenge] as a PR effort, they began to see advantages to being at the table."
- Hank Goetz reiterates the importance of keeping the process open: "Being open can often be cumbersome because you tend to spend time getting people up to speed and then they drop off. But while it may not be as efficient, it allows people to better understand what is going on and have a much larger stake in it. They then become part proprietors of decisions that are being made."
- Richard Clough speaks to the importance of finding opinion leaders: "Try to find someone who has good credibility within the whole group and try to touch those people, let them do the inviting and probably let them chair a meeting. We have tried to do this governmentally and we

have always managed to bring in the detractors, the constitutionalists who think that this is some kind of a plot by the UN to take over the world. It is difficult. When you have just two or three of those people at a meeting, they will do everything in their power to destroy it. If you can have their peer group buying into this process, however, they will shut them down. Government is not going to."

- George Hirschenberger emphasizes the need to capitalize on the initial enthusiasm and energy at times by highlighting the success of others: "Think it out on the front end if you can. The enthusiasm only lasts so long and then you get into conflicts. Winging it is great but it does not get to the tough questions. So at the front end you want to go look for examples and find people who have pulled together efforts already and get their insight. Find good examples of people involved in efforts similar to your own and investigate them."

Accommodating Diverse Interests

Diversity is apparent in the Blackfoot Challenge. This has been primarily attributed to the conscious efforts of the Challenge to avoid being portrayed as partisan. In the words of Hank Goetz: "By having a diverse representation of people at the table, although you may not be ensuring everyone's opinions, you are ensuring a wide range of reactions."

Perhaps the Challenge has learned from experience. Recently, for example, Powell County passed zoning proposals the information of which was not seen by many people but was passed anyway. It angered a lot of people. This frustration was attributed to both the lack of diverse representation on the part of decision-makers as well as a closed process. The Challenge averts this possibility by providing an open forum whereby the public not only has a voice but also has access to all information. (Hirschenberger, 1999).

Although the Blackfoot Challenge has worked diligently to accommodate all interests at the table, challenges still exist. These challenges fall into the following categories:

Challenges

- Obtaining sufficient leadership
- Dealing with land ownership patterns

Obtaining sufficient leadership

One challenge the group has faced is to find someone who is able to run effective meetings given the time constraints and busy lifestyles of participants. This person must be adept at encouraging people to do their homework so that when the next meeting takes place, it moves forward. Right now, for the Blackfoot Challenge, this person does not exist (Neudecker, 1999).

Dealing with land ownership patterns

Greg Neudecker also points out the preponderance of private timber holdings in the valley and the difficulty this poses for the group to affect change on these lands: "When you are a private business you are there because of the love for the watershed. When you are looking at corporate ownership, on the other hand, the bottom line is monetary sustainability. The resource and the overall watershed are not necessarily the primary goal. Money is. Moreover, while they have stayed on the Board of Directors, they are only cooperative if the Challenge goes to them with a specific issue. Every meeting we deal with some issue related to their property cuts or the selling off to subdivisions. Everyone comes to the table and says, 'let's work together.' Plum Creek, when they come, make it quite clear that they would rather be someplace else."

Strategies

Members of the Challenge adopt the following strategies for dealing with the issue of accommodating diverse interests that have together resulted in a shared vision of the Blackfoot Valley. They fall under the themes of encouraging honest discussion, respect for private landowners, and commitment to solve shared resource problems:

- Provide forums for information sharing, education, and addressing concerns
- Implement small-scale projects
- Encourage after hours interaction

Provide forums for information sharing, education, and addressing concerns

One strategy of the Challenge is to work towards being portrayed as a group that is identified in the valley as a conduit for information sharing and open dialogue rather than a group that exists as a facilitator of conflicts. This effort has given landowners a favorable impression of the group and has enhanced relations between landowners and agency representatives. Ranchers, for instance, have grown to view the motives of agency representatives as benign intent rather than that of a selfish agenda. These open forums encourage anyone in the valley to attend meetings, to get involved in projects, and to go out in the field. Hank Goetz also explains what the Challenge hopes to be conveying to the general public: "People have been able to feel that they can join and become a member while at the same time not worrying that they are going to get hammered if they do not join." Adding insight to the benefits of these forums, Richard Clough notes: "Those that want to be involved should be involved and those that really have an interest but do not really want to be involved should still have the opportunity so that they can't come back and nail you later."

