

SOCIAL FACTORS SHAPING THE FORMATION OF A MULTI-STAKEHOLDER TRAILS NETWORK GROUP FOR THE MONONGAHELA NATIONAL FOREST, WEST VIRGINIA

Karen Robinson, Graduate Student
Recreation, Parks and Tourism Resources Program
Division of Forestry
West Virginia University
Morgantown, WV 26506
krobin12@mix.wvu.edu

Steven Selin
West Virginia University

Chad Pierskalla
West Virginia University

Abstract.—This paper reports the results and management implications of a longitudinal research study examining the social factors affecting the formation of a trails network advisory group for the Monongahela National Forest (MNF) in West Virginia. A collaborative process of creating an MNF trails network with input from local users and stakeholders has been largely unsuccessful to date and the process itself has caused conflicts between land managers and forest users. Based on interviews with U.S. Forest Service personnel and local stakeholders, this paper focuses on social factors influencing the formation of a trails advisory committee made up of local residents and other interested parties.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

There is a growing trend towards collaborative management of public lands in federal agencies. Natural resource interest groups have been growing in number and size and have become more and more knowledgeable about environmental ethics and lobbying techniques since the start of the environmental movement in the 1970s. Decker et al. (2001) describe the trends that indicate further evolution of public involvement in governance and

planning, including continued growth of human impact problems that are often location-specific, citizens' greater expectations for solutions tailored to their communities, and continued decline in agency budgets and personnel. The trend of declining budgets alone creates opportunities for members of the public to volunteer on public lands and to relieve the work burdens of overloaded federal employees. Some may say that volunteers are "worth their weight in gold" because they increase an agency's capacities and take up slack caused by personnel cuts.

This research is part of a multiple-component larger study designed to assist Monongahela National Forest (MNF) managers with their trails planning process by providing them with information about a trail assessment, trail impacts, use of off-highway vehicles, and multi-stakeholder collaboration. The research also examines factors that have facilitated or constrained the formation of a trails network.

The U.S. Forest Service initially contracted with West Virginia University researchers to facilitate a series of meetings with trail stakeholder groups to gather input and support for the development of a comprehensive trail plan for the MNF. The project investigator had both facilitation and capacity-building roles and also worked on collecting relevant data about trail planning and stakeholder collaboration from multiple sources. The main outcome of the workshop was that stakeholders expressed interest in forming a trail network advisory committee to work with the MNF managers on their trail plan and other future planning efforts.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Collaborative approaches to the management of natural resources have received much attention as land management agencies adapt to a complex society (Schulser et al. 2003). In response to public demands,

governing through collaborative networks has begun to emerge as a new model for government programs worldwide (Goldsmith and Eggers 2004). In addition, the U.S. Forest Service's 2005 and 2008 planning rules are intended to create a more adaptive approach to planning and a collaborative process for creating and implementing management plans with ongoing public input.

Gray (1985) defined collaboration as a pooling of resources by two or more stakeholders to solve a problem that neither can solve individually. Gray (1985) also states that collaboration is an ongoing process rather than an outcome. Other experts have added that a collaborative process involves relevant stakeholders from the outset, provides joint ownership of the process, and allows for consensus building on defining a problem and working toward a mutually understood set of objectives and goals (Yaffee and Wondolleck 1997).

Researchers and managers have identified numerous potential benefits of collaborative planning, such as increased effectiveness of management, greater acceptability of management actions, increased trust, reduced costs, and increased public awareness of conservation issues (Schusler et al. 2003). More recently, Goldsmith and Eggers (2004) provided insight into the trends that influenced the increase in governance by networks: an increase in partnerships and consumer demands, increased integrative services, hierarchical to horizontal structure, and advances in technology that lowered the costs of communication and collaboration.

3.0 STUDY PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to examine the social factors that have facilitated or constrained the formation of an MNF trail network advisory group from the perspective of stakeholders and agency personnel. This study represents a formative research approach as it was intended to gain understanding of the issues and provide information that will assist managers in solving problems. Specifically, the following research questions (RQ) were explored:

RQ 1. How does the status of the pending Wilderness Bill influence the group's discussions?

RQ 2. How do the shared values of the individual interest groups influence the collaboration process?

RQ 3. How do the participants' values and attitudes influence the collaboration process?

RQ 4. How does the history of efforts by individual interest groups influence the collaboration process?

RQ 5. How does the relationship with MNF managers affect outcomes?

To examine these research questions, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews, which allowed researchers to view the topics from the participant's perspective (Patton 2002). In addition, qualitative analysis was conducted with participant observation research notes, transcribed audio/visual tapes of meetings and the workshop, data from evaluation surveys of the workshop, and notes from communication media (such as email and phone conversations). Triangulation of data strengthened the study through the combination of the methods (Patton 2002) and enabled the researchers to identify emerging themes (Dempsey 2007).

