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Putting Theory into Practice Plenary

"The People's Forest" -- Using Participatory Approaches to Create Strong Networks for the Stewardship of the National Forests

Abstract

In December of 1997, the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture named an interdisciplinary Committee of Scientists to advise the Forest Service on the revision of their regulations for planning and resource management under the National Forest Management Act of 1976. Efforts in the last decade to revise these regulations languished because they were only incremental adjustments to an outdated and failed model of rational planning. At our first meeting, the Undersecretary for Resources and the Chief of the Forest Service both instructed the Committee to not look at the current and proposed regulations, but rather draw upon the ideas of today to develop a new, invigorating framework for National Forest planning. In their minds, this new framework should embrace concepts like collaboration and partnerships, should be built on a foundation of sustainability of the ecological resources of the land, and should center around a participatory approach in the establishment of strong networks for stewardship. Over the last several months the Committee as met around the US and has heard from many people inside and outside of the Forest Service and from other federal and state agencies, local government officials and tribal representatives.

The Committee has just completed its draft report which provides this new framework. Importantly, this new framework is built from the current ideas and innovative practices found on National Forests as well as on other public and private lands. The primary elements of this framework are presented in this session. Key principles include:

- setting sustainability of ecological, social and cultural systems as the primary purpose of the National Forests and Rangelands;
- linking to the global efforts to develop intersectoral and collaborative policy frameworks for sustainable resource use and management;
- embracing a participatory approach for policy formation and problem solving at all scales;

- linking strategic plans for large landscapes to small scale implementation plans;
- reinforcing the integrative role of the "national forest plan" as a bridge between multiple resource management strategies and the actions needed to implement them;
- creating external review processes for all levels of planning and management;
- perhaps most important, building the capacity of agencies, governments, organizations and communities to work together as stewards of the public lands.

The Committee drew upon current ideas, policy processes and research in our work. In particular, we have incorporated new language and concepts of sustainability as a way of modernizing and revitalizing the existing, nearly a century old, legal and policy mandate of the national forest system. Both ecological and social sciences now embrace theories based upon disturbance, conflict and change. Of particular emphasis in our work was reframing the resource planning and management processes to incorporate flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness as key operational principles so as to work within processes of conflict and disturbance instead of against them. Participation was once a method for soliciting comment and review on already planned activities. In our approach it is the facilitative mechanism for achieving integrated land and resource management planning. From the national level to the project level, all teams should be broadly inclusive of not only other agencies, governments, and tribes but also non-government organizations with useful expertise, local communities and individuals with special knowledge, and citizens interested in the health and well-being of their national forests. These processes provide not only necessary information for the planning and management of the resources, but more importantly, often provide the human, financial and organizational capacity to carry out desired activities.

Our dream is that every National Forest would have a simple vision statement which both captured the unique contribution of the forest to its context and created a vision of what the forest might be if everyone worked to achieve it. We do not think this is impossible, rather we commend those who achieved this dream in spite of numerous barriers.

This report will be presented to the Secretary of Agriculture, the Undersecretary for Natural Resources, the Chief of the Forest Service and others very soon. Comments and ideas would be greatly appreciated. Please see our web page at: <http://www.cof.orst.edu/org/scicomm> for additional information or to provide comments to us.