

BRINGING THE PUBLIC INTO THE DECISION-
MAKING PROCESS ON PUBLIC LANDS:
SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY

The 1994 Pinchot Lecture

by

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I am especially happy to be here this evening to honor the memory of my friend, Bill Shands. Bill worked patiently with us on the Mt. Shasta Ranger District to help us to use his new principles of working with the public to get work done in the often contentious atmosphere of a National Forest.

We on the Mt. Shasta District believe that the days are gone when professional Forest Service personnel can "tell" the public the way programs are going to play out on the forest.

This lecture was prepared primarily from an essay that Bill wrote not long before his death, but it is supplemented with some of his previously published ideas on natural resources leadership.

Kathy Hammond

¹ Delivered November 2, 1994 by Kathy Hammond of the Mt. Shasta Ranger District of the Shasta-Trinity National Forest at the Cosmos Club in Washington, D.C.

Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas said it this way:

We must institutionalize collaboration. We must create forums where responsible people, be they environmentalists, industry representatives, recreationists, or government officials, in short, anyone with a stake in the management of our nation's forests, can come together to discuss issues, learn from one another, and work toward a consensus on how forests should be managed.

This is what I believe:

In this era of ecosystem management we are coming to realize that people are an essential part of nearly all ecosystems. Applying technical concepts of ecosystem management will prove fruitless if the people affected by proposed actions are not allowed to be a central element of the decision-making process.

Chief Thomas said it, and I have said it often enough, but my experience has shown that many land managers are confused about what that means.

As a result of that confusion, we often see symbolic gestures to "get the public's views" through public hearings, mail solicitations and other techniques that lack any real significance in terms of giving the public ownership in the decisions that are made.

Representatives of competing interests are often brought before some authority figure, and they are encouraged to state their most extreme, usually unachievable demands. People are heard, to be sure, but there is a clear implication that the authority figure -- be it a forest ranger or the President of the United States -- will return with a solution that is acceptable to all parties.

Such a final result is impossible in a democracy such as ours.

Instead, a process like the one I describe inevitably results in polarization among the various interests rather than consensus.

Issues today are too complex. There are no optimum solutions. And above all, the public is demanding a greater voice in making decisions about land that they believe belongs to them.

Look at the controversy over the Northern spotted owl and the old-growth forests of the Pacific Northwest.

After years of legal proceedings, the President of the United States brought his vice president, and much of his Cabinet to Portland, Oregon, to try to resolve

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an issue that local interests had argued to the point of gridlock.

The owl controversy led one journalist to write:

Even the Civil War produced a kind of community among rival armies. Here, any sense of cooperation and compromise have lagged far behind self-righteousness, myopic interest and legal stalemate.

Although the President has issued his plan for resolving the matter, it appears as though a final resolution will be tied up in litigation for the foreseeable future.

There has to be a better way.

The experiences of the past two decades argue that public figures, or managers must stop viewing themselves as **authority figures** who know what's best for everyone else.

It also argues that managers should stop regarding the public as individual data points to be inventoried and analyzed.

What is called for is a radical change of attitude on the part of those who have long been accustomed to being in charge.

Finally, the public -- a group we will begin calling the community of interests -- must be viewed as a group that is entirely capable of making decisions that affect their lives.

Public decision making is a complicated process.

Yet in his insightful book, *Why Americans Hate Politics*, E.J. Dionne asserts that "We do little to promote the virtues that self government requires or to encourage citizens to believe that public engagement is worth the time." He says that, "We are suffering from a false polarization in our politics."

Dionne suggests that concerned, informed citizens can come up with solutions that best represent their collective thinking.

Likewise, David Matthews in his book *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice* argues, "The crucial ingredient that distinguishes a mass of people from a responsible public is the opportunity for deliberation, time to absorb information and exchange views." "It is dialogue that makes for democracy," he says.

That is a crucial point. It is dialogue that is the essence of open decision

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making in communities of interests.

Nevertheless, for many natural resource professionals, overcoming the control impulse is not easy.

One Forest Service manager observed that dispelling the need to be in control "Is probably the hardest part of the process for Forest Service folks. We tend to try to control things, to dominate meetings, to orchestrate processes. Forest Service people who are new to the process routinely lament the 'lack of control' we have over the group, or the fact we are failing to 'educate' the public.

"They seem to relish the good old days when we could lecture folks until they either agreed with us or just left."

In working with individual National Forests I have found that teaching technique is the easy part. Far more difficult is getting managers who are accustomed to controlling situations to acknowledge that they do not have all of the solutions, that they need not be ashamed to admit it, and that ordinary citizens can play a constructive role in finding answers to the difficult challenges that confront them as a community.

In open decision making by a community of interests, leadership does not fall to a single individual, but it is the sum of the efforts of many individuals. The principles of Open Decision Making in a Community of Interests might be summarized like this:

- o Everyone is part of the problem; everyone is part of the solution.
- o People find the solution together.
- o The process builds lasting relationships of trust.