Implement small-scale projects

Small-scale projects were encouraged even before the initiation of the Blackfoot Challenge. Projects include USFWS efforts through their Partners of Wildlife Program to work with landowners on enhancing habitat on private lands. For Greg Neudecker, these small-scale projects increased landowner trust in him and his agency. He stated: "When the Challenge started, people already knew who I was. To them, I was not just a USFWS representative, I was also Greg Neudecker." Another project that started off small and later grew was the noxious weed control

program. The noxious weed program has been very successful because it was tangible to valley residents.

Encourage after-hours interaction

Socializing after-hours has been a way for participants to get to know each other better. From the beginning of the Blackfoot Challenge, Trixi's Restaurant and Bar has been the local breakfast spot and social hub where participants often meet during times of the day when the Blackfoot Challenge was not discussed as the central issue (USFWS, 1999). Viewed as a neutral territory, Trixi's Restaurant and Bar has traditionally been a place where people are not looked upon as representing one point of view or another.

Advice

Those interviewed provided the following advice to best accommodate diverse interests. Suggestions and reflections emphasize that participants should be practical, engage others, and communicate in different ways:

- Hank Goetz offers the following practical advice: "Keep your eye on the ball. Look at ideas that people can truly handle. Don't get hung up on issues over which you really do not have any control."
- One helpful piece of advice George Hirschenberger provides to leadership is to: "Make sure that everybody is engaged all of the time. If you do not watch everyone, you can get into trouble. Thinking things out on the front end can help this. You must structure it so that people out there who have a strong knowledge base of a specific aspect of the watershed are tapped into."
- Other participants suggested using different communication techniques. It may not work to just post a sign in one spot announcing a meeting because some individuals may not be able to get to town to see those signs. Other options should be utilized as well such as announcements over the radio word of mouth, phone calls.
- Land Lindbergh suggests starting off with momentous projects: "Start with issues that will mean something to everyone. The case of the noxious weed control was just that example. Weed control got the Challenge into the minds and hearts of landowners because it was easy for landowners to see the critical importance of a coordinated approach in tackling this problem. Moreover, it was something in which the ranching community could relate and in which they welcomed a group approach. Focusing on weed control has now spilled over into other issues (albeit slower than the group would like). Younger ranchers have been particularly keen once they got some experience under their belt with using the Challenge to help them deal with some problems."

Dealing with Scientific Issues

Issues

The issues with scientific dimensions that fall under the Challenge's umbrella of education, outreach, communication, and preserving the rural way of life in the Blackfoot Valley include the following: elk migration, bull trout listing, water quality, streambank degradation, concentrated cattle grazing along the river, a post hole operation that was putting sawdust into the river, noxious weeds, subdivisions, and improper timber harvesting.

There have not been too many challenges with regard to the incorporation of science into the decision-making process of the Blackfoot Challenge. Agency representatives have worked diligently to build relationships with valley residents and are looked upon as friends and peers. Trust abounds. People welcome the expertise of agency representatives because they have given them guidance, provided them with information, and have been available but not overbearing. Moreover, the valley is fortunate to have many residents who are adept at natural resource management. As Greg Neudecker points out, "It is not only agency representatives who are looked to for advice. When Hank Goetz says that a certain type of forestry management is the way to go, then everyone agrees. We trust him. Agency representatives are there to point out the side-boards as to what is and is not feasible." Becky Garland highlights the fact that the Challenge's Executive Committee of is comprised of individuals, agencies, private landowners, and others and that the committee carefully chooses who they call upon to make decisions and to come up with the answers.

George Hirschenberger of the BLM captures the situation nicely: "We have some of the best folks in this part of the state to handle these issues. We have good people and have brought in some good people. We have good stream restoration people and weed control people, for instance. We have lots of science. It gets political when a scientist has the wrong answer but we have plugged a lot of science in. We start out within the ranks and have brought in technical expertise. To be frank, you take advantage of what you can get for free."

Challenges

While the Challenge has been successful in dealing with scientific issues, a couple of challenges remain. They include:

- Species listing
- Elk grazing

Species listing

Although Secretary of the Interior, Bruce Babbitt, has touted the bull trout listing as a threatened species, this listing has been an issue of great debate among valley residents who are concerned that the listing will have a negative impact on area fishing. This listing also raised the issue of verification of scientific data. Some wildlife biologists representing companies such as Plum Creek disagree with some of the data of federal and state biologists.

