

Emergent Issues in Forest Plan Revision: A Dialogue

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Abstract: Working with National Forest planners can raise many questions for social scientists regarding their role in planning or plan revision. Social scientists from the North Central Forest Experiment Station and the National Forest System Eastern Region debate 3 questions that continue to surface in their work with Forest Service managers on plan revision: first, what is the role of social scientists in the critical venue of public involvement? Second, the costly and time consuming task of social assessment is considered: what are the merits of full versus partial social assessments? And third, along more philosophical lines, do social scientists play the same role in plan revision that all other scientists play, or do social scientists play a potentially more sensitive role? Because there are no simple right and wrong answers, this paper explores the questions in point-counterpoint style.

Introduction

For the past year, a team of five social scientists at the North Central Forest Experiment and the have been working with two National Forest planning teams in the Eastern Region of the U.S. Forest Service. The goal of our project is to develop recommendations for incorporating various social science perspectives, methods, and models into forest plan revision.

A Forest Plan for each National Forest is required by the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), which amended the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA). The purpose of the Forest Plan is to provide strategic direction for all natural resource management activities on the Forest. Most National Forests in the Eastern Region completed their Forest Plans in 1986. Many are currently updating and revising those plans in accordance with the NFMA regulations which state that the plan shall ordinarily be revised on a 10-year cycle or at least every 15 years.

Following many of our work sessions with National Forest System (NFS) staff we found that we were repeatedly asking each other three questions:

1. Do social scientists have a role in assisting National Forest managers with the public involvement aspects of forest plan revision?
2. Is a full social assessment necessary for plan revision?
3. Do all scientists play the same role in plan revision, or do social scientists have a potentially more sensitive role?

Although debating such questions may appear to be of interest only to academics, these questions are at the root of many of the challenges faced by social scientists when they try to work with managers to update forest plans. In an effort to better develop our thinking and to encourage others to share their ideas, we present the pros and cons, or opposing viewpoints, in answer to each question.

Question 1. Do social scientists have a role in assisting the forests with the public involvement aspects of forest plan revision?

Background

The political argument for public involvement in government activities is based on the real or imagined belief that government has failed to respond appropriately to the needs and demands of its citizens (Riedel 1972). Public involvement is vital to the activities of any governmental agency in that it is a mechanism for exchanging information, provides information on the value context for decisions, and is a source of credibility (Creighton et al. 1983).

The Administrative Procedures Act (APA) was passed in 1946 in order to provide public access to federal agencies. Under the APA, agencies were required to (1) inform the public of how they were going to interpret and implement congressional mandates, and (2) solicit comments from the public regarding any pending rules. However, the courts ruled that the APA did not apply to land management agencies because these agencies were acting as land owners when managing the federal lands, not as governmental rule-making bodies. The National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 (NEPA) was the first law to give land management agencies direction regarding public involvement. In the Forest Service, the need for public involvement was reinforced by the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act of 1974 (RPA) and the National Forest Management Act of 1976 (NFMA). These laws direct forest managers to use public involvement activities early and often throughout the revision of Forest Plans. In this context, public involvement can help evaluate community needs and expectations, develop Forest Plan alternatives, provide input for the projection and assessment of impacts, and monitor the impacts of plan implementation.

Social scientists may have a variety of motives for participating in public involvement activities related to

National Forest planning--(1) it may be part of the individual's job description, (2) it is an opportunity to test hypotheses related to public involvement in land management and planning in the closest thing a social scientist has to a laboratory, or (3) the individual feel that they have a role to play in the development of public involvement activities related to planning and management. In 1992, Gericke and his colleagues posed four questions that would provide the nucleus for a social science research program in public involvement (or what Gericke referred to as public participation):

1. What forms of public participation are constructive and what forms are destructive in particular situations?
2. How much public participation is enough?
3. How does trust in the Forest Service, as well as the desires of the public, change through the planning process?
4. How does public participation influence management decisions? (p. 38)

But public participation is a well-established component of National Forest management that has traditionally been accomplished without input from social scientists. Why should NFS managers risk increasing the complexity of their public involvement tasks by involving social scientists? What role might scientists play in this broadly-accepted, established activity?