In return for sharing power, participants in the community of interest must also bear responsibility for helping to solve problems. This might be called a 'bear it and share it' approach to decision making. Citizens who espouse particular positions must bear some responsibility for helping to solve the problems that confront the community. Likewise, officials -- the previous authority figures -- must share responsibility for solutions and decisions.

To make a process like this work, managers must like people. They must be comfortable facing sometimes risky uncertainties. They must be comfortable with ambiguity and change. And above all they must have patience to see matters through to logical conclusions.

The use of this process is not a fringe activity to satisfy minimal

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requirements for public involvement. This approach is an integral part of the management of the resources placed in one's charge.

Many natural resource managers believe that their agencies have communications problems, but large segments of the public believe that the agencies have behavior problems -- that they just aren't listening.

Looking at the working environment in which many resource managers find themselves, it may seem simplistic to simply say we ought to work more closely with the public.

Too often, resource managers are plagued by controversies where interest groups are polarized. The focus of a controversy is often on symbolic issues from the long-distant past, while real issues are avoided. There is litigation, or threats of it. Tremendous amounts of energy are wasted, and being in the middle, the resource agency's credibility almost always suffers.

But many of the problems facing resource managers these days can be attributed to how the business of public participation and involvement has been undertaken.

Rarely are contending parties brought together and required to discuss difficult issues, specifically coming up with ways in which solutions can be reached with minimum damage, or in which all interests win.

A district ranger who had begun to apply open decision making in communities of interests told me, "We used to do our thing and sort of look over the fence and see what the public was doing, and when it suited our purposes we would use their ideas."

Public agencies too often exert their authority when they should be sharing responsibility. Is it any wonder that the result is public dissatisfaction, frustration and anger?

Community of interests refers to a working environment in which leadership is exercised. Open decision making is a complimentary process in which the community of interests confronts issues through dialogue, mutual education and joint problem-solving. It is civic governance in action.

The theoretical base for communities of interests was built by Ronald Heifetz, a lecturer at Harvard University's Kennedy School of government. Writing in 1988 with his colleague, Riley M. Sinder, Heifetz said:

(In the realm of public policy) problems are messy. Many people are involved and many of them disagree on the definition as well as the treatment of the

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problem.....(T)he defining and solving (of problems) comprise significant political and social learning processes as the various constituencies involved sort out their orientations, values and potential tradeoffs. No 'leader' can magically do this work. Only the group -- the relevant community of interests -- can do this work.

Former Deputy Forest Service Chief Jeff Sirmon has said, "The authority figure model (of leadership) is a classical hierarchical pyramid; an expert in charge dictates decisions to the masses, and generally does not respond to new ideas.....As an alternative...imagine the potential of a decision making process where a group of people with different backgrounds and points of view come together for a common purpose. This model, which I call the community of interests model, treats leadership as the act of facilitating the dialogue necessary to reach resolution. It does not mean dictating the solutions, but rather helping to create the environment from which the solution can emerge."

There are four principles to open decision making:

- o People are brought into the process at the very beginning.
- o Information is widely shared.
- o Participants learn from one another.
- o And joint problem solving is the order of the day.

Then what is the role of the land manager in this process?

First of all the process places the manager in a tenuous position. On the one hand she or he is charged with the management of a parcel of land, and making decisions about that parcel. On the other hand the manager is to catalyze the community of interest that cares about that land, encouraging it to make compromise solutions that the manager can implement.

Although we talk about sharing power and responsibility, in reality the resource manager is responsible for the decisions that are made and is held accountable for the ensuing results. The responsible official must make certain that laws are obeyed. That person must also adhere to policy direction from Washington as relayed and translated by regional foresters and forest supervisors.

How then are the principles of shared power to be reconciled with the civil servant's legal obligations?

Dale Pekar of the Targhee National Forest says that the forest staff does what it can to see to it that people understand that the problem is their difference of views, and that it is to their advantage to work out a solution rather than

simply laying the problem in the lap of the government. Dale said, "I think that the public understands that they are not the decision makers, but the decision maker would be quite foolish to ignore a solution that the conflicting interests were able to work out."

There are vital ethical principles that must be obeyed throughout the unfolding of this process as well.

- o The manager/leader must be dedicated to insuring a healthy process, and not to any particular outcome.

- o The leader must insure that each member of the community of interests has an opportunity to present his or her views to the best of their ability.

- o The leader must also insure that the views of people who are not at the table are raised and considered. This includes the interests of future generations.

Open Decision Making in Communities of Interest is about democratic processes and how citizens relate to one another.

The challenge is not simply to break decision gridlock -- as desirable as that may be. The challenge is nothing less than to make democracy work.

A sixth century Chinese philosopher said this:

A leader is best when people barely know he exists. Not so good when people obey and acclaim him. Worse when they despise him. But of a good leader who talks little, when his work is done and his aim fulfilled, they will say 'We did it ourselves.'

That is what I believe.

(end)