

# Participation and Conflict: Lessons Learned From Community Forestry

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## ABSTRACT

Today, natural resource user groups are more diverse, with differing attitudes and behaviors. Successful resource management addressing diverse users' needs and preferences will require broadening participation in decisionmaking. We describe three components essential for participatory management: broadening constituencies involved in decisionmaking, cultivating better dialogue, and using conflict resolution techniques. Although there are disadvantages, participatory approaches ultimately reduce conflict, reduce costs, yield robust solutions, and lead to constituent support. We include a case study illustrating participation in a land-use planning context. Resource management professionals are likely to be involved in increased public participation and potential conflict, and professionals implementing participatory processes can be most successful with prior knowledge of effective ways to broaden participation as well as to resolve conflict.

**Keywords:** collaboration, diversity, outreach, participation, planning, community forestry, conflict resolution, participatory research

With population growth and changing demographics, and the differing attitudes, behaviors, and conflict they bring to decisionmaking, more participatory methods have been advocated for natural resource management (Lee 1993, Maser 1994, Selin and Chavez 1995, Wondolleck and Yaffee 1997). New and old residents of communities have growing interest in natural resource issues and outcomes (McDonough et al. 2002a), and by properly including their perspectives a better problem-solving and implementation process is possible. When using participatory methods, however, both success and dissatisfaction have been noted, often with respect to the same efforts (Selin et al. 1997, Steelman 1999, Bliss 2000, Crewe 2001, Bollens 2002). Many resource management agencies and entities have been called on to increase public participation in decisionmaking, and they struggle to increase both participation and satisfaction of growing numbers of diverse participants.

Increasing participation and satisfaction of participants are both especially relevant in community forestry efforts. Community forestry involves forest management with the express intent of benefiting neighboring communities. According to Brendler and Carey (1998), community forestry has three defining attributes: residents have access to a portion of the benefits from nearby forests; local people are provided a meaningful role in forest decisionmaking; and protecting and restoring a wide variety of forest resources is important. Community forestry consists of the efforts of people united by a place of interest to use and conserve resources to their advantage and includes a broad array of goods and services, ranging from urban open space to wood products harvested from rural forests. A central theme in community forestry is the ability of community members to guide the direction of change and be active in self-determination. Thus, participatory processes for decisionmaking are required. Along with increased

participation in decisionmaking, community foresters are often involved in conflict. Working with a broad array of resource-use issues (such as timber harvest and tree preservation ordinances, land-use planning, zoning and other land-use regulation, and multiple-use resources), as well as diverse racial and ethnic groups often involves addressing divergent interests, values, and ultimately conflict among participants.

This article focuses on three components central to the success of participatory approaches: (1) understanding the need for participation and its importance in natural resource management; (2) being committed to the need to broaden the constituency that participates and to cultivate better dialogue among those participants; and (3) recognizing the need to resolve conflicts and being familiar with conflict resolution techniques that can be used in work with diverse participants. Finally, a case study is offered to illustrate these main themes.

## What Do We Mean by Participation and Why Is It Important?

Participation is a process that brings together diverse stakeholders (e.g., federal and state agencies, businesses, national and local environmental groups, local leaders, and residents) to define critical issues, develop common goals and objectives, exchange information, formulate proposals for action, and share resources and responsibilities for implementation and evaluation (Lewicki et al. 2003, Selin and Chavez 1995). Several positive outcomes have been associated with effective public participation in natural re-

source management (Smith et al. 1999, Steelman 1999):

1. Conflict is better understood and dealt with very early in a change process (decreasing potential costs of failure, implementation, and enforcement and leading to a stronger sense of local ownership and support);
2. Local information is understood and plans that are generated are more likely to accommodate local needs and be more culturally appropriate;
3. Participants can develop an appreciation for complexities of problems and issues and for diverse perspectives on those issues;
4. Participating agencies can be viewed as partners and positive relations can be developed with public groups.

Many of the same authors also discuss frustrations when working with broader constituencies on both local- and larger-scale issues:

1. Lack of early and continuous involvement by participants, and difficulty sustaining participation over extended time frames;
2. Lack of conflict resolution skills to diffuse potentially volatile working groups (e.g., advisory councils with diverse representation);
3. Lack of appropriate skills for communication with nontraditional audiences;
4. Difficulties in identifying, interpreting, and using both technical and value-oriented information;
5. Fear of being overwhelmed with work when new constituencies are involved; and
6. Reluctance to give up power and to treat power relations in a self-conscious manner.

