

CHAPTER 21: CONCLUSIONS

Collaborative partnerships convening to address natural resource issues are growing at a dramatic rate across the nation. While these groups are more widespread in some regions of the U.S. than in others, all regions play host to this new form of natural resource decision-making that boasts increased citizen participation. Increasingly, these groups are influencing traditional top-down natural resource decision-making structures. Yet there is still widespread confusion about what collaborative partnerships are and how they work.

This project offers the insights of a thorough exploration of the landscape of natural resource collaborative initiatives across the United States. From a birds-eye view we began to recognize patterns amidst the seemingly endless range and variation. When we looked closer, focusing on the experiences of real people, we began to understand the kinds of challenges that groups face on the ground, and how they deal with issues of concern to the larger communities of interest.

Based on this research we made four significant findings about collaborative groups that we hope will help clarify present confusion. Collaborative partnerships:

- ◆ Vary substantially with regards to origins, issues addressed, organizational structure, process and outcomes
- ◆ Recognize and confront inherent challenges in unique ways
- ◆ Reach out to the broader community in search of greater participation, expertise and knowledge
- ◆ Adapt and evolve in response to changing issues and the needs of both the resource and the community

The Variable Landscape

In developing a partnership database of more than 400 examples of collaborative natural resource management, our research unequivocally showed immense variation in the many forms collaboration is taking across the country. Partnerships vary in terms of their origins, the issues they address, their organizational structure, process, and outcomes. Some are entirely new creations, springing up out of conflict, community need, or the vision of a single leader. Others are subtle transmutations in traditional processes. There are numerous groups that lie somewhere on the continuum from traditional public participation processes to this “new” phenomenon we call collaborative resource management.

Partnerships do share common characteristics: they bring together diverse stakeholders to develop a shared vision for the management of natural resources. However, individual groups are extremely variable. Previous studies have attempted to describe the landscape of collaborative partnerships through the development of case studies that fit into categories like ecosystem management or watershed councils. While these “boxes” may be useful as a way to define pieces of the landscape, they do not capture the range of collaborative activity across the country. Both the number of groups arising and their rate of change make it impossible, therefore, to fit groups into neatly

divisible boxes. Indeed, by stereotyping these groups, we run the risk of either misrepresenting a group's intent or overlooking important and unique characteristics that set them apart from other groups.

For instance, although both Bureau of Land Management (BLM) Resource Advisory Councils (RACs) and Coordinated Resource Management Planning (CRMP) groups are formally linked to the BLM, they vary considerably in terms of their origins and structure. RACs, which are linked to the BLM as a mandatory part of the agency's decision-making concerning the management of western rangeland, use a formalized process for appointing members and making advisory decisions. On the other end of the spectrum, however, are ad-hoc community based partnerships like the Three-Quarter Circle Ranch Coordinated Resource Management Planning Group. The Three-Quarter Circle Ranch CRM was initiated by a lone rancher with a vision for including diverse perspectives to improve management of a large public-private tract of land in Wyoming. Membership is loose, and meetings happen as needed.

Even within a seemingly simple category like the Resource Advisory Councils, each of the 24 RACs has characteristics that set it apart from the others. These differences are a result of the types of issues addressed, community history, or simply the personalities involved. Personalities, in fact, often play a defining role in the direction, vision, and decision-making of collaborative initiatives. Because the people involved are never exactly the same, even the eighty-five watershed councils in Oregon, all modeled after the same set of state standards, cannot be lumped into a single category.

Nor can collaborative partnerships be defined as something completely new. There is a continuum from traditional public participation processes to processes where citizens are actively involved in working together and with agency representatives to jointly make decisions. For non-agency participants, involvement in a collaborative partnership is often a deviation from more typical advocacy actions such as attending public hearings, lobbying, appealing agency decisions and even litigation. For agency participants, collaborative partnerships are a new input channel to assist with resource management and coordination with other stakeholders.