The data analysis approach was thematic; researchers searched for themes within the text and analyzed core content to determine what appeared to be significant (Patton 2002). Themes were linked with examples and quotes from the text in order to provide a description of the participant's perspective. Table 1 outlines the research questions that were explored during interviews.

Participants in this study had diverse affiliations with interest groups and represented many different kinds of trail users. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with two stakeholders ("Maggie" and "Buddy") and two agency managers ("Sydney" and "Chloe"). Table 2 displays the different affiliations and agency positions of the participants, the diverse activities in which stakeholders participate, and the agency staff members' goals for serving diverse user groups.

Table 1. Interview questions and relevant research questions (RQ)*

	RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3	RQ 4	RQ 5
1) I would first like to make sure that I have your affiliations correct.	X				
2) What type of trail user would you describe yourself as?					
3) Tell me about the history of your interest group's efforts regarding trails.				X	
4) What is your reason for participating in the group? (If discontinued participation:) What made you reconsider participating in the group?		X	X	X	
5) What do you feel are the benefits of a collaborative planning process? The challenges?		X	X	X	X
6) What factors or issues will likely encourage or support the formation of the Monongahela NF Trail Network? What factors or issues would likely constrain this process?	X	X	X		X
7) What type of role do you see yourself playing in a multi-stakeholder network? What type of commitment can you give to the network?	X				X
8) In your opinion, should the USFS be a member of the Monongahela NF Trail Network? Why or why not?					X
9) What resources or assistance may be needed to see the formation and success of the Monongahela NF Trail Network? From West Virginia University? From the Monongahela NF?					X
10) Is there anything I haven't asked about that you would like to share about the collaborative planning process?					

* See text for list of research questions.

Table 2.—Stakeholder and agency profile: affiliations and user types*

	Affiliations	User Type
Stakeholders	WV Sierra Club WV Highlands Conservancy WV Mountain Bike Association International Mountain Bike Association Wilderness Coalition WV Horse Council	Hiker Mountain biker Horseback rider Berry picker Cross-country skier Camper
Agency	Forest Supervisor Forest Recreation Staff Officer District Recreation Staff Soil Scientist	Integration of soil data with recreation Integration of soil data with trail design Appropriate use Trail classification

* User types listed in this table represent more than one affiliation.

4.0 RESULTS

4.1 Emerging Themes

A number of themes related to trail use and management emerged from analysis of the interview text including: past efforts, facilitating factors, constraining factors, benefits and challenges of a collaborative process. The following interpretations and examples typify the perspectives of both stakeholder and agency participants. The themes that emerged from the participants' opinions represent important components of the data and allowed for an inside look at aspects of a collaborative process.

4.1.1 Past Efforts

When participants were asked about their past efforts in regards to trail issues on the MNF, a number of them talked about participating in successful collaborative processes that involved cooperation and initiative and produced results from stakeholder input. For example, one stakeholder talked about participating on environmental assessment teams approximately 20 years ago. The stakeholder felt that there was true initiative and interest on the Forest Service's part and that the Forest Service actually took stakeholders' input and used it in the planning efforts. This stakeholder's frustration regarding the current working relationship with the Forest Service compared to 20 years ago was apparent:

"When I was a member of those teams, I really had input. I could see at the end my influence and the decisions that were made, it was a real team effort...and the Forest Service took that advice."

In this case, the stakeholder felt that time spent on the process was justified, that there was a feeling of ownership in the outcomes, and that stakeholders' input and recreational experiences were valued. On several occasions, stakeholders also talked about their input not being taken seriously and feeling like their time was "wasted," which, in turn, added to frustration and potential hesitation to participate as advisors in the future. Essentially, the stakeholders wanted to see that their time and knowledge had an impact, and agency managers understood this expectation as well:

"For me, and most others, it is extra voluntary time taken out of my schedule...needs to be worthwhile for the stakeholders." [From a stakeholder]

"They need to see actual work and planning efforts being conducted...They need to see results of their time and efforts in order for the partnership to survive." [From an agency manager]

The stakeholders also offered explanations for why the Forest Service is not as easy to work with today as it was in the past (e.g., "Collaborative planning is very different today"). In many cases, the stakeholders expressed aggravation with the Forest Service's new organizational structure because it was perceived to have been shaped by political factors and had resulted in staff turnover, a decrease in personnel, and dwindling budgets. It is interesting to note that those same political factors and the related outcomes are driving the trend toward collaborative approaches to management. At the same time, budget and staffing problems also work against developing successful collaborative partnerships. The stakeholders generally felt that it was the Forest Service's responsibility to share information and to engage stakeholders in their management efforts. Information about the interviewees' past experiences made it easier to understand their opinions and frustrations about present factors that may impact the formation of a trail network for the MNF.

