

WHY STUDY VALUES?

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knowledge about societal or corporate values actually affect what we see on the land? This paper illustrates how information of societal values influences the outcomes of resource management and planning.

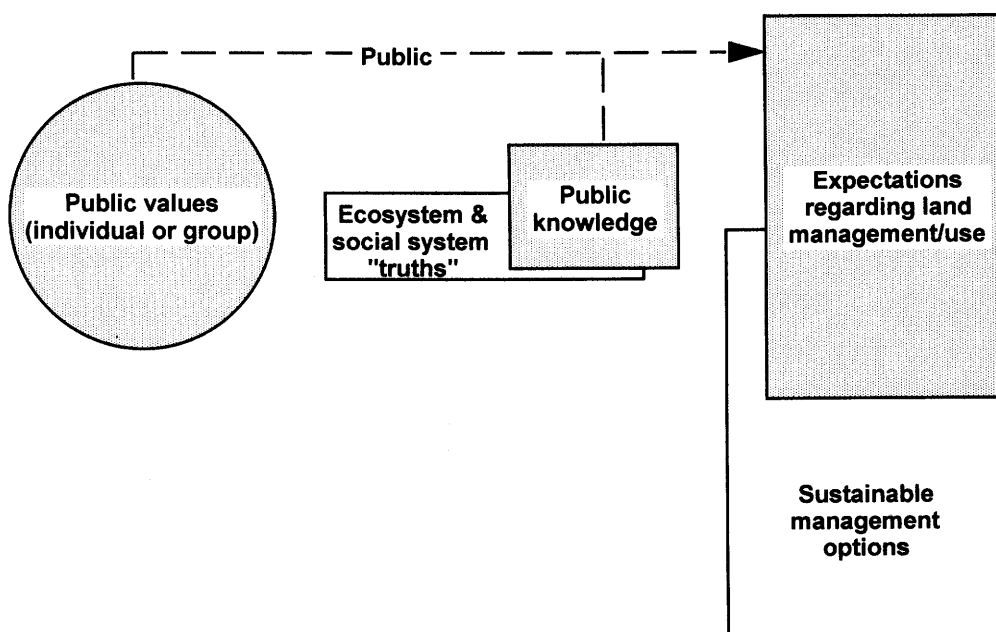
It's hard to find any discussion of the management and use of our forests and parks without seeing references to values—values are changing, we need to manage for multiple values, we need to manage for new users with different values from our traditional users. What do we mean when we talk about values? Values are “enduring beliefs that a particular mode of conduct or that a particular end-state of existence is personally and socially preferable to alternative modes of conduct or end-states or existence” (Rokeach 1968, p.550). More to the point, our values help define what we want and how we'll get it. But why should we, as public land managers and researchers, be concerned about values? The missions of many of our agencies are built on an interpretation of what the public wants and how they would like us to get there—the Department of Canadian Heritage (which includes Parks Canada) has as its mission “Building Our Future Together;” the U.S. National Park Service, “Caring for the American Legacy;” the U.S. Forest Service, “Caring for the Land and Serving People.” An understanding of public values is critical to

the successful implementation of our missions, in that we cannot hope to achieve them without public understanding and support for our goals and the steps necessary to reach them.

While our agencies appear to have legitimate interests in public values, let's think more generally about the importance of public values to the management and use of public lands. The model discussed here is very simplistic, and ignores many of the challenges of studying values related to natural resource management and use. However, despite its limitations, my colleagues and I at the North Central Forest Experiment Station have found this model very useful in illustrating the outcomes and benefits to be gained from a broader understanding of public values and their influence on natural resource management.

It's dangerous to talk about “the public” as if it is a homogenous group with similar values, attitudes, and behaviors. There is certainly more than one public, but for the sake of simplicity, I'll refer to the public, meaning the “owners” of the public lands. The public holds values regarding the management and use of public lands—they have criteria that tell them what these lands should look like (their end-state, perhaps desired future condition) and standards that tell them how they would like to see these lands managed to obtain these end-states (standards of action or conduct). When members of the public combine the knowledge they have about how things work (ecosystem and social system “truths”) with the values they hold, they develop expectations regarding how the public lands should be managed to achieve a desired future condition. We may think their knowledge is faulty or incomplete, but regardless of our perceptions of the truth of what they know, their knowledge and values set up expectations (Figure 1).