It is clear that both opportunities and challenges are associated with increasing participation, and that resource managers will need to adjust their approaches to both encourage and successfully lead participatory management.

## **Broadening the Constituency and Cultivating Dialogue**

In both urban areas and rapidly changing rural areas, natural resource management (whether for commercially productive forests or for passive open space), affects

broader segments of society than ever before. However, surveys in different regions of the country indicate that traditional partners in natural resource decisionmaking both historically and currently include predominantly middle-aged or older, well-educated white males (Force and Williams 1989, Smith and McDonough 2001). Chronically underrepresented groups include the elderly, youth, women, disabled persons, ethnic groups, less powerful local persons, and the less educated (Smith and McDonough 2001). The value of including these underrepresented groups is a cornerstone of new community-oriented approaches, such as Asset-Based Community Development (Rans 2005).

Several techniques can be used to identify and collaborate with underrepresented groups, others not previously involved, or those previously involved but now alienated or angry. Techniques aimed at generating new participants include stakeholder mapping, key informant interviews, snowball sampling, and working with established local leaders, groups, or institutions. Techniques to generate dialogue and gather information also may include key informant interviews, as well as oral/shared histories, focus groups, charettes, and participatory research. These techniques are briefly described in the paragraphs that follow.

In stakeholder mapping, groups of people are assembled and asked to work together to draw a map of people and organizations surrounding or involved in an issue. Key informants are leaders and other people who know a lot about a place or thing, or, in the case of "community connectors," they may know a lot about a lot of people (Rans 2005). Interviews with such persons may include queries about potential additional participants. Snowball sampling simply involves asking initial participants who else should also participate and asking each new participant until saturation is reached. Developing relationships with local leaders, "community connectors," groups, or institutions can allow resource professionals to identify strong local partners who will be engaged in the process and be crucial to bringing others into the process as well as help to retain their participation (McDonough et al. 2002a and 2002b, Rans 2005).

Dialogue can be described as conversation that involves meaningful speaking and listening on the part of all participants and is characterized by a two-way communication process where all people both teach and

learn. Oral histories cultivate dialogue by allowing people to explain an issue in their own words, at their own pace, and with the amount of detail they choose. Focus groups generate interaction via facilitated discussions (usually among small groups of eight to 10 people) about a specific topic. Again, participants can discuss the issue in their own terms and at their own pace. The charette process can be described as an intense work session (or workshop) with ongoing participation and interaction. In a charette, a team representing a range of disciplines forms the core group that works with community members through one-on-one and group discussions; environmental mapping; assessments of environmental, social, and economic conditions; issue-framing sessions; development of strategies for action; and finally, presentation of ideas in a public forum to solicit feedback. Additional characteristics of these techniques and their use have been described by Elmendorf and Luloff (2001) and McDonough and others (2002a).

Different approaches to participatory research have been described (for example, Berardi 2002, Park et al. 1993, Petras and Porpora 1993). Participatory research is fundamentally a collaborative learning approach, with open dialogue among stakeholders and researchers working as full partners in the research project. Local knowledge, information, experience, perspective, and needs are used to formulate the research question, methodology, data interpretation, and conclusions. Participatory research relies on a self-conscious approach to power relations between researcher and community participant in open exchange and mutual learning. Results of the research project should be shared, useable, and have the potential to result in positive change.

Recent work suggests that one-on-one personal interaction (going beyond the commonly used approach of providing opportunities for comment in large group public meetings) is very helpful with nontraditional constituents (Chavez 2000, Smith and McDonough 2001, McDonough et al. 2002b). Direct personal one-on-one interaction has been documented as an especially effective method for including and listening to members of ethnic groups, inner-city residents, and hard to reach people, such as the elderly. This process can be time-consuming, as it involves establishing neighborhood contacts and building trust, often with disenfranchised people. Other forms of information

gathering, such as focus groups or surveys, may not be as effective. People may have to be visited in person, provided information and knowledge, and they may need transportation, childcare, and other practical obstacles addressed to facilitate their participation.

