

CHAPTER 3: CRITIQUES OF COLLABORATION

Although many individuals, organizations and agencies involved in the natural resource management field support increased public participation, the ascent of community-based collaborative partnerships raises important questions about the appropriate roles of citizens, agencies, industries and interest groups in environmental decision-making. Controversy over the widespread growth of local partnerships has sparked a national debate amongst supporters and critics of these processes. Regional periodicals like The Chronicle of Community and High Country News are forums for diverse perspectives on the issues at stake. Articles in The New York Times and The Washington Post have brought national attention to community-based collaboration, while the Internet facilitates the rapid exchange of opinions.

The spotlight on the Quincy Library Group (QLG) legislation, the Forest Health and Economic Recovery Act (S 1028), has polarized the debate over the legitimacy of collaborative processes, and much of the dialogue centers on this high-profile example. However, participants and observers also offer substantial critiques of the prevalence of collaboration in environmental decision-making and of the functioning of specific groups. In the words of Brett KenCairn of the Applegate Partnership, “In the rush to edify or demonize nascent experiments at civility, I think we are in danger of over-simplifying the real challenges that any sincere commitment to neighborliness implies” (KenCairn, 1997).

Supportive Perspectives

Support for collaborative partnerships stems in part from a growing national interest in environmental conflict resolution. Clinton Administration acclaim for “win-win” solutions has resulted in wide scale efforts to resolve regional conflicts through collaborative solutions. Option 9 of the President’s forest plan for the northwest calls for “Adaptive Management Areas” which would involve groups like the Applegate Partnership in developing creative management solutions (KenCairn, 1997). State agencies like the Montana Consensus Council also promote the involvement of stakeholders in collaborative decision-making. Montana governor Marc Racicot states “We have cast our fate with these people, leaving it to them to guide the process. If they work together, they will surely lead the issues in the right direction” (Katzeff, 1998).

Ray Rasker of the Sonoran Institute points out that collaboration does not mean consensus (Rasker, 1998). Although success is more likely with a broad alliance behind you, it does not necessarily imply 100 % consensus. A partnership should not necessarily be about compromising one's objectives; it should be about working towards a set of shared values (Rasker, 1998).

Even the harshest critics of collaboration agree that it is an appropriate strategy for management of private lands (Britell, 1997; Blumberg, 1998). This may explain why some kinds of collaborative efforts are widely accepted. For example, The Nature Conservancy uses partnerships with local landowners as its primary conservation strategy. Likewise, there

are more than 4400 watershed-based groups in national on-line directories (EPA Surf Your Watershed, 1998), and both government agencies and private organizations support the watershed framework for natural resource management. Although not all watershed initiatives are collaborative (indeed many local councils are instead moderate environmental organizations), among collaborative partnerships, the watershed approach is widespread. Criticism of collaboration largely limits itself to the western states, where public land issues intertwine with management of private lands.

Innovative Solutions

Many believe collaboration produces more creative and adaptive solutions to complex natural resource management problems (Wondolleck, 1996; Yaffee, 1998). Even for public land management, involving stakeholders can produce innovative approaches to public lands management (Brick, 1998). Advocates of collaboration contend that ecosystem issues are local by definition and cannot be resolved with top-down solutions from federal agencies in Washington (Sadler, 1994; Dewitt, 1994). Top down management follows routine strategies and may not consider the range of possible solutions.

In contrast, cooperation between stakeholders can “overcome the inherent fragmentation in our society between multiple agencies, levels of government, public and private sectors, diverse interest groups, and different disciplines and value structures (Yaffee, 1998). Inkpen suggests that decision-making can be improved by the new knowledge created within a collaborative initiative (Inkpen in Yaffee et al, 1995). With more issues and perspectives on the table, groups can combine management strategies in new ways or imagine new ways to solve problems. Brick avows that “Experimentation on the periphery” is a prime way to promote flexibility and creativity (Brick, 1998).