Scientists provide valuable insights in designing public involvement plans.

Agency experience with public involvement is not an argument for continuing to leave it in NFS hands. In an evaluation of National Forest planning conducted in the late 1980s, critics found that:

"... planning is not the exclusive domain of experts.... Planning must access issues about which people deeply care. Rather than being isolated and insulated, planning is immersed in our country's social and political milieu." And, "Where plans have been successful, the attention to people's needs (emotional, symbolic, and organizational, as well as economic and community needs) were given consideration along with the resource capabilities and commodity schedules." (USDA Forest Service 1990a, pp. 3, 13).

The only way to reveal "issues about which people deeply care" or "people's needs" is through public involvement.

It would be easier to argue against the role of social scientists in public involvement if the process were working well. In fact, the process appears to be badly broken. In a recent evaluation of resource management, Cortner (1996) observes that "past efforts at resource management have not adequately dealt with the public's desires to be heard and listened to" (p. 165). She goes on to critique early public participation efforts specifically, and finds that:

"... these efforts failed to achieve participation by all affected segments of the public; failed to accommodate

those segments of the public that did participate; occurred too late in the process, or if it occurred early was not sustained throughout the process; and separated the planning and public involvement processes thereby making it hard to integrate citizen input." (p.168)

Scientists have much to offer to the practice of public involvement in National Forest planning and management. First, through their participation in public involvement activities, scientists can share various disciplinary answers to or perspectives on Gericke et al.'s questions listed above and the concerns of Cortner. More to the point, social scientists can (1) assist the planning team in identifying tasks where public involvement is required, (2) identify places in the planning process where public involvement can improve decisionmaking, (3) suggest additional types of information that could be obtained through public involvement activities, and (4) match the correct or appropriate public involvement tool with the planning task.

The second area in which social scientists can make a contribution is in the analysis and integration of qualitative data into the planning process. The pages of comments that forests receive from letters and transcripts of public meetings, although not necessarily quantifiable, are still vital to forest planning and decisionmaking. Scientists can help managers develop ways to systematically interpret and display this data so that it is useful information for decisionmakers and their partners. The goal in analyzing public input is to have a process that is "not only visible and traceable but also objective and reliable" (Hendee et al. 1974). Finally, social scientists can help NFS personnel define the goals of their public involvement process and establish criteria for evaluating its effectiveness.

Scientists should leave public involvement to Forest Service staff and public affairs officers.

Involving scientists in the design of NFS public involvement strategies is sure to disappoint both managers and scientists. First, managers simply don't have much latitude in designing their public involvement processes. The same legislation and regulations that mandate the use of public involvement leave managers a very small decision space within which to work (Krannich et al. 1994). Forest Service planning is not a good laboratory for trying out the latest social science model, because many aspects of the participation process are pre-determined. In addition, planning situations vary so much that there is a lack of generalizability from one planning situation to the next (Day 1997), limiting the usefulness of research.

In a recent review of planning literature, Day (1997) found that public involvement studies often emphasize how to maintain or shift the balance of political power by manipulating the public involvement process. Much of the difference across research studies can be traced to the ideological stance of the scientist. Those who believe in pluralism tend to see the best results from those methods that involve listening to all who come forward. Those who are revisionist see a great and unjust disparity between those who are involved and those who are not. The blending of political philosophy with social science has a

long tradition in public involvement research (Day 1997), which suggests planners might be wise to turn down scientists' offers of help.

Few scientists active in human dimension of natural resources research have qualifications in planning, policy studies, communication or political science, where much of the relevant theoretical work in participation can be found. The expertise they bring to public involvement in forest planning is in the area of understanding the context in which the NFS participation process unfolds, not in their mastery of its theoretical bases. As such, their advice should be given and received with due caution.

Question 2. Is a full social assessment necessary for plan revision?

Background

The Forest Service manual defines a social assessment as a "broad level or programmatic data collection and analysis process used to generate information about the social environment." It is not a decision document, but is meant to be used by national forest managers as background information for decisionmaking--providing them a description of past, present, and potential social conditions.