## A Collaborative Process for Conflict Resolution

In many participatory situations, particularly those with varying perspectives (varying knowledge levels, diverse values, and levels of passion and emotion), there is disagreement and conflict. Many times, conflict resolution is essential in order for a participatory process to provide useable information or to achieve action. Unfortunately, conflict resolution techniques are often not described in discussions of participatory techniques. Although increased participation is identified as desirable, techniques for conflict resolution are not clearly detailed, and resource professionals sometimes become losers in the ensuing battles between groups.

It is important for people using participatory methods to have a clear understanding of the principles of conflict resolution. Several models have been created to aid in collaborative conflict resolution. For example, *Getting to Yes* (Fisher et al. 1991) is a model based on using principled negotiations to decide issues based on merit rather than power and haggling. The following conflict resolution principles adapted from Lewicki et al. (2003) and Dale and Hahn (1994) can help facilitators assist diverse participants in finding common ground whether or not conflict already exists:

1. Good Communication—informal presentations and dialogue are encouraged, the importance of listening is emphasized, and work is done to establish a free flow of accurate information.
2. An Inclusive, Not Exclusive Process—diverse viewpoints are shared and taught through discussion and other interactions such as field trips, presentations, and brainstorming.
3. Mutual Respect for All—there is a self-conscious approach to power relations, and the information brought by different participants is assumed valid until proven different.
4. The Focus Is on Interest, Not Position—The resolution process works

**Table 1. Processes of collaborative conflict resolution (adapted from Gray 1989 and Dale and Hahn 1994).**

1. Predeliberation Getting started	Stakeholders are identified and contacted, all agree to come to the table. Because of concerns (e.g., power or limitations), some participants may need help or persuasion to join.
Establishing ground rules/setting agenda	Group devises rules for communicating, decision making, information sharing, and organizing. A first test of collaboration.
Pursuing joint fact-finding	Participants reach agreement on what technical information is important to the process, and who will gather and present information to the group.
2. Deliberation Defining the problem(s)	An overview can be provided by a recognized neutral party, but all participants should define the problem(s) based on their own perception and values.
Developing criteria/educating one another	Parties clearly state interests (rather than positions) to each other. Interests include reasons, needs, concerns, values, perceptions, and motivations. Shared interests become criteria to negotiate alternatives.
Generating alternatives	Brainstorming or other techniques are used to invent alternative scenarios, without deciding among them. Creativity is encouraged.
Evaluating alternatives based on interest	Satisfying major interests or criteria is necessary for agreement on action. Implementation is discussed.
3. Implementation Implementing agreed-upon alternative(s) Monitoring results	Actions agreed upon are ratified in writing. Participants may be called back to review results.

only when people explain and understand both what they want or their preferred solution (position) and the underlying concern or why they want it (interest).

The conflict resolution process will fail unless interests are shared and understood. A facilitator must insist on processes that address participants' interests. These interests become the central criteria for generating mutual respect and subsequent successful negotiation and action. As an example, an urban forestry tree-planting volunteer group may want to add trees to landscape a park to benefit the neighborhood and the health and enjoyment of the children, but the local police may be concerned about the proposed landscape's impact on neighborhood safety, including the children. A community for-ester would wish to encourage the local volunteer group, but would also recognize community safety as a concern. The positions are landscaping and safety, but a main and common interest is the children. As a common interest, negotiations should revolve around the criteria of children.

Identifying common interests can be difficult because for a number of reasons people may remain positional. During deliberations, if one answer is allowed to be the only right answer, other possibilities may not be discovered or evaluated. In addition, incompatibility might be assumed at the

outset because of historic or other relations. However, negotiations can be moved from position-based to interest-based through a number of actions.

For example, participants need to be encouraged to ask for other persons' interests, and to truly listen and understand those interests. Again, facilitators must remain at this point in negotiations until feedback from all participants consistently revolves around interests. Something as simple as acknowledgment of other's concerns ("I understand") can change relationships and lead to effective dialogue. In addition, facilitators may need to encourage some participants to explain their own interests, even if not directly solicited by other participants. Sometimes, group members can express their interests in very compelling ways through field trips or via testimonials from affected people. Mutual acknowledgment of interests of and by all parties is necessary for subsequent work to identify common interests and build trust through a process of conversation and sharing.

Facilitators often spend a great deal of time and effort on building a free and accurate flow of information, promoting the explanation of interests on all sides, and making sure that common interests are identified and understood. In fact, much difficult negotiation can be avoided if relationship-building that acknowledges participant in-

terests occurs some time before difficult decisions have to be made or complex issues need to be resolved. In many cases, however, a long process of conflict resolution and collaboration among diverse partners may be required, given that genuine trust, based on relationship-building, must develop over time.