Problem Solving and Effective Results

Dewitt labels this new model of governance “civic environmentalism” (Dewitt, 1994). He emphasizes that new kinds of environmental challenges, such as nonpoint pollution, pollution prevention, and ecosystem management can only be addressed through collaboration among the various actors (Dewitt, 1994). In these cases, he asserts, federal regulation is neither as effective nor sufficient to solve the problems (Dewitt, 1994). Even elected officials and agency representatives have become aware that without the backing of local communities, decisions made will not be as potent or taken as seriously as those that have included citizens’ input throughout the process (Thomas, 1998).

Proponents of collaborative partnerships claim that they produce the most effective results in the long term (Propst, 1997). They maintain that involving stakeholders in planning, implementation and monitoring of management projects encourages ownership by all participants, which in turn facilitates implementation. Supporters insist that the traditional top-down decision-making processes, on the other hand, have never worked (Erickson, 1998). Decision-making that doesn’t include stakeholder concerns is seen as leading to stalemate and frustration, common catalysts for collaborative alternatives (Van de Wetering, 1998; Yaffee et al, 1997).

It is argued that incremental successes, implemented step by step through a collaborative process, are often more permanent (France, 1998). Although partnerships should not be expected to solve all problems or radically change public lands management, they may contribute substantially to implementable solutions (Brick, 1998). According to Selin and Chavez (1995 in Yaffee et al, 1997) “collaborative designs can be a powerful tool for resolving conflict and advancing a shared vision of how a resource should be managed”. Collaboration can provide a gauge of what is politically possible to achieve (Brick, 1998).

Supporters testify that collaboration encourages participants to focus on their personal role in the management of a resource and the search for solutions, rather than pointing fingers (Yaffee et al, 1997; Erickson, 1998). For example, ranchers in the Blackfoot Challenge in central Montana have taken the responsibility to rectify the impacts their land management practices have had on watershed health. Their leadership serves as a model for others in the community and has resulted in substantial on the ground improvements (Erickson, 1998). Since private forest landowners own 73% of the nation’s forest (358 million acres), the quality of private land management can have a significant impact on the nation’s natural resources (Zeller, 1997). Zeller contends that this pattern of land ownership is yet another reason to promote collaborative initiatives that involve both private and public land owners in natural resource management decision-making (Zeller, 1997).

Community Sustainability

Collaborative processes can build trust between parties, a necessary condition for problem-solving to occur (Gieben, 1995). The benefits for communities and ecosystems are mutual, according to many participants. Collaboration helps communities relearn lessons of “tolerance, commitment, persistence and inclusiveness” (KenCairn, 1998). Partnership participants claim that one of the most important benefits of the process was connecting people within a community (APPLEGATE VIDEO). Supporters allege that until people talk to each other, neither understanding nor problem solving can occur; personal relationships and dialogue are vital. New relationships can “defuse future conflicts and promote future bridging (Yaffee et al, 1997). Yaffee and Wondolleck (1995) have dubbed these information and relationship networks “knowledge pools and relationships”, both essential elements of collaborative initiatives. Solomon asserts that “If you have not established yourself with someone, you have lost the opportunity to influence him” (Solomon, 1996). Broader influence can remove the barriers to stewardship (KenCairn, 1998). Not only might ecological restoration and sound management protect the “ecological capital” of rural communities, but according to one participant, “community success and pride will protect more habitat than any law we could write” (Michael Jackson quoted in Hamilton, 1993).

Many believe that sustainability goes hand in hand with collaboration. Neither the traditional environmental movement (Brick, 1998) nor federal land management agencies (Zeller, 1997) are organized to address the concerns of rural communities, where economic welfare and the health of the environment are highly interconnected. According to supporters, partnerships can demonstrate that environmental preservation does not have to conflict with jobs in rural communities (Brick, 1998).

