

CHAPTER 21: CONCLUSIONS

Many lessons can be gleaned from undertaking a research project of this magnitude. Not the least of which is that "one should not bite off more than they can chew."

Withstanding this advice, our team's concept of collaborative activity in the U.S. grew tremendously through the development of our data---from a limited view of collaboration that included some of the well-documented frameworks of resource management, such as ecosystem management, to one involving a broader and more complex array of activity.

As evidenced in our early chapters, proliferating governmental, organizational and adhoc efforts to incorporate collaboration into decision making provide ample proof that the role of public participation in natural resource management decisions is both dynamic and accelerating. Furthermore, we found that bringing together and managing stakeholder interaction and decision-making is a reality of collaboration that raises issues of adequate representation, co-optation and compromised solutions. On the other hand, we also discovered that most participants are working hard to remedy the shortcomings of their processes, though a long term perspective is required to have any reliable measure of progress.

As Charter member of the McKenzie Watershed Council George Grier explains: "You need to have an incredibly long-term view of things if you're going to gauge success by collaborative processes. This is kind of like the analogy of filling the pipe line: You know you don't get anything out the other end until the pipeline's completely full, and in this case filling the pipeline takes a really long time because it's relationship building, and it's building a knowledge base, and it's networking, and there's a lot of complicated stuff that goes on that has to do with human dynamics and has absolutely nothing to do with natural resources. So if you judge how well you're doing by looking at projects completed it's going to be tough to evaluate a collaborative process as being a functional one in a short period of time. The test really will be to see what it looks like in 10 years after the relationships have been maintained. There's a lot of symbiosis that goes on and you got to give that time to get itself established."

With this perspective in mind, we offer four concepts a reader can take away from this document when attempting to grasp the landscape of collaboration:

- **First, collaborative partnerships are immensely variable.**

Development of our partnership database unequivocally showed an immense variation in the many forms collaboration is taking across the country. Moreover, the sheer numbers of groups arising, in addition to their multiple decision-making processes and organizational structures, make it impossible to neatly fit groups into divisible boxes. As such, drafting prescriptive advice that applies to all seems absurd and not useful.

- **Second, collaborative activity is, by definition, immensely challenging.**

We learned, not surprisingly, that collaborative efforts are difficult to manage with respect to complex human interaction as well as their multiple social, political and economic factors. While many partnerships encounter the common concerns voiced by critics, such as ensuring representation of stakeholders, equally as many recognize, address, and resolve those issues through innovative strategies. While we did not set out to explicitly shine the spotlight on successful examples of collaboration, we did in fact find a convincing number of cases in which collaborative processes surpassed their objectives, resulting in improved management of the resource at stake (see Chapter 16 - Outcomes).

- **Third, collaborative processes are rarely insular.**

We also discovered that partnerships, in contrast to popular belief, work symbiotically with their communities to improve decision making and use of resources. This is due primarily to their interactive nature. Though some are bound by limiting factors such as political membership (such as resource advisory councils), we encountered overwhelming evidence that these same groups consistently reach out to a wider community in search of the expertise and knowledge needed to improve their decisions.

- **Finally, we must recognize that collaborative partnerships are dynamic and evolving processes.**

Contrary to perceptions in the literature that view collaboration as a static process, numerous cases exhibited that groups are, by in large, constantly changing and adapting to nature of their problems, participants and community resources.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although time constraints necessarily limited the scope of our research, findings raised other questions worth examining. The most important of these is the need for a quantitative study that illuminates the issues brought out by our qualitative work and that would involve more cases. We do advise, however, that any effort of this nature clearly recognize the inherent variation between groups and the methodological difficulties this would entail.

Second, it is important to keep in mind that the case studies we developed represent only a snapshot view of collaborative activity on the ground. Given the dynamic nature of collaboration, it would be interesting to follow groups over the course of many years to understand in more detail how they evolve.

Finally, though the scope of this research is not intended to provide specific policy recommendations, we believe our review of collaborative activity serves as a definitive signal that collaboration is indeed gaining momentum in growth and complexity, and shows no signs of ebbing. If the government is truly interested in supporting collaborative resource management, both state and federal agencies will have to revisit current policies and operating procedures. In this regard, we sincerely hope this document aids policy

makers, participants and observers alike in grasping better understanding of the ways that the landscape of collaboration movement appears today.