A collaborative approach to conflict resolution (see Table 1; Gray 1989, Dale and Hahn 1994) is a process that brings people together to identify common interests, uses problem definition as a means to invent solutions that satisfy interests, and that ultimately develops mutually acceptable solutions, rather than just deciding who wins. This process is more difficult than merely facilitating peoples' opinions within short-term focus groups or other situations. The collaborative process works to provide accurate information that helps separate fact from personal values and attitudes; it clarifies what people can and can not agree on throughout the process. Disagreement about facts may be resolved by seeking information from an impartial technical expert, but disagreement about values and beliefs can be difficult to resolve. Values, which represent the worth a person or group places on something, are often in the forefront in decisionmaking processes. Personal and direct explanation (educating/sharing) and acknowledgment (listening/understanding) can help to change deeply ingrained values. If values are at the heart of a disagreement and they can not be altered, the conflict resolution process will not succeed. Finally, all participants (and facilitators) should recognize that trade-offs will likely need to be made to address the greatest number of interests.

## A Model for Participatory Planning

Citizen participation in planning has a long history. At the state level, model planning-enabling legislation prepared by the US Department of Commerce in the 1920s required local governments to offer citizens an opportunity to comment on plans (Brody et al. 2003). Mandates for public participation are designed to increase local government's commitment to the principles of democratic governance, which include the right of citizens to be informed, to be consulted, and to express views on local government decisions. Planning scholars continue to argue that broad citizen participation can

generate trust, credibility, and commitment in the implementation of policies. A broad range of participants with a stake in the outcome should be included early, often, and on an ongoing basis in the planning process.

As an example of a successful collaborative process for reducing conflict, a model for participatory planning follows. This model helped reduce conflict in land-use decisionmaking and community forest conservation by providing education to residents about the realities of planning, zoning, and land development, by allowing residents to inform civic officials about important community forest resources and other places important to them, and by providing opportunities for dialogue between residents and civic officials before forest resources were threatened by development. The process allowed significant resources to be placed on planners' "radar screen" and allowed dialogue and collaboration before the pressure for development of those places occurred, thus reducing potential conflict.

In this case, participatory planning used sacred place mapping (as a form of stakeholder mapping) to identify issues and concerns related to open-space conservation in Union County, Pennsylvania. This mapping exercise (described in more detail in El mendorf and Luloff 2001) was used to both broaden participation and to cultivate dialogue. Participants in this project attended two full-day workshops that included exercises in listening and team building, introduced planning and design techniques, and provided a bus tour of the county. Participants were then placed in groups and asked to map the sacred places (Hester 1985 offers a description of sacred places) in their county.

The 100 participants engaged in this process identified more than 150 sacred places, including a variety of community forest resources (natural features including parks, streams, and wooded areas), structural elements (residential streets and historical buildings), and conceptual elements (rural lifestyle, agrarian heritage). Pictures were made or found to represent each identified sacred place to develop a slide presentation.

Youth from area senior high schools then worked together to use the slide presentation to speak with civic officials throughout the county. The method allowed people to focus on places in the landscape that were important to their everyday lives. This process organized diverse perspectives on important places in the landscape and allowed

participants to express their interests, not just positions, to each other. It also allowed civic officials to better understand problems and opportunities relative to land-use planning and growth at a county scale. The focus on the interests of a broad array of participants defused potential conflict, engaged a variety of perspectives from diverse participants, and allowed collaborative decisionmaking to direct future development away from valued resources, including community forest resources.

## Conclusions

We believe that it is critical that the diversity of both participants in and recipients of natural resource management work are increased. This is especially important to reduce long-term conflict, reduce costs of implementation, to yield more robust solutions that address multiple perspectives and interests, and to lead to greater constituent support for agreed-on plans and activities (e.g., Smith et al. 1999, Steelman 1999). In spite of both dissatisfaction and challenges, participatory methods that use collaborative conflict resolution techniques can help resource professionals more effectively include and understand persons that have not previously been involved in natural resource decisionmaking. Natural resource professionals should be aware of and use tools and processes that can encourage participation and reduce conflict. By including more diverse perspectives, more creative solutions are possible. Finally, natural resource professionals and agencies that broaden their constituencies will have added relevance to a broader spectrum of people and landscapes.

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