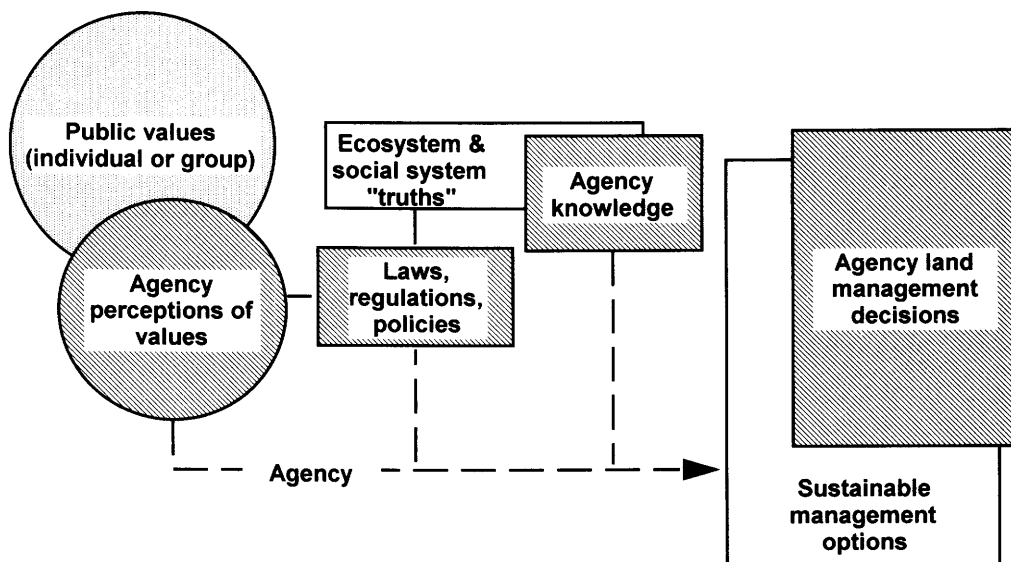
Figure 1.—When members of the public combine the values they hold with their knowledge of the ways things work, they develop expectations regarding land management and use.



Now, let's think about values from an agency perspective—perhaps a public park or forest. Agency employees have perceptions about public values, and these perceptions help them decide how to manage the public lands. Perhaps our reading of public values tells us that the public would support a goal of restoring vegetation to pre-European conditions using management techniques that most closely mimic nature. Based on our perceptions of public values, we have selected a desired end-state for an area and a plan of action to obtain that end-state.

But we have more to consider than public values when making decisions about the management and use of the public lands. We also use our knowledge about ecosystems and social systems to help us make our decisions. In addition, as a formal institution involved in land management, we operate under a set of laws, regulations, and policies. So, we take our perceptions of public values and our knowledge about the way things work, and working within a legal and political framework we make decisions about how to manage public lands (Figure 2).

Figure 2.—Agencies use their knowledge of public values and the ways things work, and, within a framework of laws, regulations, and policies, make decisions about the way public land will be managed.



What we find, however, is that in many cases, our decisions regarding land management are not consistent with public expectations (Figure 3). This may be because the agency and the public are using different sets of knowledge. When we manage public lands, we primarily use objective knowledge, facts that we think accurately portray how ecosystems work—we use science. This information allows us to predict (with some acceptable degree of risk) how ecosystems will respond to our actions. We seldom draw on knowledge from art, literature, or religion, for example, to support our decisions. Yet the public often bases its expectations on this “less objective” knowledge. So, it’s no wonder public expectations and agency management decisions don’t match—we are indeed operating from different knowledge sets.

Agency staff also have less than perfect knowledge about public values. Our perceptions of public values are based on various forms of communication ranging from informal daily encounters to formal public involvement activities. Back to the example of restoring vegetation to pre-European conditions (restoration ecology). The southeastern district of the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources had identified restoration ecology as a high priority in its comprehensive watershed management

plan. This had interrupted the interest of some local residents and the interest of their own staff as broad support for that activity. Yet when we conducted a survey of residents in the region we found little to no support for restoration ecology (Kelly and Sushak 1996). This does not mean that the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources can’t or shouldn’t do restoration ecology in southeastern Minnesota, but it does mean that to “sell” the program, they need to tie it to the values of local residents.