4.1.2 Facilitating and Constraining Factors

In general, stakeholders and agency managers need to understand one another's perspectives in order to commit to the partnership. Only then can trust and a relationship begin to develop. Participants were asked what factors they felt might facilitate or constrain the formation of a trail network (Table 3). Again, both groups emphasized the importance of time as a facilitating or constraining factor. Agency personnel generally recognized that as long-time trail users, stakeholders have the "social" knowledge of trails, which is important during trail planning efforts.

Table 3.—Facilitating and constraining factors: stakeholder and agency perspectives

	Agency Perspective	Stakeholder Perspective
Facilitating Factors	Lack of agency resources Trend toward collaborative approaches Stakeholder knowledge Stakeholder demand Need for trail plan	Stakeholder resources and knowledge Positive past efforts Existing stakeholder networks Desire to participate Pending Wilderness Bill
Constraining Factors	FS rules and regulations Time, priorities, other commitments Lack of ability to engage stakeholders FS staff turnover Longevity of network	Skepticism of FS interest, trust Time Lack of consensus among stakeholders FS staff turnover Pending Wilderness Bill

Stakeholders and agency personnel also made comments that reveal a potential lack of general understanding of one another's perspectives. This gap highlights the importance of understanding each participant's comments in the context of his or her previous experiences and general background.

When discussing collaborative processes in general, stakeholders repeatedly emphasized the importance of having willing, representative stakeholders—i.e., having “the right people”—at the table. In general, “the right people” were those who were willing to listen, to support others' interests and needs, and to participate in the planning efforts in good faith. Some people implied that collaboration has to start among the different user groups before the stakeholders enter into a partnership with the Forest Service:

“I am willing to support your interests, if you are willing to be part of the planning process and where your trails will be.” [From a stakeholder]

The pending Wilderness Bill was also discussed in most of the interviews with stakeholders. The Wilderness Bill is generally considered to be a constraining factor in the collaborative planning process in the sense that it is drawing a lot of stakeholder and agency energy and focus away from trails planning. One reason is that the bill is a top priority for many stakeholders and the organizations with which they are affiliated. Second, they see action taking place on the Wilderness Bill and know they can be part of the process, whereas the trail planning

process has been stalled for a long time. These factors are disincentives for stakeholders to put time into trail planning:

“Even after the Wilderness Bill is decided upon, who knows how that will affect interest of the stakeholders regarding participation in this group...It could go either way.” [From a stakeholder]

“I most likely will not come back to this effort.” [From a stakeholder]

Interviewees also mentioned their frustration with the lack of respect between the different user groups. One stakeholder talked about particular groups being uncooperative, inflexible, and unwilling to listen and commented:

“You're going to disagree because of your interest. So what, that is not a reason to segregate.”

Another stakeholder offered an example of the frustration and challenge of working with the Forest Service:

“A good example is when I took the FS supervisor to the Seneca Creek when the engineers had designed all these prefab bridges that they were going to drop down in by helicopter. They were cutting down trees to gain access. I had to take volunteer time to fight that and we fought the EA [(Environmental Assessment)], we fought the decision, and finally I just went in to the supervisor and said, ‘Have

you ever been in there?’ And he had not, so I got him to commit to going on an outing. He finally said, ‘Ya know, I’m beginning to see what you were so mad about here. We don’t need any bridges here’ and he called the district ranger over who was pushing the bridges and the engineers and he read them the riot act... [T]hey were proposing to destroy the beauty of this area to put in a stupid bridge. There was not a bridge put in Seneca Creek after that.”

One constraint that really stood out in the interviews was related to the longevity of a network group. The Forest Service wants to keep the user groups engaged over time, so the agency tries not to overload volunteers and works to maintain partnerships and relationships despite setbacks that may arise. However, sustaining long-term relationships is hindered by turnover among Forest Service personnel, as well as by getting or not getting the “right” stakeholders to the table. In the best-case scenario, participants representing specific user groups can guide other users and volunteer groups to participate in trail maintenance, projects, and programs. An agency manager referred to how people’s interest in the process tends to die off over time:

“We hope that the interest of the group continues, even though there may be some false starts.”

Agency staff also talked about how the local economy influences people’s interest in participating in collaborative processes and how they are unsure about

where to find stakeholders who have the time and motivation to participate in collaborative planning. As one manager stated:

“Currently the local economy is changing and you are observing a shift in the local population...It can further constrain engaging stakeholders.”