Expanding the Tool Box

According to most proponents, collaboration can and should happen within a strong framework of national laws. They are convinced that collaboration does not negate the need for strong national policy and environmental laws; it is a way to implement solutions. . A challenge to partnerships is to explain how their work can be integrated into national policy (Brick, 1998). According to Tom France of the National Wildlife Federation's Northern Rockies Natural Resource Center, a participant in the process that developed a Citizen Management Plan for the reintroduction of Grizzly Bears into the Selway-Bitterroot, the question was never whether to comply with the Endangered Species Act, but how (France, 1998). Environmentalists who support collaborative efforts agree that it is important to have a big toolbox. Participating in a collaborative group does not mean abandoning other strategies. Lobbying and litigation remain powerful tools to uphold national environmental standards in situations where a local initiative threatens to circumvent the law (France, 1998; Brick, 1998; Rasker, 1998).

Critical Perspectives

Collaborative partnerships are also harshly criticized. Many national environmental groups have refused to participate in several high profile partnerships, while others raise important questions that have gone unanswered (McCloskey, 1996). Concerns range from condemnation of alternative dispute resolution as a tactic to delegitimize conflict and co-opt environmental advocates (Britell 1997, Modavi 1996), to uncertainty over local control of national resources and the scientific soundness of negotiated agreements. Legislative support for the proposals of at least two groups (located in Quincy and Tuolumne County, California) have heightened fears that local efforts will pre-empt national interests, bypassing environmental safeguards and the opportunity for non-participant's review and comment along the way (Duane, 1997; Cockburn, 1993; Blumberg, 1998).

At the heart of the matter is the precedent set by administrative and popular support for a process that has wide variation and no accepted standards for structure, functioning, or evaluation of outcomes (Huber, 1997). Simply put, these processes raise many questions for organizations that have been long active in normal governmental processes and who are uncertain about their role and capacity in this alternative forum. Concerns have been heightened by the passage of the Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery and Economic Stability Act of 1997 (July) in the House by a vote of 429-1 (U.S. House of Representatives, Herger 1997).

Co-optation

One of the most common criticisms of collaborative initiatives is that they result in the co-optation of environmental interests. Because of power imbalances and a lack of formal negotiation training, it is argued that environmental representatives cannot adequately defend their interests when faced with industry representatives (Britell, 1997; Moldavi, 1996; Coggins, 1998). Financially vested representation might skew the debate and thus the

outcomes of a collaborative process. In fact, critics claim, government and industry use the term collaboration as a euphemism for a sell-out of environmental goals (Cockburn, 1993).

Local Control Compromises Federal Laws

Critics are especially concerned about local ad-hoc groups working collaboratively on issues dealing with Federal lands. While much of the debate centers specifically on the QLG, concerns about the legitimacy of local control over national resources permeate the literature. Legally, local interests have no more right to comment on, much less decide the fate of federal lands, merely because they happen to live in proximity (Blumberg, 1998). Federal environmental legislation ensures the systematic management of national resources according to baseline standards. It is believed that local collaborative partnerships can dilute those standards and threaten hard won national laws like NEPA and NFMA (Blumberg, 1998). Some critics even claim that the USFS wants to replace NEPA with collaboration (Holmer and Davitt, 1998). Relying on local collaboration to devise solutions to natural resource management problems is said to be an “abdication of legal responsibilities” (Coggins, 1998). If everyone collaborates and reaches a compromise, strong national environmental goals will be harder to achieve (Coggins, 1998; Wuerthner, 1998).

Lowest Common Denominator Solutions

Critics assert that collaborative groups can not produce the best decisions for environmental protection, because only lowest common denominator solutions survive (McCloskey, 1996). They argue that there is no win-win solution, but rather a distribution of the losses (Coggins, 1998). Groups might not work with the full range of options on the table, because not all voices are represented. Without adequate representation of environmental concerns, groups may not question other impacts or future consequences of decisions. Wuerthner (1998) calls partnerships “patch-up, fix-up, half-way” solutions. A common assumption is that recommendations and decisions of citizen-dominated partnerships are not science-based implementation of national laws (McCloskey, 1996; Letter to Committee of Scientists, 1998).

