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Introduction: Diverse Perspectives on Community

PAMELA J. JAKES

USDA Forest Service
North Central Research Station
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

DOROTHY ANDERSON

Department of Forest Resources
University of Minnesota
St. Paul, Minnesota, USA

A glance through the table of contents of any social science journal illustrates that social science disciplines define community quite differently. For example, geographers emphasize spatial aspects, economists emphasize work and markets, and sociologists emphasize social interactions and networks in their definitions of communities. As a scientific concept, community is very broad and difficult to define. Forty-five years ago, Hillery (1955) found 94 different definitions of community in the scientific literature, all using some combination of space, people, and social interactions in the definitions. Regardless of how you define community, the concept is central to resource management and use: "Human attitudes and values are vested within community and definitions of resources emerge from community" (Lee et al. 1990, 9).

Papers presented at the Seventh International Symposium of Society and Resource Management, held in Columbia, Missouri, in May 1998, illustrate diverse concepts of communities and different approaches to research on communities.

The first two papers in this volume investigate the role of communities in the development of feelings of attachment. Theodori and Luloff tested the hypothesis, suggested by earlier research, that people living in more rural communities have higher levels of community attachment than the residents of urban communities. They defined attachment as a sense of rootedness. The authors found no support for this hypothesis. Their analysis indicates that earlier researchers may have overlooked the importance of community in developing attachment, or may have underestimated the role of urbanization on community attachment. They believe this may have been the consequence of a failure to carefully construct measures of urbanization. One major difference between this study and earlier research contrasting rural and urban places is in the definition of urbanization. Much of the earlier work defined urbanization in terms of population size and/or density. In this study, seven characteristics were utilized: population size, population growth, migration rate, percent of housing unit change, percent of land in agriculture, percent urban population, and proportion employed in agricultural occupations.

Address correspondence to Pamela Jakes, North Central Forest Experiment Station, 1992 Folwell Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55108. E-mail: Jakes_Pam/nc@fs.fed.us

Eisenhauer, Krannich, and Blahna also analyze attachment, but in this case the focus is on individuals' attachments to special places on public lands. They hypothesize that because understandings of the environment are rooted in the beliefs of an individual's social group, local community cultures influence a sense of place. The study found that the local community's social and cultural orientation toward public land management and use influences some key aspects of emotional attachments of special places on public lands. However, these community forces are by no means deterministic. Rather, a combination of personal experiences at places; broad, nonlocally based cultural influences; and the local community's orientations to public lands are involved in the development of these attachments. Eisenhauer et al. argue that given these findings, community is an appropriate level of analysis for identifying stakeholders' attachments to public lands and for understanding some important influences on attachments to special places.

Current resource management paradigms often include concepts of collaborative management and citizen participation that envision an active role for communities in the development and analysis of resource management scenarios. Ewing, Grayson, and Argent evaluate one such resource management paradigm—adaptive environmental assessment and management (AEAM). Communities play a major role in AEAM, participating in the development of management scenarios and providing basic input to the computer simulation model that is at the heart of AEAM. In evaluating the application of AEAM in one catchment in western Australia, the authors found that the process develops common understandings regarding ecosystem health and sustainability, and a common language for building further understanding. It lends itself to collaborative management through community participation, with the promise that over time, community members involved in the process will help ensure that management decisions reflect public concerns.

Kruger and Shannon advance the concept of citizen participation in land management planning through involvement in social assessments. Social assessments document issues and concerns related to the effects of resource allocation and management decisions. The authors test the feasibility of expanding traditional notions of social assessment to include civic science—an effort to democratize science by involving citizens as researchers. They found that in their application of civic science, individual and group identity was strengthened, citizenship was enhanced, individuals and groups were empowered, and a common vision was created. The research supported Kruger's and Shannon's assumptions that people know and care about their communities and the surrounding forests, and that when integrated within the science process, they can create knowledge, benefits, and new opportunities for social action.

Questions often arise during the development of social assessments or public participation strategies regarding social justice—for example, who truly benefits and who pays when different forest management scenarios are applied? Are the benefits and costs distributed equitably across the population? To answer these and other questions related to equity, scientists and forest managers must work with communities of color. McAvoy, Winter, Outley, McDonald, and Chavez discuss some major methodological challenges faced by researchers who attempt to conduct research in and with communities of color. Their recommendations, if followed, will help researchers and managers develop partnerships with Hispanic Americans, African Americans, and American Indians.

In the final paper in this special issue on communities, Raish demonstrates how to formulate research questions or address issues of interest to communities of color.

In this paper, she examines the causes of land and resource loss in Hispano communities. Raish explores the ways in which local communities are attempting to maintain and regain land and resource access.

From community-based regional social assessments to community-oriented collaborative planning to community-conducted science, communities are playing a significant role in the planning and management of forest lands. The overview provided by these papers, and the literature cited in them, provide an introduction to anyone new to the field of community research, or a refresher for someone continuing in this area of research.

References

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