The Challenging Nature of Collaboration

Collaborative initiatives, not surprisingly, are challenging processes. Partnerships use innovative strategies to solve natural resource issues -- strategies that are currently being tested in the field. The publicity surrounding select collaborative groups like the Quincy Library Group, Malpai Borderlands Group, or Henry's Fork Watershed Council sparked many well thought out critiques of the use of collaborative partnerships to manage natural resource issues. In exploring those critiques we better understood the questions being asked of partnerships, policy-makers, and the environmental community. Do partnerships adequately represent all stakeholders? How do partnerships manage decision-making, given the diversity of knowledge, skills and influence at the table? What role do collaborative groups play with regard to government agencies and national laws to protect the environment? Do they usurp legitimate decision-making authorities and give control of national resources to local communities?

These concerns elicit valid and vital questions. Although we did not set out to respond to those concerns on a landscape level, we did look closely at the experiences of groups in confronting these inevitable challenges. In examining the principal critiques of collaboration as challenges that groups might face, we explored to what extent and in what manner partnerships dealt with issues like representation, accommodating diverse interests and capabilities, and scientific soundness. We found that participants in the ten in-depth case studies dealt with all of these challenges to varying degrees. They recognized and struggled to address both internal and external concerns to insure the success of their endeavors.

Partnerships by definition bring together people with diverse perspectives, each of them with different backgrounds, education, experiences, and levels of influence in the community. Groups strive to bring the right people to the table and once there, to accommodate their diverse interests and capabilities. This is no small task. Groups were aware of these challenges and constantly evaluated levels of participation and process structures used to provide opportunities for all stakeholders to have a voice. None are perfect, nor do they profess to be perfect. Rather, they are involved in a constant effort to assess themselves and adapt.

The challenge of dealing with science depended largely on the group's location and access to technical expertise and resources. Groups with heavy participation of agency personal and technical experts felt the main challenge was keeping everyone on the same page and balancing discussions so that everyone could understand. Groups without many technical experts used resources outside the community. Few groups were so isolated that accessing necessary scientific resources was a challenge. Dealing with the scientific aspects of natural resource management is an inherently challenging task, given high levels of uncertainty and incomplete information. In this respect the challenges facing collaborative groups are no more than for a single natural resource management agency. In fact, in most cases the partnership was able to coordinate information and data that would not have otherwise been used to inform agency decisions.

The question that must constantly be asked is "as compared to what?" Many of the community based efforts we examined did not replace a former government structure, but rather filled a role that had been previously empty, or in some cases, not even recognized as a possible role. In no case had a collaborative group usurped the authority of the agency responsible for managing the natural resource at stake. In most cases the group served as a coordinating, information, sharing advisory body that supported agency goals by augmenting community buy-in and in some cases garnering extra funds to support projects.

Collaborative partnerships are a fairly recent phenomenon in the field of natural resource management. As such they are caught in the throes of self-definition. They struggle to define participants, appropriate limits and the interface between communities, agencies and the resources that ultimately are in the hands of both.

Links to the Broader Community

Collaborative groups have been criticized as elitist organizations that through careful selection of group members, fail to reflect the wider community's views, needs and priorities. We found, however, that these partnerships, due primarily to their interactive nature, work symbiotically with their communities to improve decision-making and the use of natural resources. Although some groups are bound by limiting factors such as political membership (Resource Advisory Councils are one such example) there is overwhelming evidence that these same groups reach out to the wider community in search of the expertise and knowledge needed to improve their decisions. In fact, we found these groups actively strive to be as diverse as possible. Participants know when particular interests are not adequately represented, and they are aware of the potential consequences of their absence.

In the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, for example, (See chapter 10) Executive Director, Lisa Jo Frech works diligently to recruit new members because she feels their perspectives are invaluable yet missing at the table. All Nanticoke Watershed Alliance members interviewed feel there could be greater involvement from the poultry and farming sectors. But Frech is also concerned that the Native American perspective is absent and that key knowledge and expertise is lacking. She adds: "I do know that without their participation, our view of the watershed and its needs, issues, and resources, are not a total vision." In the case of the Blackfoot Challenge in South Central Montana members do not see eye to eye with the regional timber company. However, they take great pains to try to bring them into the collaborative process. Plum Creek Timber is the largest private landowner in the Blackfoot Valley and without their involvement and expertise, the Blackfoot Challenge, similar to the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance, is concerned by an incomplete vision.