Complacency

Since most people do not like conflict, they buy into the idea of collaborative partnerships. If people are convinced that compromise achieved through collaboration produces the best solutions, it may reduce the incentive to look for other alternatives. There may be more politically difficult solutions that are better for the environment that are not considered. Collaborative groups provide a safe alternative to crisis by holding off an inevitable crash (Wuerthner, 1998). For example, according to environmental activist George Wuerthner, the Northern Forest Council in Maine maintains the logging industry’s image of a sustainable working forest and thus the public’s confidence in a workable solution, even though the economy is failing and companies are not reinvesting in mills. Compromise can avoid the search for long-term solutions (Wuerthner, 1998). It may also inhibit the mobilization of voices of opposition (Moldavi, 1997). In the west, critics are convinced that collaborative groups serve to protect the status quo from modern reality and prolong unjustifiable subsidies and preferences (Coggins, 1998; Wuerthner, 1998).

Representation

Another issue is that of adequate representation of legitimate stakeholders, particularly those who represent national environmental concerns. The vast landscape of the west often makes it impossible for an environmental organization with an interest in an entire region to participate in every collaborative effort that appears. Indeed, collaborative efforts are very time-consuming processes, and local citizens complain that they are disadvantaged in their capacity to maintain a high level of participation. In addition, some communities simply are not particularly diverse in their perspectives. Smaller community groups may represent a cross section of the community, yet represent a tiny percentage of nationwide views. These local groups are generally applauded for their initiative as long as their decisions affect only private not public land.

Some groups like the Willapa Bay intentionally exclude environmentalists to avoid divisive opinions (Colorado Natural Resources Law Center, 1996). Although most partnerships claim to have diverse representation, critics disagree. Dissenting views may not be invited to participate in closed processes. The environmental representatives are usually more “moderate” (Wuerthner, 1996) or “tractable and malleable” (Britell, 1997) or they may have other financial interests. If a minority environmental voice is present, they may fear being outvoted or pressured to go along with the majority opinion, especially when that majority is more powerful.

Irreconcilable Values

For collaboration to work, participants have to be able to define a common end goal. Therefore, many issues are not susceptible to unanimous agreement. Often, values differ irreconcilably (Coggins, 1998; Wuerthner, 1998) and it is impossible to get past philosophical differences. Critics claim that partnerships tend to self-select for “like” perspectives (Sommarstrom, 1998), since stakeholders with more radical viewpoints may be unwilling to redefine their ultimate goals in the context of a common group goal. Critics also feel that if groups choose only “likes,” they fall short of what defines a collaborative group (Sommarstrom, 1998). Even supporters of collaboration admit that it may be inappropriate or not feasible for some volatile environmental issues like endangered species listings or wilderness area designation where the outcome must be all or nothing (Van de Wetering, 1998).

Precedent

Collaborative efforts are being held up as paradigms: solutions that can be applied to the whole landscape. However, a particular process may be successful because of a unique set of circumstances. Success is proclaimed under limited qualifications (Wuerthner, 1998). For example, the Applegate Partnership had the advantage of strong local environmental organizations with resources and well-qualified professionals (Britell, 1997). Success should not be extrapolated to call for national policy mandates for collaboration because of a few

poster children. Scale is also important: something that works on a small scale will not necessarily work if expanded to a larger arena.

Authority

The question of authority is also raised. Partnership agreements are believed to be inherently unenforceable (Coggins, 1998). Environmentalist representatives are unable to commit the public or the environmental community to a course of action (Britell, 1997). The interest groups that they represent may not have the internal cohesion necessary for a particular member to be able to represent the organization's viewpoint in a collaborative process (Yaffee et al, 1997).

Conclusion

This review of the supportive and critical perspectives on collaborative initiatives raises several key questions for our research team. Can partnerships be described globally or even compared to one another fairly? What characteristics do partnerships have that might differentiate them? How can we describe the range and variation of collaborative partnerships to truly understand what collaborative resource management looks like?

The following section, Chapter 4 - *Mapping the Terrain*, attempts to answer some of those questions, painting a broad picture of the collaborative landscape. Our intention is to provide a more comprehensive perspective on the varied forms and characteristics of collaboration than that currently portrayed in the literature.

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