Elk grazing

Another challenge has to do with elk migration on private lands. It is a problem that has been going on for many years. Certainly, these herds of elk know no boundaries and have had a significant impact on spring grazing and the rancher's winter hay supply and.

Strategies

Members of the Challenge adopt the following strategies for dealing with the issue of science that together have fostered creativity and resulted in a greater understanding of the valley's ecosystem:

- Bring in experts
- Conduct land swaps
- Use agencies to set parameters

Bring in experts

The Challenge has held public meetings and brought in specialists as a way to discuss the issue of the bull trout listing as well as to answer other questions that valley residents might have. In the words of Greg Neudecker: "Whenever there is an issue that comes up...bull trout, grizzly bear reintroduction, wolf expansion, subdivisions, air quality issues, water rights, we hold public meetings...they are rarely local people...we bring in a wolf coordinator and he does the talking...we bring in an attorney to talk about water rights or a professor to talk about data. We bring in professionals and we get the word out. In the Blackfoot, people truly respect these professionals."

Land-use swap

The manner by which the Challenge dealt with the elk herd problem was through a land use swap initiated by Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks. This state agency allowed a certain number of cattle in their land in return for a certain amount of land to be grazed on by the migrating elk populations.

Using agencies to set parameters

Agencies have been pivotal in their role to set parameters. As previously mentioned, one of the biggest successes of the Challenge has been agency work with private landowners. As Land Lindbergh put it, "Agency representatives getting together with the landowners on a reach by reach site by site basis to try to cope with some landowner problems."

Advice

Those interviewed offered the following advice as how to best handle the scientific dimensions of collaborative decision-making. Suggestions and reflections included using both agency and other outside resources:

- In the words of Greg Neudecker, "Use agency expertise so that sideboards are created as to what is and is not feasible."

- George Hirschenberger adds: "It is critical to seek out professionals, whether or not they are specifically working on a watershed project or not. There are always biologists, state range conservationists or others with the expertise. The last thing you want to do is to do a project that you are eventually going to have to redo. If for some reason they can not help you to make the decisions, they have the resources to find someone else who can. Agencies also have the money."
- George Hirschenberger also suggests seeking out those with ecosystem management perspectives: "Look for the holistic guys...people who understand watershed functions such as 1.4 million acre lands. They are hard to find but they are out there. When you are looking at lands that large, it is tough to prioritize lands and other opportunities pop up which distract you. Some of the landscape ecologists are thinking of the big picture and they can probably help you with decision-making element."
- Richard Clough sees the benefit of having an outside source to provide technical expertise rather than just agency representatives: "There are a lot of federal and state people who are excellent scientists but they do not have the credibility." He also feels it important to "concentrate on the policy aspects of the issue so you can prioritize them rather than getting caught up in the technical wrangle."
- Becky Garland suggests creating a checklist and not moving forward until everything is checked off and approved by everyone. In her words, "This is a way to define the group scientifically and it adds another stamp of approval. The group sits on it until they are able to find the right choice because science is not black and white."

Accommodating Diverse Capabilities

Although a range of skills, resources, knowledge power, and influence exists at the table, diverse capabilities have rarely been a problem for the Blackfoot Challenge. One participant exclaims that this may be because the Challenge does not impose anything on anyone. They only vote for officers. They do not take positions but simply provide information and education. One rancher points out that while agency representatives may have more technical knowledge, the ranchers and landowners in general often bring to the table the more practical experience which can level out the playing field.

Challenges

Although the Blackfoot Challenge has been successful in accommodating diverse capabilities, a couple of challenges remain:

- Federal Government distrust
- Species listing

Federal Government distrust

Speaking to the issue of dominant interests, there are still those in the valley who feel that they are not able to work with federal people. While few in number, some feel strongly that “my father has done it this way and so has his father. I do not have to deal with the feds.” These same people are concerned about the amount of influence government has on natural resource management. Moreover, these same people do not differentiate between the various federal agencies. When they are slapped with a fine, for instance, they simply freak out and say “the feds are doing this to us, telling me what I have to do and that they are going to put me out of business.”

Species Listing

The species listing, in addition to being a challenge to the issue of dealing with science, is also a reminder of the differences in power. This listing, although under the jurisdiction of the USFWS, was not supported by everyone in the valley. In the words of George Hirschenberger: “When there is money, power, and ego at play there is always going to be a problem.” He adds: “That was a deal by the USFWS. It buttered their bread quite a bit.”