There are few examples of forest-level social assessments in the literature, although they undoubtedly exist on the shelves and in the files of individual forests. One example of a forest-level social assessment is the assessment prepared for the Kootenai National Forest (Impact Assessment, Incorporated 1995). The objective of this report was to describe public perceptions regarding forest management issues and the social, cultural, and economic factors that influence public perceptions. In a similar document looking at Ravalli County, Montana, and prepared for the Northern Region of the Forest Service (Bitterroot Social Research Institute 1994) the authors argue that "attempts to manage ecosystems must carefully consider the human dimension; without this factor, there would be no reason to manage anything. The best method to gather and assess information concerning the human dimension of ecosystems is a process called social assessment." (p.1)

Recently the focus of social assessments have shifted from a national forest or individual county to a multi-county or multi-state region. Large area social assessments have been popping up like spring mushrooms - witness FEMAT (1993), the Southern Appalachian Assessment (Southern Appalachian Man and the Biosphere Cooperative, 1996), and the on-going Ozark-Ouachita Highlands Assessment. But regardless of their geographic coverage, social assessments are time consuming and costly, and the jury is still out on the value of these assessments for planning and decision making. In the absence of evaluations of the success or applicability of the social assessments that have been undertaken, is a full social assessment advisable for forest plan revision?

A full social assessment in conjunction with plan revision is overkill.

Forests are not required to undertake a full social assessment in conjunction with planning or plan revision.

The NEPA requires disclosure of the social impacts that are associated with Forest Plan revision. When, based on the decision maker's judgement, social impacts are expected, they need to be determined and disclosed to the public. This amounts to a full *social impact analysis* - quantifying and describing all impacts of *specific* management actions - not a full *social assessment* covering all aspects of community life and health, whether impacted by proposed plan changes or not.

In the Forest Service, the decision to conduct a social assessment and the contents of such a document are left to the discretion of the line officer responsible for that forest. If the line officer is convinced a sufficient understanding of the social conditions in their area exists, why would they undertake a lengthy and expensive exercise that will produce little or no new useful information? Rather than spend their time and money gathering new information about the people and institutions important to the National Forests, managers should develop a framework for incorporating the wealth of knowledge they and their staff already hold about social conditions so that it is of use in forest planning and decisionmaking.

A second alternative to a full social assessment is a more narrow assessment of just the social components of the issues identified in the Notice Of Intent (one of the first summaries of plan revision issues). Many of these forest planning issues are defined in terms of biological or physical resources, and by focusing social analysis on these problems, their biological, physical and social dimensions can be tied together and the interactions and linkages among the dimensions made more apparent.

A full social assessment is a well worth the time and money .

Although not required by law or regulation, social assessments set the stage on which National Forests perform. The Forest Service's own NEPA training courses highlight the need for evaluating current conditions in implementing forest planning. A social assessment provides such an evaluation. Following the first round of planning on the National Forests, a critique of that process found that forest planning, as practiced by the Forest Service, lacked any means of incorporating social issues into decision making (USDA Forest Service 1990a):

"We apparently provided the decisionmakers with reams of FORPLAN results and resource data but with very little information on the demographics, culture, or lifestyle of constituents. As a result, decisions often were not acceptable in social and political spheres." (USDA Forest Service 1990b, p.14)

Information describing the demographics, culture, and lifestyle are the essence of a standard social assessment.

The National Forests are being managed under an ecosystem management paradigm, which has been defined by the Agency as: "A concept of natural resources management wherein National Forest activities are

considered with the context of economic, ecological, and social interactions within a defined area or region over both the short- and long-term." There is no way that the "context of economic, ecological, and social interactions" can be understood without a broad analysis of the ways in which people are part of and interact with forest ecosystems. Social assessments provide such an analysis.

Question 3. Do all scientists play the same role in plan revision, or do social scientists play a potentially more sensitive role?