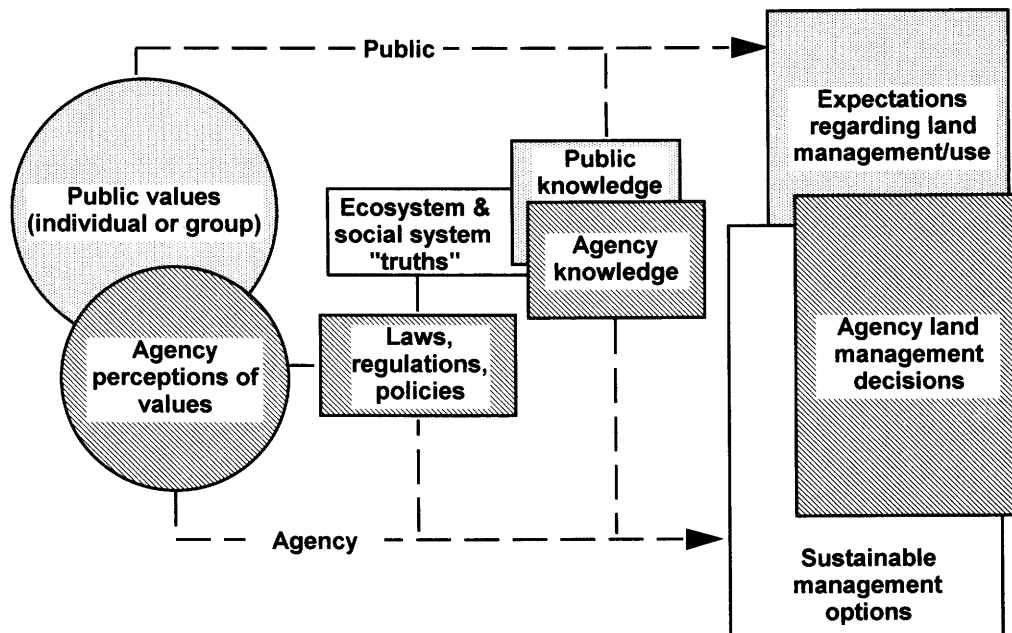
Finally, our management decisions may not match public expectations regarding land management and use because our options are limited by laws, regulations, and/or policies. For example, the laws relating to wilderness area management will simply not permit certain types of uses regardless of what the public wants or expects. The question is, what can we do to bring public expectations regarding public land management and use more in line with agency management options? Or, to take the alternative perspective, how can land management decisions better reflect public expectations regarding public land management and use?

One answer is public involvement (Figure 4). Through more and better communication with our partners and clients we can gain a more complete understanding of

public values. We can begin to explain our programs and decisions using criteria that are important to the public, in ways that make sense to the public. This increasing public understanding of the trade-offs critical to natural resource management and use will change their expectations of what is possible. We can increase the public's knowledge about

how things work not only from a bio-physical, scientific perspective but also from a social perspective. Public involvement can also increase our knowledge about how ecosystem and social systems work by exposing us to alternative forms of knowledge that are used and valued by the public.

Figure 3.—We often find that agency decisions regarding land management are not consistent with public expectations.



A second answer is research. Research can generate some of the same benefits as public involvement—a better understanding of public values and increased knowledge about old and new “truths.” Research on public values can result in tools that allow us to monitor changes in public values and the development of new values related to the environment. It can also help us develop ways to include in our decisionmaking the more qualitative, “non-scientific” data known to and used by our clients and partners.

Today, more people than ever before are living near, using, or monitoring the management and use of our public lands. These people demand more and different things from these lands. Changes in expectations regarding land management and use have resulted in conflicts, manifest in the form of lawsuits, demands for home rule, aggressive political advocacy, and appeals of land management decisions and plans. By understanding public values we can make management decisions that better reflect public expectations. But this understanding of values also helps

us define and describe the trade-offs and risks of various management alternatives in terms that make sense or are relevant to the public, resulting in a shift in public expectations regarding public land management and use. Our success in balancing public expectations with resource capabilities is the key to the survival of our agencies, but more importantly to the survival of the ecosystems we are responsible for managing and the communities dependent on their health and sustainability.