These cases are representative of the efforts many collaborative groups are making to develop and to sustain community involvement. Collaborative groups, after all, often arise because of the need for a local citizen voice. Collaborative groups are also aware that without encompassing involvement from the community at large (including national communities of interest) they will not withstand the test of time. Long-term community commitment is necessary to insure that current efforts eventually bear fruit. Because many collaborative groups work toward long term goals, conduct regular open meetings, workshops and field trips, there is ample opportunity to draw in the wider community.

The roles of state and federal agency representatives also help collaborative groups to avoid insularity. Collaborative initiatives surpass rather than circumvent the fulfillment of existing requirements under National Environmental Protection Act. Of the groups we analyzed with agency involvement, agency representatives were dedicated to these partnerships and felt collaboration "to be the future of natural resource management" (Neudecker, 1999). Agency representatives like U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist Greg Neudecker, welcome the communities' expertise and realize that residents in these communities often possess a knowledge base that complements that of agency expertise. In Silverton, Colorado, Greg Parsons of the Colorado Water Quality Control Board was astounded by the amount of local expertise on biological and chemical components of

water quality as a result of historic mining practices. The expertise from the mining community has been fundamental to the success of the Animas River Stakeholder Group.

Maintaining an open-door policy was another common and instrumental strategy that facilitated greater involvement. The words of environmental representative, Felice Pace of the Scott River Coordinated Resource Management plan (See chapter 17) are shared by an overwhelming majority of participants with whom we spoke: "You just have to muddle through [the representation issue]. You can never guarantee it will be perfect. I only suggest that the bottom line be that the door be left open for democracy to function. And that should be both ways --- if someone wants to walk out, they should be allowed to do so as well."

It would be incorrect to say that all collaborative groups succeed in effectively tapping into the community at large. For many, it may take years before enough trust is developed for community members to willingly share their knowledge and expertise. Indeed the Nanticoke Watershed Alliance still struggles to overcome its image as an elitist environmental organization. For that reason, it has been a challenge to get key players involved and some influential participants have left partially because they feel the group has lost its identity. Overall, however, groups take significant strides to reach out to the wider community in search of expertise so as to make more knowledgeable decisions about the natural resources at hand.

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 the nature of their problems, participants, and community resources. Similar to the notion that no two partnerships are alike, no two partnerships adapt to these changes in a similar manner. Nothing is set in stone. Whether it be the introduction of new people to the group, change in partnership size, or a decrease or increase in member involvement, the partnership adapts accordingly. The Nanticoke Watershed Alliance (see Chapter 10) for instance, functions very differently today than at the time of its inception a few years ago primarily because new members have joined, other members have left, and the priorities of both the general membership and the Board of Directors has changed.

Adapting to change does not come easily. Evolution takes time and a great number of these groups, because so many are relatively new, clearly have not had time to become established organizations. Indeed, if they have evolved, it may be in the form of incremental steps. Nonetheless, new partnerships are not created in a vacuum. They benefit and learn from the experience of other groups, and often model their processes and organizational structures after older more established groups.

It was the overwhelming consensus of all participants with whom we spoke, that to succeed, their partnerships must listen to their participants and the community at large. Keeping the process open ensures that all concerns are being addressed and that the group's priorities fall in line with not only the existing regulations, but with the needs and priorities of the wider community.

Recommendations for Further Research

Although time constraints necessarily limited the scope of our research, our 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. To look at a collaborative partnership at a particular moment in time without the benefit of historical perspective is to see it as a single still shot. In reality, one must follow a partnership through numerous stages of growth and change in order to develop a context for understanding these initiatives.

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."

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 state and federal agencies are truly interested in supporting collaborative resource management, they 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 attaining a better understanding of the landscape of collaborative resource management.