4.1.3 Benefits and Challenges

During the interviews, researchers also asked for opinions about the benefits and challenges of collaborative processes from both the stakeholder and agency perspectives (Table 4). Stakeholders most often mentioned conflict elimination as the main benefit of collaboration. Other benefits listed by stakeholders included gaining a better understanding of other user groups’ needs and interests and greater acceptance of management decisions as a result of having the opportunity to contribute to the process. As one stakeholder stated:

“It makes you walk the trail differently when you are able to collaborate with the agency as well as other stakeholders.”

Another benefit from the stakeholders’ perspective was that the agency would not need to contract work out and that the user groups could apply for grants for trail maintenance and projects in general. According to one stakeholder, the collaborative process had not generated benefits for quite some time because of a lack of initiative from the agency, staff turnover, and political issues.

Table 4.—Benefits and challenges of a collaborative process: stakeholder and agency perspectives

	Agency Perspective	Stakeholder Perspective
Benefits	Decrease costs and maintenance Stakeholders can leverage resources Stakeholders can provide knowledge Build and develop relationships --Eliminate conflicts	Informing congressional delegates --politically, very positive Existing stakeholder networks Stakeholders can leverage resources Public input can decrease conflicts
Challenges	Increase interest of user groups Time, priorities, other commitments Longevity of network	Getting the right people to the table Time Frustration due to agency's not showing initiative Majority of efforts going toward pending Wilderness Bill

As previously mentioned, stakeholders identified time (or lack thereof) on the part of both the agency and stakeholders as a major challenge to the collaborative process. Time tends to dictate and impact the overall process and can make or break a successful network partnership. A few stakeholders also felt that the process was unfair to them because of agency staff turnover, the difficulty of keeping the agency on target regarding the overall goals, and the need to avoid political and legal issues which could hinder the progress of projects. As one stakeholder stated:

“Agency personnel need to be willing to listen and represent an initiative or inertia.”

The stakeholders understood the challenge and the importance of getting the appropriate representatives from the different user groups to the table. They talked about the need to represent all users during the process. Otherwise, there would be no reason to convene since there would be no way to successfully assign appropriate use to the different trails without continued conflicts. Furthermore, decision-makers would have no way to know in advance whether management decisions would be accepted and supported.

In discussions with agency personnel about the benefits of a collaborative process, eliminating user conflicts came up again. More specifically, agency personnel acknowledged the value of stakeholders’ having a feeling of ownership of the places they used and wanted to protect. Agency employees also mentioned the importance of building relationships with people and organizations that could participate in trail projects as well as planning efforts. Several people said that the collaborative planning process provides opportunities to better understand diverse users’ needs, to build consensus about appropriate trail use, and to identify disagreements among the different user groups. Agency managers said:

“User groups know more of what is happening in the field ...”

“Even if the group can take on 25 percent of the issues, it will still help out the Forest Service managers.”

“Collaborative processes can decrease the cost, which is significant due to dwindling budgets.”

Agency personnel identified some of the same challenges in the collaborative process as stakeholders but from their own perspectives. For example, they wanted to be able to “agree to disagree” in some cases in order to allocate appropriate trail use without displacing historic users. This frustration came through from one agency manager:

“Any trail out there is someone’s special trail...making it harder to build consensus on appropriate use.”

Another agency manager felt that the collaborative process has the potential to slow down planning efforts but that the outcomes might still be positive in the long run. This observation goes along with comments about the challenge of maintaining the stakeholders’ interest in order to progress toward a mutual goal.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

Overall, one of the main factors that could constrain the formation of a network and alienate volunteers is wasting time. There is also a clear lack of communication between the stakeholders and the Forest Service. At this point, it seems entirely possible that stakeholders will give up on the trail planning process and focus their efforts on other issues because of the lack of results in the planning process to date and poor communication by the Forest Service in the past.

One area that needs further exploration is the agency’s perspective on how and to what degree to engage volunteers. Social learning is a key factor in the success of a network and allows all parties to address the goal of eliminating conflict. It would also be interesting to try to get input and recommendations from stakeholders that are known to argue rather than work together. Until the Wilderness Bill is passed, it will also continue to be a big distraction for the Monongahela employees and stakeholders.

It is worth noting that, so far, facilitators have not been successful at keeping the trail planning process moving and making it productive; the role of facilitators in the process needs to be further explored. There may also be as-yet unidentified institutional factors impeding the trails planning process.

This research has provided some information that can help MNF employees and stakeholders better understand each other. The research found in particular that the keys to creating a successful network are: sustaining relationships, keeping communication going, having an effective third-party facilitator, having an agency volunteer coordinator, having technical support from the agency itself, and getting both the agency and the stakeholders to commit to participating in the process.

Further research is needed to identify other factors, such as institutional factors, that facilitate or constrain the formation of a multi-stakeholder trails network group. Future research could also compare the experiences of the MNF staff and stakeholders to other case studies that focus on difficulties with collaborative planning for natural resource management.

6.0 CITATIONS

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