Background

NFS relies on scientists from a wide range of disciplines to lend expertise on resource management issues, and to help predict the effects of management decisions. Ecosystem management depends on scientists to support an adaptive management approach, where managers are encouraged to treat policies as experiments, learn from them, and refine their management practices (USDA 1995). Any scientist involved in NFS planning will judge the outcomes (i.e., proposed alternatives and their consequences) of the planning process. Yet social scientists' expertise may also extend to the process by which decisions are made, or the reasons for disagreements about resource management and use. Does the broad scope and political nature of social science create unique responsibilities for social scientists working in plan revision, or do all scientists face essentially the same kind of task?

All scientists face the same kind of challenges.

All scientists share the fundamental goal of improving our understanding of the world. The knowledge they generate sometimes has widespread, unanticipated consequences. Intentionally or otherwise, scientists often challenge popular ideas, redistribute power, raise concerns where none existed before, or change relations between people or groups of people. These effects will be felt most acutely when new knowledge is being added rapidly - which is also justification for addressing an issue in plan revision. Any scientist involved in plan revision will be dealing with potentially sensitive issues.

Forest management policy is often based on scientific findings, and scientists in the Forest Service have been caught up in the politics of natural resource management for years, despite the best efforts of the agency to insulate them (USDA Forest Service, 1995). The spotted owl controversy provides the perfect example of how inflamed a "strictly biological" debate can get. Even something that appears simple and straightforward, like the definition of "old growth forest", has political ramifications and can make an ecologists' work the focus of controversy.

The political sensitivity of any scientist's work stems in part from their personal world view and style. Just as there are social scientists who aim to change the balance of power between social groups through their research (Rosenau 1992), there are biologists whose mission is changing the priorities of land managers (Lautenschlager 1996). Post-modern philosophies of science call for more honesty about the scientist's personal agenda, and as a result, there is more

discussion and declaration of agendas than ever before (Rosenau 1992). Its effects are evident in the criticism and dialogue that surrounds debates over natural resource, ecosystem management, and ecology (e.g., Kellert and Wilson 1993; Cronon 1995).

The idea that social scientists have a more delicate mission is just a symptom of being relatively new to resource management, still lacking institutional knowledge of how to anticipate and deal with controversy. There is no reason for social scientists to approach plan revision differently than the rest of the scientific community does.

Social scientists have a different role in plan revision.

When biologists and physical scientists comment on the consequences of management actions, their criticism usually applies to recommendations made by a resource specialist or interdisciplinary team. Social scientists more often apply their expertise to judgements made at a higher level of the agency. For example, when a social scientist comments on the method the forest has used to involve its publics, or the process by which issues are screened, or the relationship a forest has with its Friends of the Forest group, their criticism applies to the judgement of line officers, the Regional Forester, national leadership, or Congress.

Because social scientists study the needs and values that drive the political processes bearing on forest planning, the focus of their research is different from that of biological or physical scientists. Managers rarely ask scientists for input on many aspects of the plan revision process; in fact, the questions many social scientists find most fascinating are likely to be the same ones managers are least likely to ask them to study. For example, from the perspective of a social scientist, the question of how best to reach a decision is a potential research question. To most managers, it is a policy question, and they rightly see themselves as the experts where agency policy is concerned. NFS managers simply may not see scientific expertise as relevant to what they are doing. The same is true of research on the ways in which NFS personnel engage with or respond to the public, how NFS staff judge the public and how the public judges them. When social scientists offer to analyze a difficult management situation, there is a natural hesitancy on the part of the manager to submit to scrutiny, and few managers will be comfortable initiating a study of their actions.

Although research carried out in conjunction with plan revision does not necessarily have to originate from or even please NFS managers, it does have to be relevant and useable. Without a long track record of previous research to point to, social scientists face a greater challenge convincing managers that their research will be helpful. If managers do not use social science research results, social scientists will have difficulty establishing the relevance and worth of their work, the ultimate test of their success.

Conclusion

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions. Rather, answers vary by National Forest and by individual

scientist. The important point is that social scientists and forest managers work together to insure that the best possible planning process is implemented on each forest, and that adaptive management represents a true partnership between scientists and manager.

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