Strategies

Members of the Challenge adopt the following strategies for dealing with the issue of accommodating diverse capabilities that together has helped them to channel energy and to allow all voices to be heard:

- Redirect energy
- Encourage open dialogue

Redirect energy

Although the Challenge is aware that there are individuals who do not trust federal government representatives, the group chooses to not focus energy and resources on these people but to focus on those individuals who believe in the collaborative process. According to Land Lindbergh, The Challenge conveys the following message: “They are there if you want them...if not they will stay away. Pretty soon some [skeptics] say, ‘well that is working...maybe I will give it a shot.’ They are starting to realize that these things are coming down the road at them and some are asking what is the most productive way to deal with them- that they need to tell their story and that they will not be able to if they are not at the table.”

Encourage open dialogue

Participants encourage open dialogue as a way to handle the issue surrounding diverse levels of power, resources, skills, and knowledge and the influence that these varying levels can have on the process as a whole. All valley residents are encouraged to attend meetings and the greatest of effort is made to listen to everyone who attends whether it is a small landowner or a Federal agency representative.

Advice

Participants offered the following advice as to best accommodate diverse capabilities. Suggestions and reflections include encouraging an open process, listening, seeking out leadership, and to not underestimate the power personalities have on the process:

- Hank Goetz encourages getting everyone at the table, keeping them engaged, and keeping the process open. He points out: "You will see people with absolutely no resources at the table who are trying to dominate." He also stresses the importance of making sure that people involved in the process are independent and confident enough to voice their concerns while at the same time respecting the concerns of others. He was also unable to stress enough the importance of commitment.
- Make certain that you have a paid executive director or coordinator who knows how to use the Board of Directors and vice-versa. This Executive Director must also be able to adequately assess the priorities and limitations of all stakeholders involved in the group and, as Becky Garland points out, "be someone who is able to deal with the tough people. Put that person on them like a fly to poop until he/she understands."
- Becky Garland also suggests the following: "Sit, listen and listen good. Keep an open mind."
- Finally in the words of one participant: "Accept the reality that a great deal depends on the individual personalities of the group and agencies in particular. In the instance of the Challenge for example, there is a new ranger at Seeley Lake who is totally committed to collaborative efforts. BLM manager, Darryl Sall, who recently passed away, is another example of a committed individual. He was instrumental in getting the Challenge started by obtaining money from the BLM to provide for initial items. This happens to work in favor of the Challenge. In other parts of the state, however these type of people have not stepped forward, making it difficult to apply some of the successes of the Challenge to other groups."

Insights specific to this case

There are additional issues that the Blackfoot Challenge has had to try to overcome. They include the following:

Non-point source pollution

A new challenge is to the group is the issue of non-point source pollution. Hank Goetz explains: "What we are trying to do is tell the state that we are coping with situation to avoid confrontation and litigation. Legislation passes that says we are not going to have any more pollution in these waters--well that takes them years to designate what reaches of the streams have a problem and years more to identify where exactly here problems are. We are trying to start dealing with those

early on-the most polluted worst of specific sites and to try to get compliance by cooperation not enforcement."

Funding/Leadership

The Challenge has been struggling in the past few years with not having the finances for a full time director but only a part-time director. The Challenge has had some good people but because they were only part-time, they eventually moved on to other things. As Jim Stone commented: "We desperately need a full-time director to take on the role that now 2-3 landowners and 2-3 agency people are trying to scrap around and find enough time and energy to keep it going. That is the real weakness. We really need ideally a fund to draw on to pay for administrative costs. That is something for which we need to raise money. We need a director to go out there and raise administrative money. Right now we barely have enough money to keep a part-time director going. Money now is coming form the agencies but we really need to tap into the citizens. We have had people move into this valley that are quite wealthy and we have to some how open there eyes to the potential here that this group has to keep this valley the way that it has been which is what brought them here in the first place. Trying to coordinate absentee landowners with those who have been living in the valley for four or five generations is difficult. This is an essential/potential role for us of which the Challenge has not had a chance to take advantage."

Disproportionate amount of time spent on certain projects

The Challenge has been a little too dependent on the weed control for agency support because that is something that landowners can really relate to. This intense focus is perhaps to the detriment of perhaps developing other resources. In the words of Land Lindbergh, "We are sort of in a problem now. Our success perhaps has not gone to our heads, but it has maybe thinned our resources both dollars and manpower to the point that we are in to a new stage of how much should we doing we do, how much funding do we have, where do we go from here."

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