Literature Cited

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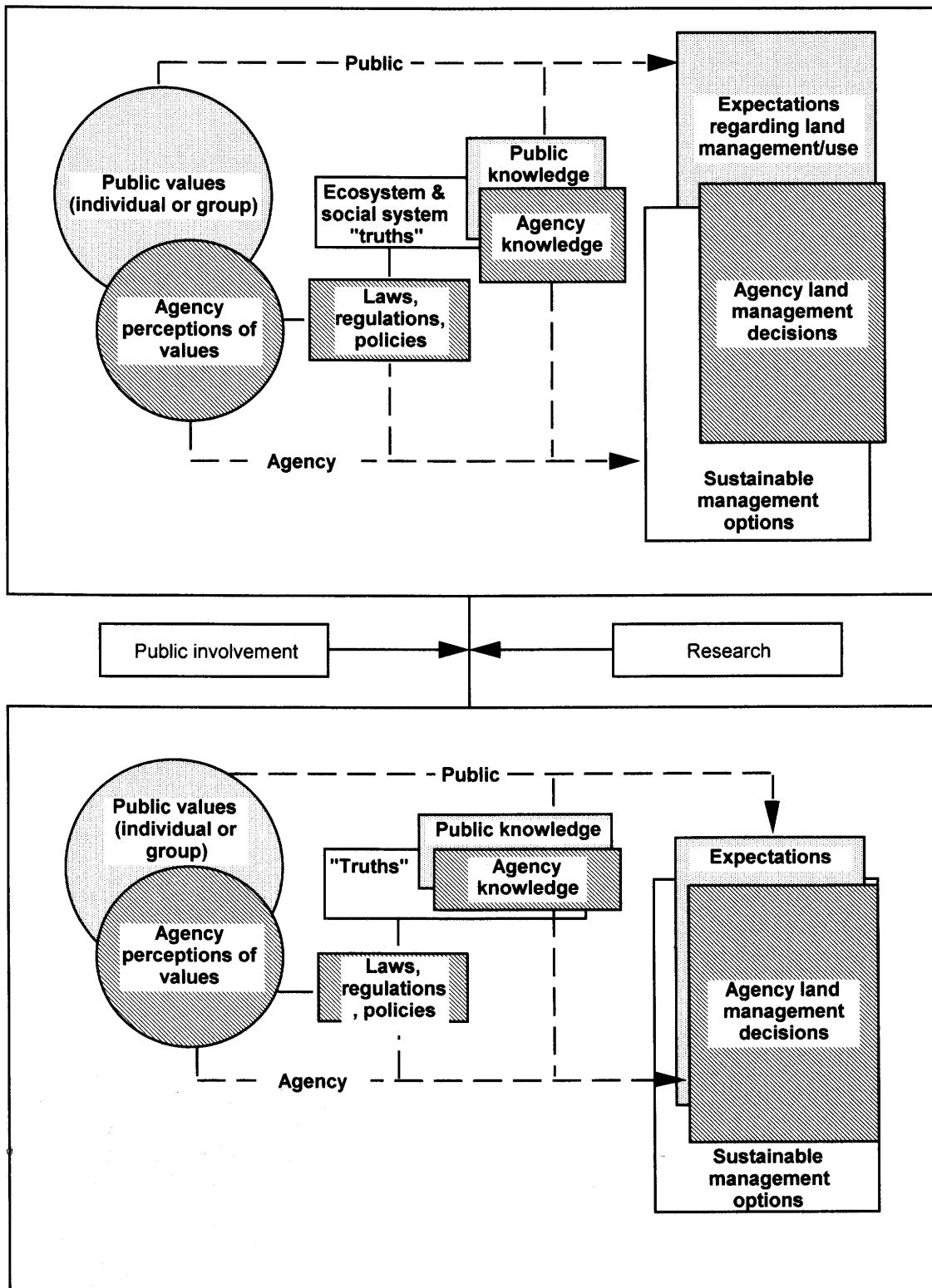


Figure 4.—Public involvement and research helps build understanding between the public and agency decisionmakers and brings public expectations regarding land management and use and agency decisions regarding land management more in sync.